

# CYNON VALLEY HISTORY SOCIETY

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# HANES

NEWSLETTER OF THE CYNON VALLEY HISTORY SOCIETY  
CYLCHLYTHYR CYMDEITHAS HANES CWM CYNON

ISSUE NUMBER 91



SUMMER 2020



I hope you have found the three editions of Hanes Bach of much interest.

We hope you are all well despite the continuing pandemic of Covid-19. With this in mind one of our members Robert Anthony has written a fascinating article about his great uncle who was one of the millions of people who died in the Spanish flu epidemic during World War 1.

To cheer you up we look at some of the Italians who emigrated to this valley and who opened many cafés where people could meet and eat meals and of course, ice cream.

This is the centenary of the Disestablishment of the Church of Wales, so we look at how the people of this valley responded to it.

Happy Reading!

## The Italians of the Cynon Valley. Part One: The Bracchis



Why did so many people come from Bardi, from the country of Verdi and Garibaldi, the land of sun-kissed olive groves, of picturesque quaint villages to the rain-washed, gale-

tossed, black be-grimed, cold land of Wales? (A slight exaggeration!) The answer is in one word: "Poverty!"

Maybe some of the *Bardigiani* were told that the Welsh workers were paid in gold!

The small hill town of Bardi lies in the north west Apennine Mountains between Parma and Genoa. In the late nineteenth century it was like much of Italy: a poverty-stricken area where oxen pulled ploughs on unproductive land, where peasants lived from hand to mouth. During this period much of Italy was a poor and illiterate country short of skills and money—for the people there was little hope for the future. In 1901 it was estimated that three and a half million Italians out of a total population of thirty-three million were living abroad, many emigrated to the Americas and the richer parts of Europe including Wales. The news of booming industrial south Wales reached Bardi — so, many came. In Glamorgan the number of Italians rose steadily from 455 in 1881 to 997 in 1921.

### The Bracchi Empire

Who was the first man from Bardi to come to Wales to enter the catering trade? The answer would be Giacomo Bracchi, (born 1860). (Angelo and Stephano Bracchi were in Aberdare in 1891, see article below.) He came to London with his wife Caterina, formerly Fulgoni, around 1880, where he was probably an itinerant musician at 1&2 Robin Hood Yard in Holborn, London. Around 1892 he went to America where his son Luigi was born then he came back to Wales to pioneer Italian cafés with their delectable confectionary and ice cream. Why did he and the others that followed set up this trade? They somehow saw a huge gap in the refreshment market! The Temperance Movement in Wales was very strong, consequently many of the Welsh Nonconformists would not go to public houses for refreshment, and food was not sold in them. Yet there were hardly any Temperance bars, e.g. cafés and restaurants that sold teas, coffees, fish and chips, and ice cream. So, the clever Bracchi opened the first Italian café in Wales in Newport around 1893. He and his family soon moved to Aberdare and set up their business and home in 26 Canon Street. Many of his relatives followed him to the land of Croesus: South Wales! By 1901 his business had flourished greatly: he had eleven Italian male assistants aged between 16 and 28 with surnames like Carpanini, Fulgoni and Rabaiotti. These men came as a result of Bracchi's trips back to Bardi, where some poor parents would say to him, "Mr Bracchi, would you like to have my boy work for you? Take him to Wales". "All right, 30 shillings a month and I'll give them clothing, feed them and look after them." He used to take 10 to 15 boys over to Wales. In the summer he'd send them out with the ice-cream cart. On Sundays they would work in the shop.



Giuseppe Rabaiotti with his ice-cream cart in  
Phillip Street, Mountain Ash, c.1907

The boys slept in dormitories. They had to get up at 4am to make ice-cream by hand and be out on the streets by 7am. They would work for 12 hours or so until they had sold their ice cream. The business expanded greatly. Shops were opened all over the south Wales valleys including Abertillery, Bargoed, Abercarn, Pentre, and Porthcawl. During the Tonypandy riots, three Bracchi shops lost their contents.

