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# HANES



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

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*How those curiosities would be quite forgot, did not such idle fellows as I am put them down*  
(John Aubrey 1626-1697)

## HANES AND CWMBACH

From time to time *Hanes* takes a brief look at specific districts of Aberdare, e.g. Hirwaun (No.32) and Robertstown (No.47). In this edition we turn our spotlight on Cwmbach, a community that sprang up during the industrial revolution; firstly along the Aberdare canal (1812), and then as the result of the sinking of coal pits in the area between 1837 and 1850.

Prior to this sea change the area now known as Cwmbach consisted of a number of farms and homesteads the names of which were:

Ynyscynon, Pant- y- gerddinen, Blaen-nant-y-groes, Abernant -y- groes (Uchaf and Isaf), Ty-llwyd, Tir- y- founder, Tir-bach, Lletty-shenkyn and Cwmbach. It is from the latter that the name of the community is taken [Deric John: *Place Names of the Cynon Valley*. Aberdare 1998]

It has been suggested that the place called Abernant -y- groes indicated that it was the location of an early Celtic or Cistercian cross. (R. Ivor Parry *Religion....before the Reformation*, Old Aberdare Vol. 6)

Cwmbach is important in the history of Aberdare as the location of the first deep sale coal mine sunk there by Thomas Wayne and others in 1837 – a Blue Plaque marks the site. It is also the place where the first Co-operative society in Wales was set up on March 8th 1860. In Welsh cultural history it was the home of the poet Thomas Evans (Telynog, 1840-1865)

In 1853 Thomas Webster Rammell recorded:

*Cwm Bach is a part lying to the south-east of the town [of Aberdare], and consists of 300 or 400 houses. It lies near the river on a flat low ground, and is traversed by the canal. It is described as one of the worse parts of the parish as regards drainage and privy accommodation. There is no road whatever here; and a great number of the houses are so situated that no cart, and in some cases not even a horse could approach them. The greater part adjoins the canal; and this part is as badly off as can well be conceived, having no means of getting rid of ashes, or any sort of refuse.* (The Rammell Report)

His description appears to relate to the lower part of the village.

The farmers who worked the land in 1841 were Edward Morgan (Lletty-shenkyn), Mary Williams (Pant-y-gerddinen), Richard Richards (Ynyscynon), William David (Abernant-y-groes Uchaf), and Llewellyn Howell (Abernant-y-groes Isaf).

This extract from the 1847 tithe map of the parish of Aberdare shows Cwmbach. The image is taken from a photograph of a section of the parish copy of the map made by the late Douglas Williams on a 35 mm slide.



A key to the various parcel numbers and farm names appears below.

## CWMBACH

This section of the 1847 Tithe Map shows the River Cynon (left), the Aberdare canal running from north to south, and **Abernant -y- Groes Isha farm**, Cwmbach (top right). This was a small farm of just over 48 acres; the farmhouse can be seen at parcel number **916** (below the letter n in

Morgan. It was on part of the Abernant- y-groes Estate in July 1837 that Thomas Wayne and the landowners, the David family, (trading as **Wayne's Merthyr-Aberdare Coal Company**) sank Aberdare's first deep mine, **Abernant -y-groes Colliery (later named Cwmbach Pit)**.

In 1847 the farm was vested in the Executors of Thomas Morgan David.

The houses on parcel number **900** are Timothy Row (now demolished). Scales Row (still standing) occupies enclosure number **897**. The canal is crossed by two bridges; the first near **1001**, the second between **897** and **917** was the old canal bridge which led to the Aberdare Coal Company's dry dock on the canal bank.

By 1868 this whole area had undergone a sea change with the sinking of High Dyffryn Colliery, Cwmbach Little Pit and the construction of extensive rail and tramway networks. (c.f. the 1868 first edition 25 inch OS survey map)

The locations of other interesting old farms are shown, **TyLlwyd**, **Tir Y Founder** and **Tir Bach**, all then in the ownership of John Bruce Pryce.

Thomas Powell, of Powell Duffryn, sank his first pit at Tir-y-founder in 1840. He is named on the Tithe Schedule as the occupier of Tir- y-founder, a holding of just over 29 acres.

