

# CYNON VALLEY HISTORY SOCIETY

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# HANES

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

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## ABERCYNON ISSUE

This newsletter could be accused of favouring the northern half of the Cynon Valley especially Aberdare so I thought I would make amends for this by devoting this issue to Abercynon down south! Once again I would be grateful for feedback about any of the articles in this issue and if anybody has documents or photographs of Abercynon, I would be grateful if they could donate them to Aberdare Library.

### CANALS



**The Canal at Abercynon**

The rapidly developing iron industry in Merthyr Tydfil and Dowlais demanded a quicker method of transportation than pack horses carrying iron to Cardiff.

Samuel Homfray the ironmaster suggested a canal for this purpose. As a result the Glamorganshire Canal was begun in 1790 and two years later barges ran from Merthyr Tydfil to Abercynon and Cardiff. The branch from Abercynon to Aberdare was opened for traffic in 1812.

The headquarters of the Glamorganshire Canal Company was The Navigation Hotel, which still stands today.

Around Abercynon there were 11 locks in a quarter mile. The lock at Plymouth House in Springfield Drive still stands. Its rear garden was once used as a waiting area for barges.

It is only since 1893 that Abercynon assumed its present name. It has been known successively as Ynysfeirig, The Basin, Navigation and Aberdare Junction. Before the sinking of the pit in 1889, Abercynon was just a rural village that had less than fifty houses and farms.

## TREVITHICK'S LOCOMOTIVE

Samuel Homfray ironmaster of the Penydarren ironworks bet Anthony Hill of the Plymouth ironworks 500 guineas that he could haul a load of ten tons of iron from Merthyr Tydfil to Abercynon on a train drawn by a steam engine.

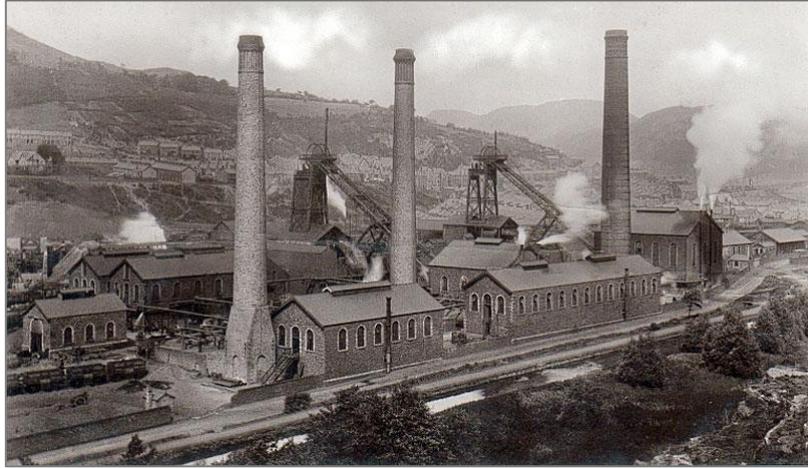
On 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1804, Richard Trevithick's steam locomotive with this load plus seventy people, including Anthony Hill travelled the 9 miles in 4 hours and arrived at Abercynon. Due to the steep gradients on the return journey, the locomotive gave up the ghost.



**A painting depicting Trevithick, the locomotive and the train on its way to Abercynon**

Yet the run from Merthyr to Abercynon was the first journey by steam locomotive. There is a memorial to this feat of this engineering in front of the fire station, which is located on the site of the old canal basin. It would be 21 years before George Stephenson could emulate that great feat on the Stockton to Darlington railway.

## ABERCYNON COLLIERY (Dowlais Cardiff Colliery)



**Abercynon (Dowlais Cardiff) Colliery**

The Martin family who came from Cumberland were great pioneers in the coal and steel industry of South Wales. Edward Martin was the manager of the Dowlais steelworks. To save the enormous cost of transport from Merthyr to Cardiff he decided to build a steelworks at Cardiff. It was called the Cardiff Dowlais Works, which opened in 1891.

