

CYNON VALLEY HISTORY SOCIETY

PRESIDENT: THE LORD ABERDARE



HANES

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

ISSUE NUMBER 40

AUTUMN 2007

NOTES AND QUERIES.

As you receive this Edition of HANES the Society is commencing its 2007-2008 series of lecture programmes, and entering its Thirty-sixth year.

As it does so we record the retirement of a number of officers who have served Cynon Valley History Society for a great number of years. The gentlemen concerned are Mr. Tom Evans, one of the few surviving Founder-Members of the Society, Mr. Ken Collins who is standing down as Treasurer after 30 years (Ken, we are pleased to say will remain on the Committee as Minute Secretary). Mr. Elfed Bowen will no longer act as our Book Sales and Distribution Officer (in effect our Commercial Traveller), an arduous task as those of us who have seen him delivering bundles of heavy books to shops in our Capital City, and other places in South Wales, will be aware.

Finally Mr. Bryn Davies who is unable to continue as our General Secretary due to ill-health.

Our grateful thanks to each for their long and dedicated service.

Would you please note that Subscriptions are now due for renewal and should be paid forthwith if you wish to remain a Full or Associate Member of the Society. We would like to thank all those who continue to pay their Membership Fees regularly and punctually year after year.

OLD ABERDARE VOLUME X

We are pleased to inform you that the final volume of Old Aberdare will be published at, or before, Christmas 2007. This will contain three Essays, together with a facsimile of Webster's 1865 Trade Directory of Aberdare, and extracts from the copy Report Books of the Board of Health's Inspector of Nuisances and Cabs for the years 1888-1893. We hope to be able to announce the actual publication date at our September or October Meeting

HANES AND St.JOHN'S: NEW ASPECTS ON AN OLD CHURCH.

THE CHANCEL OF ST.JOHN'S CHURCH AS PERCEIVED BY THE REVD JOHN GRIFFITH ON BECOMING VICAR OF ABERDARE.

(This item is included not only for its historical interest, but also for the writer's keen observation, and elegant and amusing prose. *Cambro Sacerdos* (Welsh Priest) was one of the several pseudo names used by John Griffith in writing to the press, usually, as in the case of this letter, complaining of the neglect of the parish by the Dean & Chapter of Gloucester, who took tithes from Aberdare, owned the Glebeland and gave nothing in return.)

"The Chancel is a damp, dingy place, some 15 feet long by 12 broad. In it is placed a rotten deal table, covered with a singularly curious coloured cloth, on which are placed two superannuated cushions. A rash antiquary might say that these were scarlet centuries ago. A cautious man, however, would only assert what they seem to be now, namely, mouldy drab. On either side of this table are two oblong stools, shaped like a carpenter's bench, and supported one on three, the other on four legs. These stools or benches are covered in green baize, the legs being naked, showing the workmanship below, which is of the purest and simplest order of art; the cortex, or bark, still showing in many places. Parochial rumour says - if, however, it be a libel the Dean and Chapter can reply, that these altar stools or benches are not the bequest of the Dean and Chapter, but they are the amateur workmanship of a late incumbent, who, being of an erratic and melancholy turn of mind, used to beguile his sedentary moments sometimes in carpentering, and sometimes like Shakespeare's weaver, in "the singing of holie psalms" Many instances of his ingenuity in the former art still remain in various nooks and corners of the old Church, and tradition assigns to him a high place in the execution of the latter".

(Letter to John Bull, 6th.February 1847, signed Cambro Sacerdos).

THE CHURCHWARDENS OF THE PARISH OF ABERDARE 1735-1759

- 1735 Wm Gibbon and Wm.Lewis Robert.
- 1737 Nicholas Herbert and William Thomas
- 1740 Edward Philipp and Wm.Morgan
- 1741 Evan Morgan and Richard Griffith.
- 1742 Lewis Richard and Evan Meirigg
- 1743 Theophilus Richard and John Richard
- 1744 John Meirigg and Thos.Roger
- 1745 John Richard and William Gibbon.
- 1746 David John and Edwd. Philipp
- 1747 Howell Morgan and Edward John.
- 1748 Thomas William and Edward Philip.
- 1749 No Entry.
- 1750 David William and Thomas Lewis
- 1751 Edward William and Thomas Howell
- 1752 No Entry
- 1753 No Entry.
- 1754 Edward Bevan and Edwd.Phillip Edward
- 1755 Charles Miles and Morgan David
- 1756 David Wm. Mathew and Thos.David Miles.
- 1757 Richard Griffith and John David Edward.
- 1758 Edwd. Phillip Thomas and John Thomas Evan.
- 1759 Jenkin Gibbon and Thomas Howell.