**901** Cottage and garden occupied by Bethuel Williams. (Williams was the son in law of Morgan Thomas David of Abernant- y- groes Isaf farm.)

The occupier of parcel number **902** is William Wayne and others. It is designated coal wharf etc.

**904** The Colliers Arms, occupied by John Colman. (Opened in 1841 closed in 1924. It stood in Bethania Place.)

**1001** This parcel of land is part of Cwmbach Farm owned by the Marquis of Bute and occupied by the Aberdare Coal Company. The Tithe Schedule describes it as ? Dry Dock.

Source: the 1844 Tithe Schedule.

Readers know how life in the Aberdare valley in its formative years was brutal and short; of all the outlying villages Cwmbach was only too aware of this fact. Within the space of only a few years there were horrific explosions at,

Cwmbach pit in 1846 when 28 miners were killed followed by the deaths, within three weeks, of 4 others who had been seriously injured in the incident.

Lletty-shenkyn colliery in 1849 resulting in 53 deaths.

Cwmbach colliery 2 deaths (1852)

Lletty-shenkyn colliery 5 deaths (1853)

Ditto 2 deaths in 1862.

In 1849 the vicar of Aberdare, the Rev. John Griffith, wrote his well known letter to the Church Building Society describing the parish as a San Francisco of immigration and unrest. In this he said, *we are continually having strikes here. There is not a fortnight since we had one of ten weeks. We are just entering another; how long it will last and whether it will end quietly God only knows. There is some excitement here always. Had we more churches and more church rooms we should, I trust, do better. As it is now we are very bad.* [C.B.S. 4219. Griffiths to the Society, 11 December 1849, quoted in Wilton D Wills, *The Rev. John Griffith and the Revival of the Established Church in Nineteenth- Century Glamorgan*, Morgannwg Vol. XIII, 1969, pp. 83-84]

John Griffiths' disquiet in penning this letter was prophetic and within two months of his

appeal to the Society a blackleg worker, John Thomas, was murdered at Cwmbach. The facts are set out below. The strike of 1849-1850 even became a matter of concern to the Home Office at London.

**ABERDARE - DIABOLICAL ATTEMPT TO MURDER A WHOLE FAMILY,** - One of those occurrences that have lately thrown so much alarm over the district took place here on Friday last. Rumours are numerous as to the manner in which the attempt was made; but until an investigation has taken place, it will remain an unaccountable mystery. From the handbill issued we copy the following: -- *Between the hours of ten and eleven o'clock on Friday night, an attempt was made by some miscreant to murder a whole family, at Cwmbach, Aberdare, by exploding a large quantity of gunpowder in the house of John Thomas, a collier in the employ of the Aberdare Coal Company, whereby the unfortunate man was frightfully burnt and otherwise injured. The interior of the building was shattered to pieces, and the roof nearly blown off.* One hundred pounds has been offered by the Aberdare Coal Company in order to discover the offender, but, like the preceding awards offered, it is unlikely to offer no inducement for divulging the miscreant's name. Thomas was one of the 'strikers' but had, by returning to work, aroused the passions of his former associates. Many men that we have conversed with having assured us they would willingly go back to work but for fear of the others. It is supposed those standing out are led by men who have figured pretty conspicuously during former strikes - *The Cambrian*.

Two former attempts have been made to murder innocent men, whose only crime it was to have preferred honest labour to idleness and beggary, by shooting at them at night through their windows. Both escapes were narrow. In the first case, the slugs struck the wall immediately above the bed in which the man and his wife were sleeping. In the second, the bullet must have passed through the head of the intended victim, had he not fortunately stooped at the moment the shot was fired, while he was sitting surrounded by his wife and four children, either of whom might easily have been killed. - *The Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*.

This incident was mentioned in Hanes No 20 (Winter 2000) but no mention was made of the subsequent death of the unfortunate man. The source of that article was *The Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, Friday, February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1850.

