

‘Times they are a-changin’

- Bob Dylan (1964)

June of 1921 saw the first carnival in the Public Park (later renamed Aberdare Park). Held on Thursday afternoon, after all had finished work, Thursdays being half-days, the sun shone gloriously on the participants and sightseers of the parade. Llwydcoed Silver Band led the procession from Victoria Square into the park for judging in various categories. Among the groups of awards were for best jazz band, best character dress, of whom the winner was ‘Boy Nigger Chief’, walking race, mile race and waltzing competitions. The daily takings for the afternoon’s event amounted to £22 14s 10d, nearly eight hundred pounds in value today, which was accepted by Councillor Illtyd Hopkins, secretary of the Distress Fund.



Aberdare carnival grew steadily in the coming years, by 1933 a reported 20,000 tickets had been bought through advance sales. By now Aberdare Hospital were the organisers of the event, this being their second year. At 2pm, the procession was due to assemble on the fairground, the streets teeming with eager onlookers, attired in Sunday best. The usual events highlighted the day, from jazz bands, fancy dress and dance competitions to those of a peculiar sort, dram weight guessing, duck chasing (ducks were elusive then, these days it’s more likely you are chased by them as the amount has increased terrifically) and a ‘remarkable display of his powers by Idris Lewis, a one-legged swimmer.

The sun shone gloriously, as it so often did then, as prizes were collected for best fancy dress, among which was 'a very fierce and convincing-looking Zulu, his black body glistening in the sunshine as he swung his formidable knobbery and rolled his eyes', best jazz band, best dressed cycle, best descriptive Turn-out for mechanical and horse-drawn vehicles, best groomed colliery horse and best impersonation on horse-back amongst others. The best tableau (float) and the crowning of the carnival queen were always well attended by visitors.

Thirty thousand visitors were reported by local press as attending the 1933 carnival but there was not another event like it held in Aberdare for another 33 years.

After a colossal break of thirty-three years, the carnival was re-established in 1966 under the organisation of the British Empire Cancer Campaign, under the chairmanship of Mr W. R. Bound. The re-instating of this once regular event had been the response of Mr W. R. Bound and the members of the British Empire Cancer Campaign in answering the dire requests of the charity for increased funds to continue their life-changing research. With the help of Council Chairman Coun. Amos, an estimated one-hundred square metres was set aside for the carnival to take place within the vicinity of Aberdare Park. It would now take place on the Saturday of the August bank holiday weekend, allowing for greater attendance and participation.



An overwhelming twenty-six floats contributed to the spectacle, leading a parade from the Ynys, through the town centre and accumulating at the park. These were mainly dressed by businesses and charity based organisations. Some took their contribution very seriously by contacting 'Hollywood' for the dimensions of their Flintstones car and receiving a blueprint of the plans in return. This was apparently then the only replica Flintstones car outside of the States, much to the delight of the children who had an opportunity to ride in it! Many of the business floats advertised their wares through their design; not intentionally mass advertising. Within the park were fancy dress competitions, races, judo exhibitions, balloon races and a marquee, offering refreshments to titillate the fancy. Prizes ranged from a firkin (nine gallons) of beer to a ton of coal. Priorities most definitely.

It was reported a great success by local press, who honoured it with a full broadsheet page, with a total of £1500 profit made after outlay. At today's value that would be over nineteen and a half thousand pounds. Not bad for an afternoons entertainment. It was reported though that as it was a great success, plans for next year must commence in earnest to keep momentum and excitement at a high and also to use a bigger area.

Socially, how things have changed. For the better? Who knows, it is just inevitable as progress intensifies so must we adapt to it. It was feared, during the sixties, that the mass introduction of the motor car and television would take people away from simple enjoyments of contributing to everyday life. The carnival if anything, has proved peoples' need for inclusion and not only was Aberdare carnival a great success but villages around it held their own ambitious carnivals and fetes on August bank holiday Monday with favourable outcomes.



The strength of the carnival evolved every year, with more tableaux, fancy dress, stalls and the popular increase of the jazz bands. Jazz bands lived in every village during this period, each as disciplined, determined and conscientious as each other. It gave the young a sense of ambition, of collectiveness and of pride. Competitions were big, with as many as thirty bands competing, it became a highlight of the carnival, family day out with a picnic, find a piece of grass to roost near the fenced off enclosure and cheer unashamedly when our colours took their starting position and again when they had completed their routine within one inch of its life. We were all proud to be a part of their journey and all supported each other's; though obviously wishing our team to take the cup and prize money. One year, my local troop made jazz band history by qualifying for the World Jazz Band Championships at Alexandra Place, London. The forty-five children would stay in London for the night to compete against sixty global teams, an experience they have never forgotten.

Wales on Line reported Aberdare's 43rd carnival was a resounding success, printed on 9th July, 2009, after moving back it's date to the end of June and spreading over the two days of the weekend, it stated that Jeff Taylor, director of the Aberdare Carnival and Show company, declared 'the new two-day formula and mid-summer date was a great success'. Attractions

included a major jazz band competition, dog show fun fair, and an It's a Knockout tournament. The Sunday's main event was a 5k charity fun run.

Another report by Wales on Line sheds a different outcome to the year's event. Dated 24th September 2009, Mr Taylor announced in a shock statement that the Aberdare Carnival and Show Company was finding it difficult to pay bills resulting from this year's event. The company which was only formed three years ago to alleviate Cancer Research UK Cynon Valley committee having the anxiety of raising the funds to run the event blamed becoming the victim of the recession.

What are the main differences of these three generational events? Being of cynical stature, my gut tells me it's organisation and money. Even during the twenties and thirties, you spent money on visiting the carnival, the entrance fee, a programme so you didn't miss your preferred event, hotdogs, cold drinks, merry-go-rounds, it was all still there. The same in the sixties and seventies, candyfloss, ice-lollies, raffle tickets, all the same if slightly different. Today, everything costs. There is very little, if anything, that does not take your hard earned money. Mainly filled with stalls and fast-food wagons, bouncy castles and fair rides, from the moment you set foot through the park gates, your purse open to the demands of whining children and if you are lucky to be blessed with more than one, it's unlikely to be closed for the duration of your visit.

We do, after all, live in one of the most deprived areas in Europe and have funding regularly to allow us to exist to a certain standard. The only free activities are the revival of the jazz bands and children from local dance schools demonstrating their skills.

In 1969, Aberdare carnival was the 'largest in Wales' and were awarded the Nuffield Trophy for the year's best local fundraising by a committee of the campaign.