Much coal was needed for this plant down in Cardiff. His brother Henry W. Martin who had worked at the Dowlais steel works came to Abercynon to exploit the deep steam coal seams there.

The sod-cutting ceremony took place on 1<sup>st</sup> December 1889 and sinking proper began two days later. Eighteen sinkers were killed during sinking operations, eight together in one accident, six together in another and another four in individual accidents. Sinking was held up in the north shaft for 15 months during 1892–94 because of the enormous water inrush, overpowering the pumping system. The pit was sunk to a depth of 740 yards, which then represented the deepest in Wales. It started producing coal in 1896. Abercynon grew from a less than 50 cottages in 1889 to a soaring population of 6,000 in 1901 and to nearly 10,000 by 1911.

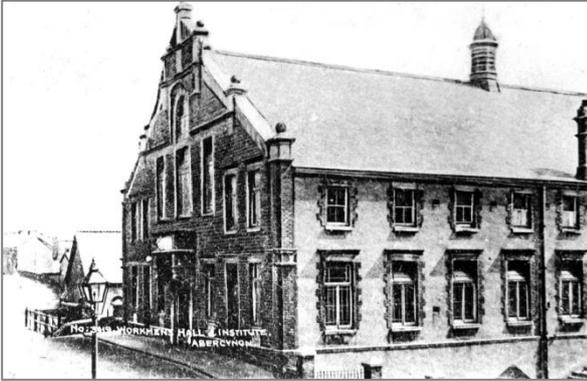
By 1914, 2561 men and boys were employed underground and 345 on the surface and their annual output then was over half a million tons. Nearly 200 horses were being worked, mostly underground at that time. In 1973, the mine was connected to Lady Windsor Colliery, Ynysybwl. A little under 500 men were employed prior to the 1984 strike. It closed in July 1988. A memorial is situated on the site of the colliery.

## ABERCYNON WORKMEN'S HALL AND INSTITUTE

The foundation stones were laid on 19<sup>th</sup> September 1904 and it was opened on 18<sup>th</sup> December 1905 by Mr Arthur Keen chairman of GKN, the owners of the colliery. It cost over £11,000 and was paid out of the colliery workmen's wages. Built on a steep hillside, the height of the pine end wall was over 70 feet from base to roof while the front wall was just 35 feet high.

It was designed by F. Gibson, a local architect from Abercynon and built by the Williams brothers of Ynysybwl. The building comprised a large hall to seat

1700 persons, a lesser hall to seat 250–300 people, a library and reading room, two committee rooms, a billiards room and a theatre. This also doubled up as a cinema, which had 1000 seats. During the early years, many political meetings were held there, as well as many plays, concerts and operas. It had shops underneath it including a Bracchi and the St Johns Ambulance Brigade centre.



**Abercynon Workmen's Hall and Institute**  
**Front, on Mountain Ash Road**



**Rear, on Edward Street**

After Abercynon colliery closed in 1988, the hall struggled for a while. Substantial repairs were needed but the Cynon Valley Council decided to demolish the hall and build a car park and some flats. Alwyn Howell a local Independent Labour Councillor was the only councillor who wanted to keep the hall open. He collected a petition arguing for its retention and 2500 people signed it, but it was to no avail. He contacted CADW but they did nothing to help. One day in 1994 workmen started taking the slates off the roof but that was the same day that CADW decided to save the building — but it was too late! Twenty years later there is still nothing built on the site where the largest workmen's hall in South Wales once stood.

## THE TORNADO

On 14<sup>th</sup> October 1913, "a tornado of death" hit the Senghenydd Colliery when 439 miners died in a neighbouring valley. Thirteen days later a meteorological tornado of terrifying violence struck Abercynon.