The victim, John Thomas, died on Saturday the 2<sup>nd</sup> of March 1850. The following detailed account of the circumstances of the incident is taken from the newspaper report of the inquest proceedings.

## **MURDER AT ABERDARE.**

"An inquest has been held at Aberdare, on view of the remains of the poor fellow, named John Thomas late of Cwmbach, collier, who fell a sacrifice to the diabolical vengeance of certain parties who are at present undiscovered.

The deceased had recently entered the service of the Aberdare Coal Company, under the new regulations, and had thereby incurred the displeasure of the colliers who are at present carrying on what is popularly known as a 'strike for wages.'

**Anne Thomas, widow of deceased**, said that her husband was forty-four years of age, and on the night of the 15<sup>th</sup> February he was in bed with her and one of their children, in a room on the ground floor of a house in which they resided. Four other children were in a room upstairs. Between the hours of eleven and twelve on the night above stated, she heard a noise like the

breaking of glass. She perceived a strong smell, and on looking over the side of the bed saw on the floor something burning. She called out to her husband that the house was on fire. He jumped up – took hold of what was burning – tried to put it out with his hands – went with it towards the door, and soon afterwards she heard a loud noise just like the explosion of gunpowder. The room became full of smoke and sulphur. She was not hurt, neither was the child. Her husband was in the next room near the staircase. He was quite insensible. The partition between the two rooms was blown down. Her husband was extensively burnt about the lower extremities. It was necessary to put him to bed. He died on Saturday the 2<sup>nd</sup> March.

[The medical evidence given in the paper has been omitted from this account. Editor].

The Inquest was then adjourned.

At the resumed hearing Mrs Thomas the widow of the deceased said – After the accident happened I found something in the house which led me to suppose how it had happened. I found a piece of old stocking, a piece of wood, and pieces of old stuff gowns. The piece of wood was by itself, and had attached to it bits of string which showed that something had been tied to it. A piece of safety- fuse had been tied to the stocking. I am sure these things were not there when I went to bed – there was nothing of the kind there. The piece of wood was quite wet as if it had been lifted out of a ditch. The explosion stopped the clock. The witness then detailed at length a variety of details in respect of threats held out to the deceased for working, and mentioned repeatedly the name of Rees Davies.

**Police-sergeant Plumley** said – On the night of the 15<sup>th</sup> February I was called to deceased's house, soon after the explosion had occurred. Found the house nearly full of smoke and sulphur, and on the ground floor a quantity of bricks and stones. I noticed three squares of glass broken in the window of the bedroom on the ground floor. The partition was blown down, and the roof had been lifted two or three inches of the walls. The fuse communicates with the inside of the stocking. It had evidently exploded, and the fragments of the stocking bear marks of having been exposed to fire. From the loose cords and rags, and the pieces of stocking, I infer they were tied to the board [The description of fuse which was used on the sad occasion by the murderer burns at the rate of a foot in a minute.] I am quite sure that the stocking contained gunpowder; and that the powder had exploded in the house, having been thrust through the window with a lighted fuse attached to it. The night was wet, windy and dark. I searched the houses of parties who were suspected, and found nothing to excite suspicion.

**Charles Thomas, collier** lives within a few hundred yards of the house occupied by deceased at the time of the accident, but did not hear the report of the explosion. There was a meeting of the colliers on strike at the Cardiff arms public-house; but deceased's name was not mentioned when he was there. There are meetings held every day, and witness is in the habit of attending them. He thought he had never heard deceased's name mentioned at any of those meetings. He has heard the name of Thomas Griffiths mentioned – that man who occupies the house next to that in which the explosion took place. He never heard any threats at meetings and if they were only to begin talking of threats witness would instantly leave and not go to them again. He has been on strike twenty-one weeks [We understand that this witness has been 'out' since July; and has lent the colliers union upwards of sixty pounds – the accumulation of honest industry, not one farthing of which will he ever see again, in all human probability.