(Ascertained from the Parish Registers)

The Election of Wardens took place at the Easter Vestry i.e. during the month of April.

The first named would have been Vicar's Warden, the latter The People's Warden.

The names listed represent the more substantial and important parish farmers.

There are a number of familiar names here, E.g. Gibbon, David, Morgan (Gadlys), Herbert (Hendre Bailey) and, of course, Theo Richard(s) "Eminent Drover" of Blaengawr, etc.

THE BELL SPEAKS

By W.W.Price

(From *The Aberdare Leader* 20th.September 1941)

“What a thrill to touch the bell that has called the people of Aberdare for over 300 years to worship together in the sacred old edifice, to toll the burial of a parishioner, to greet a loving couple on starting life together, or to celebrate some great victory in foreign lands. But today the bell, like other church bells, is silenced on account of the second Great War, for the first time in its long history.

As I stand on the topmost rung of an extended ladder, kindly lent for the occasion, Mr.Arthur Wright B.Sc, of Bargoed, the science master at Lewis’ School, Pengam, who has devoted 40 years to studying church bells (See the “Arch Camb.”* For his articles on the Church Bells of Monmouthshire), is sitting astride the roof on the other side of the bell. Thus we take a rubbing of the ancient bell, and this is what we read: “WILLIAM MATHEW, E-SPVAR X R.T., W.H., C.W. 1637; I.P.X.”

As some of these letters appear meaningless Mr.Wright helped the bell to speak to us, and this is what the bells tells us:-

William Mathew presented the bell. As he was a well-to-do-man, he is called Espvar, (Esquire). “R.T.” and “W.H.” are the initials of the names of the “C.W.” (Churchwardens)*, who were in office at the time of presenting the bell. 1637 is the date of casting the bell, therefore it is over 300 years old, and we have overlooked celebrating its tercentenary. But who made the bell? At the end of the line, you will notice “I.P. These stand for John Palmer, of Gloucester, the celebrated bell founder. The letter X above, which confounds us is simply used to mark a stop, or space, so is not read as a part of the inscription.”

* Perhaps, R.T. = Roger Thomas.

W.H. = Walter Herbert?

One of these would have been the Vicar’s or Curate’s Warden, the other the People’s Warden. The former would have been of a higher social standing.

Meet the Donor – William Mathew 1

Unfortunately, although we cannot say more about the bell, we can record a few facts about its donor, William Mathew the First of Aberaman. There is need of a history of the entire Aberaman branch of this important Glamorganshire family. Until this is written the following short account of William Mathew will have to suffice.

The Mathew family built and lived at Aberaman House; not the present Georgian building but a substantial gabled stone house, similar to Llancaiach or Dyffryn House which has been sketched by both Penry Williams, and one of the Bacon sisters. In 1670 Aberaman House, which was built Ca.1558, had six declared hearths (as opposed to Dyffryn’s seven). William Mathew, the donor of the bell, was the first of that name (hence Wm. Mathew 1), and is described in records as “of Roos and Aberaman” He was the eldest son of James Mathew the second of Roos, and Elizabeth daughter of John Carne of Nash. The Carnes were one of the most important and powerful landowners of the Vale of Glamorgan. William Mathew married Mary** (died 1664), the daughter of Edward Pritchard of Llancaiach, another great Glamorgan magnate, and widow of Rees Thomas of Llanbradach.

William and Mary had 17 children of which James, Christopher (of Gadlys) and Myles (or Miles) are recognised figures in the history of Aberdare. A daughter, Barbara married John Jones of Dyffryn House, Mountain Ash.

William was High Sheriff of Glamorgan in 1618, and served as Magistrate on the Brecon Circuit (Glamorgan), from 1622 to 1625.

William Mathew was alive in 1637 (the date on the bell), but died the following year. He is buried in the chancel of the parish church. In 1630 he possessed two Freehold tenements (farms) in Aberdare, 7 other farms, a lease of 30 acres of the Lord of the Manor’s Demesne land, and a Mill.

*Archaeologia Cambrensis 1937-1941 and 1942. The Church Bells of Monmouthshire.

** Catherine according to G.T.Clark (Limbus Patrum)

William Edwards in his "Notes on the Ancient Parish Church of St. John the Baptist" (Second Edition 1946.) records that in 1553 valuable communion plate etc. was "stolen" from the church. (Page 15.) Although true in substance the statement is misleading, as the persons taking the items had, or had had, some legal authority. It is hoped that the account given in Geoffrey Evans's later publication is clearer. The story has not been told since 1982, and as it is well worth recalling, HANES reproduces it below in a dramatic form, as it might have appeared had there been newspapers in 1553.

