

COWBRIDGE & DISTRICT LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

No 53 : DECEMBER 2003

MEETINGS

December 5th

The Maud Gunter Memorial Lecture

The History of Llandough

Hilary Thomas

Punch and mince pies

January 2nd ~~1st~~ ^{GR}

The Parishes and parish churches of the

Glamorgan coast

Jeff Childs

February 6th

Cardiff after 1800

D Morgan

March 5th

Margam Estate: its power, wealth and people

Steven George

March 13th (Charter Day)

Medieval dinner at the Duke of Wellington

April 4th ~~1st~~

The Mumbles Railway

G Gabb

All meetings are held in the Lesser Hall,
Cowbridge, and start at 8pm.

Membership now costs £5 per year.

OLD INNS AND ALEHOUSES OF COWBRIDGE

The latest book of the Cowbridge Record Society is now on sale for £4.95, a not-to-be-missed Christmas present. We have uncovered a great deal of information about the hostleries of Cowbridge from the seventeenth century onwards, have located public houses of whose existence we were previously unaware, and have found out lots of anecdotes and gossip. Local genealogists will find details of innkeepers and their families; we are sure that all will find it an interesting read. The photographs are good, too!

OFFICERS AND COMMITTEE

Joint Chairmen: Bruce McGovern, Jeff Alden

Hon Secretary: Don Gerrard

Hon Treasurers: Ivana Locke and Val Pugh

Programme secretary: Dick Tonkin

Publicity Officer: Don Wallis

Editor of the newsletter: Jeff Alden

Representative on Vale Conservation Advisory

Group: George Haynes

Committee: Betty Alden, Arline Boulton,

Marilyn Cope, Robert Cope, Liam Ginn,

Keith Jones, Iris Simpson

CHARTER DAY, 2004

March 13th will be a special day for the town with a grand medieval dinner at the Duke of Wellington. While many of us will be involved in this, it is not solely for members of the Local History Society. However, we hope in addition to be able to organise something on the lines of previous years for the society - details in future meetings.

OUR CONTRIBUTORS

Thanks to Alec Jones and Luke Millar for their articles, and to John Lyons for the information which I used in the third article. As editor, I may well add little bits or take pieces out of articles, so please blame me for any errors and omissions.

Luke is endeavouring to find out the existence of as many Vale of Glamorgan-made clocks as he possibly can. Details of the construction are much more important than condition. If you know of any of these clocks - even if you do not want to give the exact location - please let us know.

THE MARI LWYD

In the first weeks of January, God willing, the pubs of Cowbridge will once again be echoing to the strains of the fiddle and the chanting of verses, when the Mari Lwyd comes into town.

In 1888 David Jones of Wallington, the Llanblethian-born historian of the Vale, felt that the 'special local observations and rural pageantry which in Glamorganshire, on and about Twelfth Night, wound up the festivities of Christmastide, are no longer to be met with'. He commented in particular on two customs, *Canu Gwassaila* and the *Mari Lwyd*. *Canu Gwassaila*, Wassail singing, involved the singing of challenges in verse to the inhabitants of the house, and sung replies by those inside. The party, which included a Bessy, a man dressed up as a woman and equipped with a broom, was usually 'blacked up'. The men in the party had staves, and padded clothes, and as soon as they were admitted into a house after their challenging songs, would beat each other with the staves. They indulged in considerable amounts of horse play; and carried a wassail bowl, made of Ewenny pottery, which would be filled - and refilled - with beer, by the people of the house. The more elaborate Mari Lwyd involved more decorous 'wassail singing' together with the dressing up of a man in a costume involving a horse's head and white cloak.

For the Mari Lwyd, great preparation was needed – for several weeks beforehand, involving very many people. The basis of the Mari Lwyd was the skeleton of a horse's head, padded on the outer side and shaped with calico. The jaw was fastened so as to move up and down easily, and could be made to bite at the will of the man who played the horse. Eyes were made out of the bottoms of broken beer-bottles carefully chipped round, while the ears would be of felt, leather or any other suitable material. The whole would be decked with 'ribbons so plenty' that the Mari was indeed a sight to see. From the neck hung a large sheet which covered the young man who gave life to the Mari. The men who made up the party came dressed in their Sunday best, and with ribbons of many colours (lent them by their womenfolk) stuck on to their coats and hats.

The party went from house to house singing challenging verses to a traditional tune. At least the first three would be in Welsh, of which the first ran as follows:

O dyma ni'n dywed
Gym' docon dinuwad
I ofun cewn genad
I ganu.