**Rees Davies, collier and sinker**, examined – He was in Tredegar when the explosion occurred. He returned on the Saturday afternoon when it happened. This witness gave a long history of the manner in which the meeting of the colliers are conducted; but his statements contained scarcely anything not known to the public. He denied having told the deceased's widow at any time that his (deceased's) case, or matter, had been under consideration at the meeting. Witness was examined at very great length on various points connected with the strike. His answers were most readily given without the slightest hesitation on, but his demeanour betokened great mental anxiety. The tenor of his evidence was in direct opposition to the statements made by the widow of deceased, and completely negated the presumption which one would naturally find on her testimony.

This concluded the case, as it was thought inexpedient to examine further witnesses.

The coroner then summed up the evidence with his accustomed ability, after which the jury returned a verdict of *wilful murder against some person or persons unknown.*"

**From The Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian.**

**Source of both extracts, *The Morning Post*, February 26, 1850.**

Editor's Note: The "person or persons unknown" were never discovered and no charges were ever brought.

Yet further conflict followed within two months of the death of Thomas.

## **BROKEN HEADS AND SMASHED WINDOWS.**

**ABERDARE - AFFRAY BETWEEN THE ENGLISH AND WELSH COLLIERS.** – It is not, perhaps, generally known to our readers that, at the time of the Aberdare strike nearly 150 colliers from the Forest of Dean were had to fill the places vacated by the 'strikers.'

It had been foreseen that the introduction of these men would lead to strife and discontent, and on Monday this was verified, by a tumultuous affray occurring between the English colliers and the old workmen.

The feeling existing between the two parties had never been of the most cordial kind – the English being looked upon as strangers who had come to possess themselves of the bread due to others. Tenacious of old rights and privileges, and withal, of a primitive cast, the inhabitants of Cwmbach wanted but an opportunity to measure strength against the intruders. Their opponents the English colliers, are, in truth, a disgrace to their country – the *canaille* of the dissolute, as are generally the colliers of the 'Forest.'

On Sunday evening the majority of the two 'clans' met at a public house in Cwmbach and indulged themselves with strong and deep potations. Inspired by the amount of malt extract imbibed, an English collier, (the champion of his clan) stood up and declared, as his opinion, his ability to 'whop the whole of the coves present,' and he was seconded in this opinion by the noisy cheers of his brethren. This was the signal for a desperate and savage attack upon each other, and for a considerable time war was waged with bitter enmity.

Tired out at last, the combatants separated, but only to provide themselves with sticks, á la Paddy, for the contest on the morrow. From the accounts we have received, which are of an uncertain character, we believe Monday afternoon was the time when a renewal of hostilities

took place, the result of which has been broken heads and mutilated limbs out of number, and two persons very dangerously wounded.

In addition to this the windows of nearly every house in Cwmbach have been destroyed – scarcely a pane visible. Some twenty or so are in custody. Other minor casualties of slight importance occurred.

Some evil-minded persons report the total absence of our Israelitish glaziers, with whom this town is inundated, to the want of glass at Cwmbach, nearly a dozen Jews being seen going over the mountains at a pace that would astonish a Gentile.

As soon as the news of the disturbance reached Merthyr, Superintendent Wren and a selection of the best men of his force started for the scene, and on their arrival quickly quelled the disturbance. It is reported that one or two of the police have been dangerously wounded; for the truth of this we, cannot however, vouch. – From *The Cambrian*.

**Source *The Morning Post*, May 16, 1850.**

### **1878. THE DISTRESS IN ABERDARE AND A GENEROUS CWMBACH BENEFACTOR.**

Mr. Benjamin Evans writing from the Royal Oak Inn, Cwmbach, Aberdare, asks us to announce that he has been authorised by Mr. David Daniel (sic) of Abernant-y-groes, to distribute to the poor people of the locality good soup to the value of 30/- weekly, until further orders.

**Source: *The Western Mail*, 16, January, 1878.**

NOTE: The name of the donor is wrongly given in the article. The name should have read Daniel David of Abernant-y-groes Uchaf House, Cwmbach. By 1861 he had joined the ranks of the minor gentry being one of the partners in the Wayne's' Abernant-y-groes Colliery.

### **PROGRESS**

As all these pieces paint a very black portrait of Cwmbach we should point out some positive events in the history of the village starting with the opening, in 1846, of a school run by the minister in the Baptist chapel at Abernant-y-groes.