THE HIRWAUN COMMONER

(INCORPORATING THE VILLAGER AND GREAT FORESTS NEWS)
[ENGLISH EDITION.]

13th July 1553

Price: ½ penny

SEIZURE OF ITEMS FROM ST. JOHN'S CHURCH ON KING'S ORDERS.

SHOCK AND DISBELIEF IN VILLAGE.

At noon yesterday (12th July) a number of important County Gentlemen claiming to be acting as the King's Commissioners, and under his Warrant, rode into the village with an armed retinue. Our correspondent recognized the following faces, Masters Wm. Herbert, Myles Mathew and Wm. Bassett.

The armed men dismounted and stood guard at the church door, preventing anyone from entering or leaving. The three Gentlemen set up quarters at the Inn and demanded that the curate, Sir John Yong, and Lewis Johns and Thomas Miricke, the two churchwardens, be brought before them immediately.

All three arrived swiftly, and the Curate was presented with a sealed Writ. The parties then entered the church, and Master Herbert demanded that the old oak coffer be opened. The curate and wardens produced their keys and the great chest was duly unlocked. The contents, letters, parish Registers, candles and other objects, were strewn about the place, and the remaining items were carefully inspected and promptly removed, to be taken away. One of the men then strode to the chancel and roughly seized everything resting upon the altar table.

We can now confirm that the following sacred and valuable vessels and robes were confiscated:
- A Chesible of crymmosin velette (worth 26 shillings and eight pence), another of bliwe silke (worth 13 shillings and 4 pence), two candlesticks, a sencer shippe and the brass altar cross (worth twenty shillings and ten pence).

The velvette and silk vestments were rolled up, and the precious metal objects were thrown into a large leather saddlebag. The curate was bold enough to ask for, and to his surprise, was given a receipt, for the items being taken away.

By this time most of the villagers had turned up and were standing in silence outside the church. Word of what was happening had got out. Many cried. Others fell to their knees in prayer. Their task completed, Master Herbert and his party rode off amidst a cloud of dust, the clatter of hooves, and the jangle of weapons and spurs.

We have since ascertained that this incident was not common to Aberdare, and that similar church possessions have been removed from churches throughout the Diocese of Llandaff. It is understood there is a financial crisis in London, and that the young King Edward VI had ordered that all church plate be handed into his Exchequer to aid the funds of the State. In an exclusive statement to "The Commoner" the curate informed us, "*I have been aware for a while that this terrible event was going to happen. I have been dreading the moment. Aberdare is a poor enough place and its church even poorer. We will not get over this. How can we now glorify the Lord, and make the communion sacred? Our Mother church at Llantrisant, and Llanwonno gave some of these items to us after they had received new benefactions. Other pieces were the gift of Squire Mathew of Aberaman, and his*

family. The fabrics were beautiful and costly; silks brought from Bristol, and acquired from foreign merchants there, and lovingly fashioned into vestments by the women of the village."

Our correspondent later contacted local relatives of both Masters Herbert, living at Hendre Bailey, and Mathew at Aberaman but they declined to comment

Historical Retrospect

King Henry VIII died on the 28th January 1547. His son, Edward VI, a minor, succeeded him. On the 3rd March the King's Council Decreed that owing to the "King's need of money, Commissioners should be sent into every Shire to take into the King's use such church plate as remained following the Reformation". There was some delay in carrying out this order, perhaps as a result of the young King's reluctance to continue the process of despoliation. On the 21st April however Edward wrote in his Journal "*it was agreed that they (The Commissioners) should go out for to take Certificates of the surplus church plate to mine use and see how it hath been embezzled.*" The Council was in a hurry to carry out their task as the young King's health was failing rapidly. .

For administrative purposes the Diocese of Llandaff was divided into groups of Hundreds under Commissioners. The Parish of Llantrisant was grouped with Caerphilly, Dinas Powis and Cardiff. William Herbert was appointed Receiver of the money and Plate. His fellow Commissioners were William Bassett and Myles Mathew. They chose the town of Cardiff as their Head Quarters.

Their next step was to order representatives of every church in their Hundred to bring a catalogue of the goods in their respective churches. Such goods were then claimed for and on behalf of the crown.

It was a race against time, as Edward was by then dying, and in fact passed away on the 6th July 1553, before the Commissioners had ended their task. The Commissioners were ruthless in their greed and exceeded their Commission, seizing everything of value – even bell ropes and tapers.

Edward had directed that all confiscated articles should be sold, but it transpired that the corrupt Commissioners kept a large part, if not all, of the confiscated property.

The removal of the items from Aberdare was most probably illegal, as their seizure took place 6 days after the death of Edward. It is not known if they (The Commissioners) were aware of this fact. News of Edward's death was suppressed so that steps could be taken to place Lady Jane Grey on the throne.