In the bilingual districts of the Vale, they would then change to English

We've got a fine Mary
She's dressed very pretty
With ribbons so plenty
This Christmas.

Apparently this was enough to admit the party to beer, cake, and fun – particularly for the Mari who would run after the young women of the house. The party left after collecting some money, singing the valedictory verse

God bless the ruler of this house
And send him long to reign
And many a merry Christmas
May he live to see again
And God send you a happy new year.

'Mari Lwyd', according to David Jones, means 'Blessed Mary'. He took it to be a survival of a previously popular Festival of the Ass which was held, certainly in pre-Reformation times, on 14 January and which commemorated the flight of the holy family into Egypt. A donkey covered with robes used to be led into the church, a service performed in its honour in which the responses imitated the hee-hawing of the animal. After this, the donkey, ridden by a girl and child (representing the Mother and child) would be led around the parish. Apparently some

similar survivals of this ancient custom survived at least up to the nineteenth century in Monmouthshire, Lancashire and Kent.

Whether there was a revival of this custom in the early years of the last century - after Jones had bewailed its disappearance - I do not know. John John - Johnny Grassy - of No 7 Church Street, Cowbridge is usually regarded as the last singer under the Mari Lwyd in Cowbridge, before the revival by George Crabb, Bill Lewis and the others. Johnny Grassy died in 1932, and so it is likely that he was acting the part in the twentieth century. What they perform these days seems to be a combination of the two customs, with a blacked-up Bessy with a broom, and mock fights, as well as wassail singing and the Mari Lwyd. Nevertheless, they deserve your support: go along and sing with them!

I am very grateful to John Lyons of Narberth for drawing my attention to the article by David Jones of Wallington on 'The Mari Lwyd: a Twelfth Night Custom'.

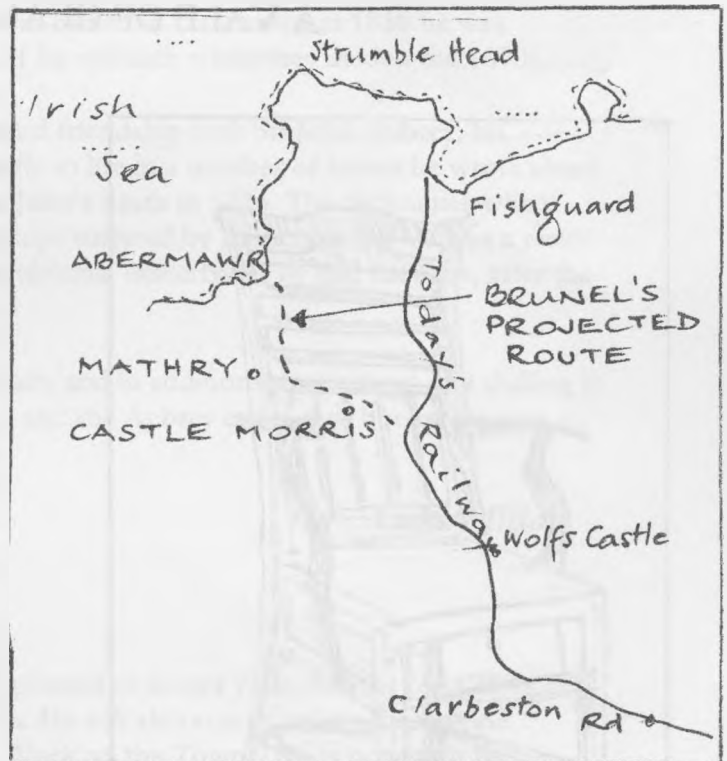
BRUNEL AT ABERMAWR, PEMBROKESHIRE

Many visitors to that part of Pembrokeshire between St David's and Fishguard, and especially those who walk the coast path, will know the bay at Abermawr and its long shingle beach. Not many, however, will know the connection between Abermawr and the great Victorian engineer, Isambard Kingdom Brunel.

In the 1840s Brunel, as engineer for the South Wales Railway, supervised the construction of a seven-foot broad-gauge line from Gloucester westwards which was to terminate at Fishguard. However on 30 November 1847 he submitted a new plan to reroute the line to Abermawr instead of Fishguard. The reason for this change is not known although there was some suggestion that the Admiralty required Fishguard as an anchorage for the Fleet.