Italian cafés were easy-going places: customers could stay as long as they wished and spend as little as they liked. In one Bracchi, a courting couple sat before the fire for three hours each evening, day in and day out, for twenty years! During the three hours, they bought one pork pie between them, using two plates and two knives, and two cups of tea. Eventually they married and went to the café no more. [I hope they invited the café owner to the wedding and the reception. He deserved it! Ed.]

### Alleged Wounding

The first mention of the Bracchis in the local press in 1891 was not an auspicious one: Alleged wounding—Stephano and Angelo Bracchi, ice-cream dealers, Canon Street, were charged with unlawfully wounding James Jones on 17th inst. On the Saturday night in question, he went into the defendant's shop in Canon Street and asked for a pennyworth of chips. Angelo supplied him and he handed him the money, (or so he said he did.) Angelo asked for the money. Jones said he was not going to pay twice. Angelo struck him on the left temple with a poker and then Stephano followed up hitting him with a similar instrument on the back of the head, which knocked him senseless. [Surely, they would have not struck him on the head if he had paid a penny. Ed.] The result was that Angelo was discharged and Stephano was committed to the sessions.

*Aberdare Times* 31st January 1891 & *W. Mail* 4th February.

### Selling after hours

The Italians were very hard-working and worked long hours, often 16 hours a day, but they sometimes sold food after hours:

"Giacomo Bracchi's premises in Canon Street were visited by PC Pittaway at 11.25pm. A lot of customers were being served. Defendant said his clock was slow. He was fined five shillings and costs and told to buy a new clock!"

*Aberdare Leader* 25th June 1904

### Comedy in Court

"At the Mountain Ash Police Court PC Wines related that he visited the premises of Paul Bracchi, Commercial Street, Mountain Ash and there found a dozen young men playing a game called "The Clown's Hat," which he alleged was a game of chance and therefore against the law. The constable had tried to play the game but couldn't win at it (Laughter). At this point the magistrate asked for the machine to be brought on to the table. The Magistrates Clerk had the first try but failed.

Bracchi sadly lost the case and was fined 20 shillings".

*Aberdare Leader*, 13th March 1915

### A Favourable Light

The Bracchi family were shown in a favourable light: "Mr Charlie Bracchi, the manager of Bracchi Bros at Abercwmboi, on his departure to join the Italian army was presented with a silver-mounted walking stick and a silver cigarette case at the Cap Coch Inn."

*Aberdare Leader* 3rd July 1915

### Sunday Trading

There was some Welsh opposition to Italians opening their premises on Sundays and many Italian shops were taken to court about this matter.

"Mr Gwyddonwy Evans of the Aberdare Chamber of Trade gave an instance of an Italian who started in this country with only 2/6 in his pocket. He was now doing a huge trade and was making more money on a Sunday than on the other six days put together. [This could well have been Giacomo Bracchi]. It was really too bad that we should be giving the right of asylum to these Italian ice-cream vendors who really murdered us in our trade. Mr Evans called upon the Government to prohibit Sunday trading."

*Aberdare Leader* 5th July 1913

"Antonio Antoniazzi, Canon Street, in the employ of Bracchi Bros. was summoned for trading on a Sunday.

Giovanni Rabaiotti, Commercial St., was similarly summoned by selling cigarettes to a boy. P.C. Weathersby proved the cases and fines of 5s each including costs were imposed."

*Aberdare Leader* 6th March 1915

#### Ice cream sellers fight each other.

On rare occasions Italian ice cream sellers would fight each other. Maybe the reason was that they both wanted the best pitch:

"Angelo Colizzi, an Italian ice-cream vendor employed by Mr Joseph Arcari, was charged with assaulting Giovanni Fulgoni, (employed by Mr Bracchi), one of the same occupation.

Complainant said that during an altercation near Hirwaun, he was knocked on the head by the defendant with the lid of an ice can. He had used the handle of the whip in self-defence.

W. Bracchi said he was at Hirwaun on the show day and saw the defendant strike the complainant.

Joseph Arcari said that Fulgoni and Bracchi attacked Colizzi.

