

CYNON VALLEY HISTORY SOCIETY

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PLATINUM JUBILEE HANES

NEWSLETTER OF THE CYNON VALLEY HISTORY SOCIETY
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A Happy Summer to you all.

Life is getting back to normal now at last with Covid receding. Most will have seen the Queen's Platinum Jubilee celebrations on television and some of you might even have been to a street party.

In this issue we look at the recent celebrations we had in this valley and at the local events at the Coronation of George VI on 12th May 1937 and Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee of 1887.

In July, Caradog-fest will be taking place here so it is appropriate that we should know about this great musician. School days are supposed to be the happiest days of our lives. Jean John reminisces about hers at Aberdare Girls County School in the 1940s.

Happy Reading!

Aberdare Festival 3rd-4th June 2022



Aberdare Festival Land Train

Over 10,000 people came to Aberdare Park on 3rd–4th June this year to celebrate the Queen's Platinum Jubilee. The extravaganza saw tribute acts to Steps, The Vengaboys, Little Mix and Beyoncé.

As well as bands, there was a land train that took people on rides around the beautiful park in glorious sunshine. For children there were circus skills to learn, many animals to pet, donkey rides and pottery painting.

For the more mature, activities included candle-making, courses on how to make handmade gifts and cards, and for the football fans, a penalty shootout featuring Aberdare Town Ladies F.C.

The festival had a minor flaw as the car parking was chaotic and under-managed, and the residents of Glan Road must have wished they had gone away for the two days but on the whole, the festival was a great success.

The Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria, 1887

In this Platinum Jubilee Year, we look back at the events that took place for another long-lived queen:

Cwmaman

This densely populated mining village was on Tuesday en fête in honour of the Queen's Jubilee. The children formed in procession, carrying a large and exquisite banner on which were inscribed the words, "Cwmaman Board Schools", with an excellent portrait of Her Majesty. Headed by the Cwmaman Brass Band, the children of the upper classes proceeded to Aberaman, while the younger children returned to the schools, where they were plentifully supplied with tea and cake.

Western Mail 22nd June 1887

Mountain Ash

In order that the employees of the Powell Duffryn Company might illuminate their dwellings on Jubilee night, they were presented by the company with an immense number of candles: 45,000. [This proves that P.D. could be kind! although they were known for their tyranny in their treatment of their employees, P.D. being nicknamed Poverty and Death. Ed.] The majority of the public houses and private houses were illuminated.

A great many people on Tuesday night climbed one of the highest mountains in the neighbourhood where they had a view of no less than 37 bonfires.

The seven Sunday Schools of St Margaret's Church marched to the Duffryn Schools where a huge procession of 1,100 scholars and teachers were formed. Led by the Volunteer Brass band, they thence marched to Duffryn Grove, which had been kindly lent by Lord Aberdare. There was an abundant and substantial feast of tea and cake provided. A large number of swings had been suspended from the sturdy oak trees, which provided an unceasing source of enjoyment.

Various rustic games were improvised, and several balloons were successfully sent up. It is estimated that about 1,700 partook of tea and that nearly 2,000 were present in the Grove

Western Mail 23-24th June 1887

The Coronation of George VI on 12th May 1937

On that special day, 6,700 Aberdare schoolchildren were presented with souvenir mugs in their classrooms on Friday afternoon and were given Coronation teas.



Coronation Day at Park School Infants, 12th May 1937

The Lady High Constable, Mrs A.P. Thomas, visited all the classes of Park School and presented each pupil with a mug. After the ceremony, a little boy and girl dressed in blue robes trimmed with fur went from classroom to classroom as the new King and Queen amidst the cheers of the pupils.

But all was not sweetness and light in Aberdare over the Coronation celebrations. There was much anger in the local press about the Council's "pathetic example of indecision". The Editorial of the Aberdare Leader of 15th May reported that the Labour council were not going to allow the Town Hall to be decorated for Coronation Day. The Council successfully manoeuvred to get the Press out of the Chamber before they made their climb-down in order to grant permission to the Chamber of Trade to decorate the Town Hall. In addition, they were going to refuse a tea for the kiddies but they changed their minds for fearing of outraging public opinion.

Caradogfest

The schedule of events that will take place on the weekend of 15-17th July was in the Spring issue of Hanes.

There is one more event taking place: a Cymanfa Ganu at Green Street Methodist church on Sunday 17th July at 6.30pm.

Caradog: Griffith Rhys Jones



Griffith Rhys Jones, Caradog

Why would thousands of people turn out on 10th July 1920 in torrential rain for the unveiling of a statue in Aberdare?

The statue was of Griffith Rhys Jones, otherwise known as Caradog who with his choir, the Côt Mawr, won the major choral competitions held at the Crystal Palace in 1872 and 1873 and which made Wales to be known as "The Land of Song".

Caradog was born on 21 December 1834 in the Rose and Crown Tavern, Mill Street, Trecynon, Aberdare, the son of John Jones, engineer at the Llwydcoed iron-works, Aberdare. He left school at the age of 12 when he was apprenticed to a blacksmith at the local Gadlys ironworks. A member of Hen Dŷ Cwrdd Unitarian Chapel, he became a distinguished organist and violinist.