By late 1847 the line had already reached Clarbeston Road, and Brunel planned for it to continue via Spittal, Wolf's Castle, Welsh Hook, Heathfield, Castle Morris and then by bearing right at the bottom of Mathry Hill to run down the valley and end at Abermawr. His plans for the harbour at Abermawr included breakwaters, a pier and loading quays all aimed at facilitating trade with Ireland and beyond. Most unfortunately for Brunel his arrival in west Wales coincided with the time of the potato famines in Ireland when blight ruined the harvests and a million men and women emigrated in search of a better life. These events made his financial backers doubt whether the work would ever show a profit

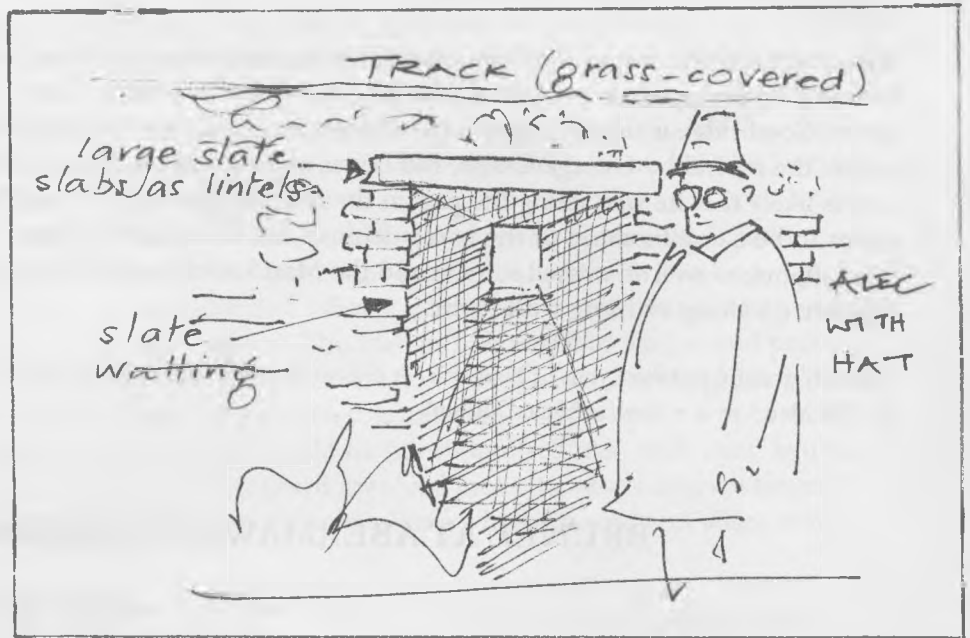
and they withdrew their support. Brunel was forced to suspend construction and in 1851 he abandoned his plan for Abermawr. Instead he continued the line to Haverfordwest. His original destination, Fishguard, was only joined to the rail network in 1906.



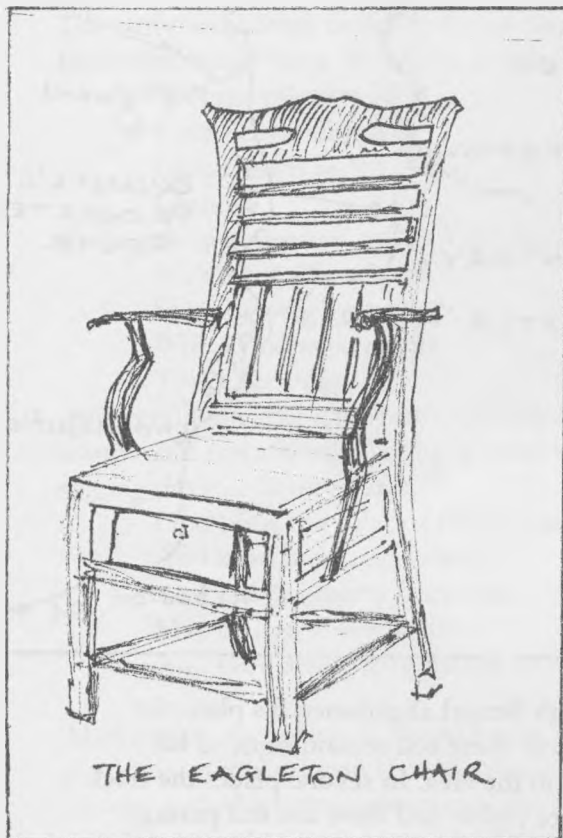
Although Brunel abandoned his plans for Abermawr there still remain signs of his activity in the area. In several places the track levels are visible and there are still passage tunnels in existence, their sound condition reflecting the skill and craftsmanship of those who built them. Passage tunnels were made to

allow people and animals in single file to pass underneath the track, and two tunnels are to be found near Abermawr beach. One is at the top of the zig-zag path at the south end of the beach, and the other is several hundred yards inland, at the top of the north bank of the small valley leading to the beach. Further traces of Brunel's work are to be found on nearby farmland but are not accessible to the casual visitor.