All this came to light in the following reign of Mary Tudor, when on the 9th May 1555, following local Petitions, a new Royal Commission was set up to enquire into the circumstances of the removal of church goods, and new Commissioners visited the parishes to record what had been taken, and to recommend restitution.

In the case of Aberdare evidence, on oath, was taken from the "*curate, parish clerk, sexton, church wardens, and two or more of the honeste and discretiste parishioners*"

To sum up the late Professor Sir Glanmor Williams has recorded that the "Edwardian raids on Chantries, and church goods offered scope for many kinds of chicanery and desecration, and as many chalices ended up as goblets on the local squire's table, and copes as coverlets on his bed, as found their way into the royal possession"

For other items seized from churches in the old Diocese of Llandaff see Chapter Seven, (The Confiscation of Church Goods 1552-1553 pp. 102-112), of *The Reformation in the Old Diocese of Llandaff* by Lawrence Thomas (Cardiff 1930)

FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS

Anyone passing the parish church of St. John the Baptist in the autumn of 1941 would have come across an unusual sight. Two men would have been seen on the west front of the church, one sitting astride the apex of the roof, the other standing on the top rung of an extended ladder. The latter was making a rubbing of the inscription on the single bell of the old church. That man was our most famous historian, William Watkin Price. The other was Arthur Wright, the Science master of Lewis' School, Pengam, and an expert on old church bells.

The piece of paper on which the rubbing was made, itself now a piece of local history, can still be seen amongst WWP's papers in the library. Thanks to these two intrepid enthusiasts we know that the famous John Palmer, bell founder of Gloucester, cast the bell in 1637 and that it was given to the church by William Mathew of Aberaman House. From other cryptic lettering on the bell Mr. Wright was able to establish that the churchwardens for that year were two men with the initials R.T. and W.H. To be Church Warden you would have to be a substantial yeoman and a respectable member of the community. W.H. might well have been Watkin Herbert of Hendre Bailey, Llwydcoed who died post 1640. (More about this family in a later issue)

Other mysteries that elude us are why was the gift of the bell made in 1637 – was this for some special event in the history of the parish, or the Mathew family? A coming of age, marriage or birth of an heir perhaps? We shall never know. What we do know however is that in setting up the bell the local blacksmith and stonemason would have occupied positions similar to that of "WW" and Mr Wright 300 years later.

Another intriguing question is how did the bell reach Aberdare? HANES suggests that it came by sailing ship from Gloucester to Cardiff, or some other small port in the Vale of Glamorgan – Aberthaw perhaps, and was then transported by pack-mule through the Taff and Cynon Valleys. The acquisition of the bell would have been both an act of faith and a matter of pride for the people of Aberdare.

The purpose of the bell is clearer – to call parishioners to worship, to Patronal festivals, tithings, harvest suppers and it was perhaps also used as a tocsin (warning or alarm). W.W.P wrote that *it was used to toll the burial of a parishioner, or to greet a loving couple on starting life together, or to celebrate some great victory in foreign lands (Trafalgar and Waterloo perhaps)*

The bell in Welsh history had its own language as a passing bell. It would be tolled by the sexton in the evening of the day on which the death occurred, and not as the soul was departing. By varying the number of pulls parishioners knew whose passing bell was being rung. This was the formula: four pulls, thrice repeated with a pause between each set of pulls signified a girl-child is dead, that is, the bell is tolled twelve times for a girl. Five pulls three times repeated, with a pause after each fifth, signified the death of a boy child, and six, seven, eight and nine pulls, three times repeated imply, respectively that a single woman, an unmarried man, a married woman or a married man had departed this life. (The local custom was perhaps different)

The point of this article, if there is one, is to record that this unique old bell is no longer heard. It was said to be "cracked" and in need of recasting. It was removed by the Revd. Gordon James when he was Vicar to the other space in the bell-cote, and replaced by the bell from Robertstown Church. HANES urges that an expert be called in to inspect the bell with a view to its restoration, and re-instatement to use. It is a treasure that should not be silent, as it was in 1941 when seen by WWP. There was then a valid reason for this. It was wartime.

Perhaps the Friends of St. John would take this matter up as a matter of priority, and ascertain if grants are available for this purpose?

Published by The Cynon Valley History Society
Hon. Secretary, Brynmor Evans, 45E Oxford Street, Aberdare CF44 BBE (01685) 875558
Edited by Geoffrey Evans, 5 Plasdraw Place, Aberdare CF44 0NS (01685) 871840
E-mail: gmorgannwg@aol.com

Registered Charity No. 732365"

Printed by Dial-A-Print, Mountain Ash 01443 474822