His "party act" as a virtuoso violinist was playing the piece "The Farm Yard" giving the sounds of the calf, bull, chicken etc. in a striking manner.

His first taste of success came on 23 June 1853, when aged just 19 he took a choir of 17 from Bryn Seion Chapel, Trecynon to victory at an eisteddfod at Aberavon, the test piece being ' Hallelujah to the Father' (Beethoven). As the name of this successful choir was entered as 'Côt Caradog', the conductor was henceforth known as ' Caradog.'

In 1858 he was appointed conductor of the Aberdare United Choir, and it was his work in this capacity that made him famous, the choir taking the chief choral prize at the Aberdare National Eisteddfod of 1861 and many other eisteddfodau over the years.

Leaving his job at the Fothergills Arms in Aberdare in 1870, he moved to the Rhondda to run the Treorchy Hotel where he formed the town's first Male Voice Choir in 1871, which was the forerunner of the famous Treorchy Male Voice Choir.

The Crystal Palace Company of London in 1872 announced that a competition would be held for choral societies of between 200-500 members; eight test pieces would be sung, the winners would be awarded a very ornate silver gilt trophy worth £1000 with a £100 cash prize.

The choirs of Wales picked up the gauntlet and held a mass meeting in The Temperance Hall, Aberdare where Caradog was unanimously chosen as the conductor. The choir was 450 strong were named The South Wales Choral Union but were popularly known as the "Côr Mawr" with 150 coming from the Cynon Valley.

The 1872 contest

The final rehearsal took place at Aberdare on 1st July. A concert was held at 2pm but it was so popular that performances also took place at 5pm, 8pm and 9pm, which raised £200 towards the total cost of the enterprise of £2000.

At the competition on 4th July, the adjudicators asked for just three test pieces to be sung.

The only other competing choir, from Bristol, had withdrawn but despite having no opposition, the Welsh choir had to perform to a very high standard to receive the illustrious prize, but two calamities almost lost it for them. The choir sang "God bless the Prince of Wales" with so much vigour that the orchestra lost their place, which in turn affected the intonation of the singers. The second upset arose when performing Bach's "In tears of grief". The choir sang the piece with three beats in the bar but the orchestra leader insisted that each quaver beat was to be conducted. A lesser conductor would have been driven to tears and given up, but the genius Caradog solved the impossible by conducting in three with one hand, (for the choir), and in six with the other, (for the orchestra). Despite all these problems, the choir was awarded the prize.

When Caradog arrived back in the Rhondda, he received an ecstatic welcome from a crowd of 5,000 people proud to be Welsh after the insults of the "Blue Books" many years before. A state of euphoria swept through Wales, which was far stronger than when Wales was to win the Grand Slam in the Rugby Six Nations in years to come.

The 1873 contest

Caradog was eager to retain the cup so rehearsals started again in 1873.

At Caerphilly Castle on 3rd June, a "grand rehearsal" took place where 15,000 people attended. The last two rehearsals were held in the Market Hall and Temperance Hall in Aberdare on 7th July and the bells of St Elvan's rang excited peals of bells.

The competition took place on 10th July and this time Côr Caradog had a rival choir – The Tonic Sol-fa Association of London, a choir of 320 voices conducted by Joseph Proudman, but they broke down singing, "Come with Torches". Notwithstanding they were no match for Côr Caradog who sang even better than the year before. Their return to Wales was again marked with tremendous excitement.

Sadly, there was not a Crystal Palace competition in 1874, and Caradog's choir never competed again although there were many reunions in the next forty years.

In 1893, he was a conductor at the Pontypridd National Eisteddfod, and a month later when he visited the Chicago World Fair, he received a tumultuous welcome from American Welsh exiles.

Caradog had three wives: his first wife Sarah died aged 22 shortly after their marriage in 1861. His second wife Gwenllian (d.1879) gave him a son who was born in 1864: John Griffith Jones. She also gave him a son, Caradog, and daughter, Mary Anne, who both sadly died before they were a year old. Their graves together with Caradog's parents and paternal grandparents are in St John's churchyard.

His third wife Margaret, whom he married in 1881 survived him and lived until 1923.

Caradog ended his earthly symphony on 4th December 1897, and was buried in Aberdare cemetery, where his ornate gravestone can be seen with his beloved violin on top. But his lasting memorials are his statue in Victoria Square, Aberdare, the Primary School in Aberdare named after him, and making Wales famous as "The Land of Song".

Further information: Williams, Gareth, Valleys of Song.

Ambrose, Gwilym P., The Aberdare Background to the South Wales Choral Union IN Old Aberdare Volume X pp59-74.

The Cynon Valley Museum will host an exhibition about Caradog during the month of July.

Memories of Aberdare Girls County School, (1942–1949) By Jean John, née Buxton



The former Aberdare Girls County School

With great trepidation, I arrived at the Education Department at the Rock Building, Aberdare in 1942 to see if I had passed my Grammar School entrance exams.