A fine of five shillings and costs was imposed on both parties and they were bound over to keep the peace."

*Aberdare Leader* 5th September 1903

#### Bracchis in Mountain Ash

The first Bracchi in Mountain Ash was owned by Guido Bracchi, whose shop was the Ideal Café, which was opposite the Palace Cinema in Oxford Street. In 1928 it was taken over by Charlie (Cesare) and Paul Fulgoni who called their café the Cadona Club. This was later taken over by Mr & Mrs Emilio Piccaro who changed the name to the Express Café.

By 1930 there were about 90 people in south Wales with the surname of Bracchi.

Giacomo Bracchi retired to Porthcawl where he died in January 1940, aged 80.

He and his fellow Italians had greatly enriched the social life of the people of south Wales and made it a far better place to live in.

Sources: *Lime, lemon & sarsaparilla* by Colin Hughes; *Mountain Ash Remembered* by Bernard Baldwin.

In future issues I hope to tell of the Ferraris, the Servinis and Carpaninis of this valley. If anyone has any memories of these and other Italian families and their cafés, I would be happy to receive them.

# The Church Defence League

by Hywel Davies

On Wednesday afternoon, June 12th 1912, a procession of clergy and laity, 'two miles long' according to one report, (\*Spectator, 15th June 192), made its way from Regent's Park in London to Hyde Park, in protest against the Welsh Church Bill, then before parliament. The procession, apparently, included 'upwards of 10,000 Churchmen from Wales', along with 'another 5,000 from Lancashire and Yorkshire'. Speakers on that afternoon included the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, the Bishops of London, St Asaph and St David's, the Duke of Devonshire and Bonar Law, the leader of the Unionist Opposition.). A G Edwards and John Owen fulminated against any attack on "the voluntary donation(s) of pious ancestors", while elsewhere the Unionist MP, F E Smith, stretched credulity when he claimed that disestablishment "would offend the soul of Christian people everywhere". ("*Chuck it, Smith*" was G K Chesterton's satirical response in verse). Similar, if smaller demonstrations, in the name of Church defence, also took place in Wales, in Caernarfon, Swansea and Wrexham.

In fact, the need of 'an association of clergy and laity for defensive and general purposes' had been felt since 1859/60, when the Church Defence Institution (CDI) was formed. Later, in 1893, the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Edward Benson, founded the Central Church Committee specifically 'to fight against Welsh disestablishment'. Three years later it merged with the CDI, to be known as the Church Committee for the Defence and Instruction. In 1923, by then overtaken by events, it was incorporated into the Church Assembly, known today as General Synod of the Church of England.

The first indication of similar grass-root activity in the Cynon Valley appeared in the '*Aberdare Leader*' for 17th February 1906, (page 5), when a public meeting was advertised 'to discuss the subject of Church Defence' at the Constitutional Club on Thursday, February 22nd 1906. The following week's '*Leader*' contained a report of 'rowdy proceedings' at a Church Defence meeting in Hirwaun. Perhaps a partisan spirit was only to be expected, as the issue under discussion was whether the Church, in one way or another, benefitted from State funding. However, things became so heated that the Chair, Mr W.S. de Winton, thought it best to give out a hymn in the hope of calming proceedings. His choice of 'The Church's one foundation', however, was not wise. Those unsympathetic to the Church's cause felt provoked to respond with a hymn of their own choice, and struck up, in Welsh, the rather more dour, '*Beth sydd i mi yn y byd?*' Mr de Winton, in desperation, decided to call proceedings to a close. Seconding the vote of thanks to the speakers, the Churchwarden, a Mr. W. Edmunds, referred with regret to the 'bigotry' of those who had attended simply 'to disturb the meeting'. That, of course, only made matters worse, so that the event ended 'amid considerable uproar'.