Alec Jones



A VALE OF GLAMORGAN CHAIR



Substantial oak armchairs with drawers beneath the seats are widely known, traditionally as the father-of-the-family's fireside seat, probably with a bible in the drawer. The example illustrated here is remarkable both because it exhibits a variety of early nineteenth-century vernacular 'fashion', and because an inscription on the stay-rail tells us everything about its provenance. The letters are deeply cut, and filled with a red stopping. They read: W EAGLETON C/1816/ Lantrithyd' and on the top cross-splat: 'Gods intent none can prevent'

Stylistically it combines the form of a South Wales vernacular 'Sheraton' armchair with the heavy front legs and boldly raked back of the 'Chippendale' examples, plus an extended back with cross-splats and a shaped crest rail. The arms are boldly swept in the eighteenth-century manner, and the long tapered bases of the arm supports are fluted. The drawer compartment is formed by a second, lower set of rails below the seat, with grooved-in flush panels on three sides, the drawer opening to the front.

The drawer itself is of elm with an oak front. It is unusual, being entirely divided up to half its depth by cross-wise slips of pine, forming twelve narrow compartments 2.5 cm wide by 3.5 cm deep and 30 cm long. These were originally concealed by a false bottom which slid through a slot in the back and grooves in the sides into a groove inside the front. The drawer's lock is missing, but the form of its recess indicates that the bolt shot downwards to lock the false bottom.

The purpose of the drawer compartments is obscure. It is unlikely that they were used for coinage, as the chair's ownership (see below) might indicate, because they are too narrow for the large pennies still in circulation in 1816. Silver cutlery seems possible, but whatever was kept in them was probably protected by a loose cloth lining, because the drawer bottom shows no signs of wear.

The ownership of the chair has proved easy to trace. Llantrithyd is a village to the south-east of Cowbridge and was the seat of the Aubrey family from the seventeenth century until, early in the nineteenth century, a family tragedy caused the sixth Baronet, Sir John, to abandon the house, which still stands in ruins. The move away was also partly the result of the family's acquisition of estates in Buckinghamshire at Boarstall and Dorton. At the time that the chair was made, William Eagleton was steward of the Llantrithyd estate, while his brother John held the same position at Dorton. 150 years earlier, Thomas Edmondes, the founder of the Cowbridge Edmondes dynasty, was steward to the Aubreys at Llantrithyd

The parish registers show that William and Catherine Eagleton had seven children born between 1815 and 1824; three died in infancy, one appears to have moved away, while three continued to live in the locality. When William was buried in Llantrithyd in 1836 he was described as being 'of Bonvilston', as were two of his children when they died in the 1890s.

John Eagleton enjoyed a position of close trust and friendship with Sir John Aubrey; his brother William is more obscure, but comes briefly to life in a number of letters he wrote about the collection of debts due to the estate after Sir John's death in 1826. The difficulties which Eagleton had in collecting rents reflect the hardships suffered by farmers in the Vale as a result of the collapse of grain prices and other social problems, exacerbated by bad harvests, after the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815.

William Eagleton earned a salary of £50 per annum, and in addition a 'poundage' of a shilling in the pound on his collection of debts. The letters, and the Aubrey estate rent books, are now in Buckinghamshire Record Office.

Luke Millar

ENDPIECE

COWBRIDGE 750 - Bruce McGovern will be pleased to accept your cheques for £25 as payment for the Medieval dinner on March 13th. He will also accept orders for the fine Rumney pottery commemorative mug, at £10. Work on the Town Trail is now with the designer, most of the history input having been completed, and the same goes for the Charter leaflet.

GARAGE SITE - now that the garage has been demolished to make way for eight town houses, keep your eyes open for any signs of past occupation on the site!

NEWSLETTER - deadline for the next issue is March 15.

CHRISTMAS - a merry Christmas and a happy New Year to you all.

Jeff Alden, Editor, 01446 - 773373