I was greatly relieved and so happy to see that my name was No. 17 on the list of successful candidates. It was to be the next step in my education, a world away from the closely-knit community of the village school in Llwydcoed.

It was during the years of the Second World War and there were many obstacles to overcome, not least finding clothing coupons for school uniform.

However, I made it onto the school bus and arrived at my new school building on Cwmbach Road in Plasdraw. The main entrance was so impressive but only visitors, members of staff and prefects were allowed up those steps and through those hallowed doors. All lesser mortals had to walk to the back of the building to gain entry there.

The building was magnificent in my eyes and those staircases were fantastic. What a privilege it was to be there!

A House system was in place, named after four Welsh literary giants: Alafon, Ceiriog,

Goronwy and Islwyn. I was allocated to Alafon.

My learning curve was enormous and I spent some very productive years at A.G.C.S., though I have to admit that the extra-curricular activities took up a great deal of my energy.

I have to thank Miss Lily Walters for my love of Art, and belonging to her choir fostered my interest in singing for the rest of my life. Incidentally, it was as a member of the choir that gave me a chance of a lifetime while we were visiting the BBC radio station in Cardiff to perform during a Children's Hour programme. At the rehearsal, anyone was invited to write a script in Welsh on the topic of "My Hobby". The winning scripts submitted were by Dilys Thomas (the local M.P.'s daughter), and myself.

Thus it came to pass that Dilys and myself went on air for 'Cylchgrawn Radio' on the Welsh Home Service on 21st August 1947 and got the princely sum of one guinea fee, plus five shillings and seven pence travel expenses. Naturally, my subject was Art!

Other members of staff that I remember were the three Miss Rees's who were the renowned Annie, Dolly (French), and the spirited Winnie who threw chalk at anyone being inattentive and then requested: "Hand me back my ammunition!"

Miss Chapple was so kind and mothered us while teaching Maths. It's little wonder in later years she gave up teaching and went full time into Social Services and delivered her tremendous pastoral care there.

Little 'Dinky' Greenland kept order in the Chemistry lab by ringing a little bell to gain our attention. I think the jingle about the chemical formula must have originated from her. It's worth repeating: "Alas poor Fred he drinks no more, for what he thought was H₂O was H₂SO₄! Don't get them mixed up!"

The tiered Demonstration Room next door to the Lab offered a high jinks ritual when we could get away with it. The class would open up the desk lids and if the coast were clear would do a thunderous domino effect of banging the lids in very quick sequence before Miss Greenland appeared.

Miss Alice Prothero, 'Polly', was a force to be reckoned with. She reigned supreme in her Biology Lab at the end of the first floor corridor. She grew geraniums in her conservatory, which fronted the corner of the main school. It had huge charts hanging from the walls showing the innards of frogs and smaller mammals. These were somewhat disconcerting if you had to view them while eating your dinner in the corridor upstairs!

She had an uncanny skill of selecting certain topics for extra revision for C.W.B. (Central Welsh Board) exams. Invariably she would be correct and nine times out of ten, those subjects came up on the exam paper. Her years of experience and dedication showed what a great teacher she was.

Miss Long taught the history of architecture and I always got on well with her because I was interested in her subject and could draw quite well.

Miss Gladys Jones, 'Gladeye,' taught arithmetic, geometry and algebra. My first encounter with her within the first week at the school rather coloured my conception of Maths as a whole. She gave me detention for not having redone one sum I'd got wrong. I was mortified and I missed the school bus home and had to walk into town and then pay on the service bus because my pass was not valid.

To be continued

For further information, please see the booklet *Celebrating 100 years: Aberdare Girls School*, and Celia Thomas's memories of the school in the issue of Hanes Winter 2021.

Donations to the Society

Mrs Thelma Roberts, a great granddaughter of the famous Aberdare photographer Joseph Lendon Berry, has kindly donated some family photographs, some interesting documents and a long stemmed briar pipe.

In a future issue of Hanes, there will be an account of him and his family history.

Cwmbach Male Choir.

Last year was the centenary of the Cwmbach Male Choir, and they have now produced an excellent video, which is worth watching. See

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zK9BiKg1FL0>

They also performed recently at the Principality Stadium with Aberdare's Stereophonics.

New Information Boards in the Dare Valley Country Park

RCT Borough Council is to be congratulated in erecting at least six large information boards at the park. One shows Powell's Pit (Bwllfa No. 3) which was opened in 1856 and closed in 1936.

Another board contains information about Isambard Kingdom Brunel and the Dare Viaduct, which was constructed of timber, was 450 feet long and 70 feet in height and was demolished in 1947 after being used for 92 years.

Society News

Some members of the society are researching the History of The Cwm (the Dare valley, which the viaduct spanned.) If you have any information about The Cwm please contact the editor who will forward your information.

All our archives have been digitised and are in the process of being sent to the Peoples Collection of Wales website. We thank Zoe Lloyd and Krissy Wheeler for doing this invaluable work.

Centenary Issue

The centenary issue of Hanes will be produced in September. Yes, we will have reached 100 not out. If you have any articles you want to write for it, or articles from the previous 99 that you think should go into it please let me know.

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