C.A.H. Green as Archbishop of Wales  
in Aberdare in the 1930s



C.A.H. Green in 1909  
as Vicar of Aberdare



Meanwhile, back in Aberdare things were much quieter. The next public meeting of the Church Defence League does not appear to have taken place until Sunday evening, 22nd October 1907, at the Memorial Hall, when officers were elected. (*Leader*: 26 October 1907). It was also decided that a series of talks concerning Church Defence should take place during the winter; the first was to be given by the Vicar, Revd. C.A.H. Green, (Bishop of Bangor from 1928, and second Archbishop of Wales 1934–1944), entitled 'Endowments in the Llandaff Diocese'. Many more meetings followed exploring the same theme, notably that the Church's endowments and tithes were not taxes but free gifts, often acquired long before the State was even formed.

As the Bill to disestablish the Church made its weary way through parliament, debate increasingly took to the streets, and not always without incident. On Tuesday evening, 17 June 1913, for example, the Aberdare Church Defence League held a large meeting in Victoria Square, where the speaker, Mr I. B. Rowlands of Neath 'was continually heckled.' (*Leader*: 21 June 1913). At a later meeting at the Market Hall on 15 January 1914, it seems as if a final show of resistance was on display. Not only did the platform speakers include the Bishop of St David's, but also Lord Aberdare, the Chancellor of Llandaff Diocese, the Vicars of Aberdare, Mountain Ash and Aberaman, the Rector of Merthyr – and the Church Defence Lecturer at St Michael's College, Llandaff. Bishop John Owen moved the resolution against 'the contemptuous proposal of the Government' which was carried unanimously. (*Leader*: 17 January 1914)

(This last ditch attempt would fail as the Bill was passed in September of that year and became law in 1920. Ed.)

## Pte. David Morgan, Mountain Ash: an early 'Spanish' Flu victim?

by Robert Anthony

*"I have just returned from Pembroke Dock attending the funeral of my son (12413 Private David Morgan K.S.L.I.) whose life, I think, has been needlessly sacrificed."*

So wrote Lt. Col. Morgan Morgan (former commanding officer, 5th Welsh Regiment) of "Maesydderwen", Aberffwd Rd, Mountain Ash on the 3rd March 1917 in a letter to Brig. Gen. J.E. Caunter, Head of Western Command, Chester. A manuscript draft of this letter survives: it is not known whether a reply was received - or even if it was sent.

Born in 1885 at Mountain Ash, David Morgan, my great-uncle, volunteered with the 6th (Service) Battalion of the King's Shropshire Light Infantry (K.S.L.I) in September 1914 and, on the 22nd July 1915, accompanied his Battalion to Boulogne, and then, via the Étapes transit camp and dépôt 20 miles to the south east to the battlefields of the Somme.

For 7 months David avoided harm but on the 23rd March 1916 was hospitalized for 16 days with anaemia. He was hospitalized again, with dysentery, and on the 13th October 1916 invalided from France to hospital in Epsom. Discharged on the 6th February 1917 he convalesced for 10 days at home at Maesydderwen, Mountain Ash. On the 17th February he rejoined his Battalion at Pembroke Dock but died in the Military Hospital there on the 28th February, the cause being recorded as pneumonia.

Contrary to Morgan Morgan's comment in his letter of the 3rd March that he had 'just returned from Pembroke Dock attending the funeral of my son', *The Aberdare Leader* of the 10th March reported that the body, accompanied by a military escort, had been conveyed from Pembroke Dock to Mountain Ash on Friday 2nd March, the funeral and interment (at Caegarw cemetery) taking place the following day.

Why did Morgan Morgan consider his son's life to have been 'needlessly sacrificed'? The essence of his complaint was that David, having served his country on the Western Front

since 1915, and being twice invalided, was, on his return to the Battalion from convalescence, wrongly placed in a 'high medical category' making him immediately subject to full military duties. Morgan Morgan believed that this had contributed to David's death. He asked the General to 'put in a word' to the authorities with a view to amending regulations so that soldiers in these circumstances could be placed in a lower medical category to enable full recovery.