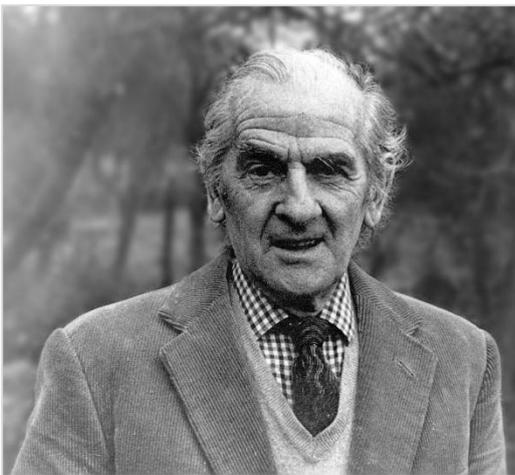


**Effects of the 1913 tornado in Abercynon**

The Merthyr Express gave a vivid description of it. The tornado raced with a front of 200 yards and a speed of 80 miles an hour. On Monday at 5 pm, the rain came down in torrents. Soon there were vivid flashes of lightning with the roars of thunder, the intervals between the flashes and the peals were just moments between them. Just after 6pm, the tornado struck Abercynon with tremendous violence especially Fair View and Pen Locks, which received the full force of it. A whole street of twelve houses was wrecked. Several people were seriously injured and Alfred Blake died from his injuries two days later. The east side of Abercynon was stripped of trees, huge elms and oaks lay with their roots in the air.

## SOME NOTABLE ABERCYNON PEOPLE

### **George Ewart Evans** (1<sup>st</sup> April 1909–1988)



East Anglia is the part of the British countryside that we would associate him with almost all of his books are about its oral history; so it is surprising to learn the he was born in Abercynon.

His parents owned a grocery business and he assisted in the delivery rounds travelling by pony and trap through the area. He experienced the poverty of the inter-war years which took him to the left of politics and culture.

After serving in the RAF during World War 2, he and his wife moved to the remote Suffolk

village of Blaxhall in 1947. This was because he was compelled by deafness to abandon teaching. But with hearing aids which had just been invented and the other new invention of the tape recorder he set about tape recording stories and anecdotes that the older country people told him about village life and farming traditions, which were almost dying out in that part of a fairly undisturbed region of England. After many rejections his first book *Ask the fellows who cut the hay* was published in 1956 and that led to many more oral history books in the same vein. He wrote his autobiography, *The Strength of the Hills* in 1983. He is considered to be the father of oral history.

### **John Edwards** (1923–)

He was born in Abercynon and he attended Mountain Ash County School, after which he trained as a teacher at Caerleon College. At the outbreak of World War 2, he joined the Royal Navy.

Ffrangcon his brother, who was 16, pretended to be 18 to join the navy although he was 18 months younger than John. They joined HMS Jamaica a ship that was sent to help the Arctic convoys delivering supplies to a port near Murmansk in Russia. The brothers endured sub-zero temperatures and blizzards that threatened to topple ships over. They were at the Battle of the North Cape where their ship with others sank the Scharnhorst in total darkness on Boxing Day 1943. For their deeds, John & Ffrangcon did receive the Arctic

Convoy Star but the Russians should have given John their equivalent medal the Ushakov, but sadly, he has never received it. He left the navy as he had a perforated eardrum; he was 20% disabled. In December 1945, John started teaching at a primary school at Bristol, and subsequently as a head teacher at three more Bristol schools.

On 5<sup>th</sup> April 1952 he married Mair Eluned Thomas.

He was appointed as a County Inspector for Schools in Flint and Clwyd, and following this, his next role was as County Advisor for spoken English for Mid-Glamorgan.

When he retired, he was made a Fellow of the English Speaking Board for services to spoken English despite being a fluent Welsh speaker!

With his great interest and expertise in the spoken word it is understandable that when he retired to Abercynon he studied the English that was spoken in the South Wales valleys, which came to be called *Wenglish*. He found that the speech patterns and rhythms of his childhood English/Welsh dialect were alive and flourishing and worthy of recording.