In 1853 a church school was built. The pupils consisted of 54 boys and 84 girls.

By 1851 the Anglican church held two Welsh Sunday church services in a chapel school. Church extension continued and by 1861 the use of the National schoolroom in the village was being used for church services.

A British School (non-denominational) was opened in Bridge Road in 1868.

A brass band was set up in Cwmbach in 1873.

On the 1st November 1881 Lady Aberdare laid the foundation stone of a new Anglican church. The building was consecrated on the 18<sup>th</sup> August 1882.

The Cwmbach Institute was opened in 1911, and the famous Cwmbach choir was founded in 1921.

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### **SEVENTY YEARS ON: THE BOMBING OF CWMBACH. (30 May 1941)**

Seventy years ago, on 30 May 1941, the *Aberdare Leader* reported that "during darkness between Friday and Saturday" a South Wales valley town and a mining village had been struck by high explosive bombs". Although the *Leader* could not, for security reasons, say so at the time the town was Mountain Ash and the village Cwmbach.

The more serious of the two incidents, in terms of human cost, was Cwmbach where four people were killed, and several others injured.

The bomb, described as heavy, was dropped on the edge of a housing estate hitting Bethania Place destroying a number of cottages and killing four members of the same family living in adjoining houses. The victims were Mr Eleazer (Eli) Jenkins, his wife Mrs Margaret Jenkins, Nancy their daughter who was brought out of the rubble alive but died in the ambulance (all of number 7), and another married daughter, Mrs. Louvaine Davies who lived next door at number 5. Her sister in law, Sally who was sleeping in the same bed as Louvaine was unhurt. At No 5, Ifor, Leonard and Windsor Davies escaped serious injury. Ifor sustained a broken arm. A family, the residents of a third house in the row escaped with minor injuries and shock. A Warden patrolling the street was caught by the blast, escaping with a broken rib; a neighbour, John Griffiths, who was in his back garden, was thrown a few yards but was not injured. Prompt assistance was given by the Police, Home Guard, and local miners who immediately started digging into the rubble to search for victims despite the fact that there were planes in the sky and bombs could still be heard falling (at Mountain Ash).

The ambulances in attendance were driven by members of the Women's Voluntary Service whose and the good work of the female drivers was particularly noted.

The paper notes that crowds of onlookers hampered the rescue services.

Bethania Welsh Baptist Chapel was also severely damaged and its vestry completely destroyed. Windows and doors were blown in on the Council housing estate and one woman was thrown onto the floor.

It is believed that the German planes were returning from a raid on Swansea and pilots, perhaps short of fuel, jettisoned their bombs to lighten the planes.

A local wag trying to make sense of the raid remarked *what was in this village that attracted enemy bombers, only that there had been an especially large crop of onions planted this spring!*

No fatalities or injuries occurred at Mountain Ash, where two bombs fell, although there was great destruction. An elementary school was almost wrecked and other properties damaged i.e. an evacuee women's club, a clinic, a Baptist chapel, an ambulance hall and a W.V.S sick bay.

The local hospital was also damaged and windows and doors blown in.

Source: *The Aberdare Leader*, June 7<sup>th</sup> & 14<sup>th</sup> 1941.

#### CORRECTION

Please note a typing error on the first page of *Hanes* No. 54 (Spring 2011). In the article entitled "Tall Oaks From Little Acorns Grow" the date in the second line should read 26 March 1971 and not 26 March 2011, the editor apologises for the mistake.

#### GOOD NEWS FOR RESEARCHERS

The ever watchful Steven Graham, has drawn the editor's attention to an announcement that the National Library of Wales is in the process of digitalising all its holdings of out of copyright newspapers and journals, generally those published in Wales up to 1911. The archive consists of up to 600 different titles consisting of some two million pages. The project started in 2009 and should be available on line from 2012. The project will provide access to *The Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian* and other local papers.

For consistency the spellings of place names (apart from those appearing in original sources) are taken from Deric John's *Cynon Valley Place Names*.

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