There is a Morgan family 'tradition' that David died of the Spanish Flu, the deadliest (to date) pandemic in history infecting an estimated 500 million people worldwide and killing between 20 and 100 million. The obvious difficulty with this is that the main, highly virulent, wave of this pandemic peaked between September and November 1918; a quick review of Welsh newspapers of the time suggests that the earliest local reference to Spanish Flu (in Swansea) was the 22nd June 1918. David died at the beginning of 1917.

There is, however, evidence that the Spanish Flu virus was already brewing at the end of 1916. Debates continue over origin and cause but an article appearing in the *Lancet* in 1917, written by British Army medical

officers serving in the huge Étaples transit camp, describes an outbreak in the winter of 1916-17 of 'purulent bronchitis' causing the deaths of 71 soldiers. An immense number of troops constantly passed through this camp to and from the front and it had become notorious for its harsh regime, overcrowding, under-nourishment, lack of sanitation and sickness. The authors of the *Lancet* article also pointed to the existence of many live animals in and around the camp including pigs, horses, geese, chickens and ducks. In addition, there was a pervasive presence of gas. The poet Wilfred Owen, in a letter to his mother of the 31st December 1917, described Étaples, (when he was there about a year earlier), as a 'vast dreadful encampment...a kind of paddock where the beasts are kept a few days before the shambles'.

This would have been fertile ground for the emergence and spread of a new respiratory disease and later studies consider it likely that the 1916-17 virus was the same as that which caused Spanish Flu, and that Étaples was the 'seedbed'.

Could David Morgan have contracted Spanish Flu? Although he passed through Étaples at least once on his way to the front, he obviously could not have been infected there as he left France in October 1916, for hospital in Epsom, and did not rejoin his Battalion in Pembroke Dock until the 17th February 1917. Thus, he could only have been infected, if at all, by a soldier recently arrived at Pembroke Dock via Étaples. Given an incubation period of 2 to 7 days, infection and death within the 11-day period at Pembroke Dock is feasible.

This is, of course, conjecture and insufficient to support the family tradition. It is, however, of interest that The *Aberdare Leader* of the 3rd March 1917 reported that David had 'caught a severe cold' at home before departing for Pembroke Dock. If true, this

would have weakened his resistance to attack by a virus of greater virulence. On the other hand, owing to an insufficient period of recuperation at Maesydderwen, the cold may have developed into pneumonia. In either case, it is highly likely that concern over his son's indisposition on departure was a trigger for Morgan Morgan's letter to General Caunter.

Main sources:

1. Hammond, J.A.B. et al: 'Purulent bronchitis: a study of cases occurring amongst the British troops at a base in France', *Lancet* (1917), 2: 41-6.
2. Oxford J.S. et al: 'A hypothesis: the conjunction of soldiers, gas, pigs, ducks, geese and horses in Northern France during the Great War provided the conditions for the emergence of the "Spanish" influenza pandemic of 1918-19, *Vaccine* 23 (2005), 940-5.

## Cynon Valley Museum Online Exhibitions

Although the museum is currently closed, there are many exhibitions to view online:

Three exhibitions by the Jewish History Association of South Wales:

- Morris Jacobs: A Draper for All
- The Life of Victor Freed
- Merchants and Moneylenders: Popular Jewish businesses in the Cynon valley.

Art exhibitions

- Jodie Neale: Exhibition at Home (ceramics)
- Roy Carr: A Year in their Lives - a digital redisplay of the popular photography exhibition from 2018.
- Aberdare Camera Club: A (virtual) walk around Aberdare Park.

Upcoming exhibitions:

- Caitlin Flood Molyneux: Exhibition at Home, commenced on 15th July 2020 - an abstract artist who was due to have a debut solo exhibition at the Museum this summer.
- Aberdare Camera Club: A (virtual) walk around Dare Valley Country Park, coming 8th August 2020.

## Feedback

I would be grateful for feedback about any articles in this issue. Articles on any subject about our valley's history for possible publication are welcome.

Acknowledgement.

I am grateful to RCT Libraries for the reproduction of the Bracchi Bros and CAH Green photographs.

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Registered Charity No. 510143

Printed by Cynon Valley Museum, Depot Road, Aberdare. 01685 886729

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JULY 2020