So in 1985 he wrote his first book on that dialect *Talk Tidy*. It was such a success that it was closely followed by *More Talk Tidy*. John has travelled worldwide making *Wenglish* speeches and delighting Welsh audiences with their native dialect.

One of the highlights of his *Wenglish* tours was being the Master of Ceremonies at the Australian Bi-Centenary Celebrations at the Melbourne Concert Hall.

John still lives happily in his beloved Abercynon.

### **Group Captain Willie "Tirpitz" Tait (1916–2007)**

Tait was born in Manchester in 1916, and lived in Woodland Crescent, Abercynon in the 1940s.

He will long be remembered for his three attacks against the German battleship Tirpitz that was eventually sunk in November 1944.

By the end of the war, he had flown more than 100 operations and had been amazingly and uniquely awarded four DSOs and two DFCs.

He died in 2007 aged 90.

For more information about him and the sinking of the Tirpitz, please see books such as *Target Tirpitz*.

### **Dai Dower (1933-)**

Dai was born in Abercynon and at 15, he started work at Abercynon Colliery. In 1952 he became ABA flyweight champion of Great Britain.

By the age of 23 he was conscripted into the army. He had won the British Empire (1954), British (1955) and European (1955) flyweight titles).

In 1957, he had the opportunity at short notice to fight the Argentinian Pasqual Perez, the world flyweight champion. He had only three weeks to prepare but everything was against him: He was thirty pounds over-weight, and he had little time to train, as the army would not give him time off. To make things worse he went to Buenos Aires without his father or trainer as the airfare was too expensive for them to come with him, (£600). At the fight, he was

knocked out by the Argentinian in the first round.

Following this crushing world title defeat, he went back to the army to finish his National Service.

Later he was, for twenty-one years, Head of Sport at Bournemouth University, and in June 1988, he was awarded an MBE for his years of teaching sport to children. He now lives in retirement in Bournemouth.

There are some videos of his fights and him in training on YouTube.



### **Wilfred George Bowden (1898–1986)**

Being shot through the neck is an exciting start to any book. This did happen to Wilfred and is recounted graphically in his autobiography, *Abercynon to Flanders and Back*. He joined up to fight in World War 1 in 1915, at the young age of 16½ (18 months underage). After sustaining an injury, he was a prisoner of war, but returned to Abercynon in 1919. There, he became an engine driver, retiring from that occupation in 1963. He became a magistrate and in 1969 became Chairman of the Bench. With his interest in railways, it is not surprising that he was the Chairman of the Abercynon Committee to Commemorate Richard Trevithick's historic railway journey. The Trevithick memorial was unveiled by Wilfred on 30<sup>th</sup> September 1979.

### **Emrys Daniel Hughes (1894–1969)**

Although he was born in Tonypany, Hughes lived in Abercynon for much of his life. He was an enthusiastic member of the Left wing of the Labour Party. He married Nan the daughter of Keir Hardie in 1924. He shared his father-in-law's anti-war principles. In 1916, he was arrested at Abercynon railway station for failing to report for army service, as he was a conscientious objector. Emrys was sent to many prisons including Caernarfon Castle where he endured many types of physical and psychological punishments. He was finally released in August 1919.

He became an M.P. for South Ayrshire in 1946 until his death in 1969.

### **Howell Davies (1880-1950)**

In 1908 he took a lease on Imperial Stores in Abercynon, which sold soft drinks and later beer and bread. In 1913 he started a bus service (the Imperial Motor Company) with two vehicles. In 1937 it had grown to 29 buses and coaches when it was taken over by the Red & White Bus Company. He became a director of that company.

He died a very rich man because in his will he gave £10,000 to each of his three sons and seven daughters.

### **William Henry Dyer (Mabonwyson) (c.1837–1881)**

He was a very tall ugly man, yet he was a poet. He often failed to win prizes at eisteddfodau and blamed the "Clic y Bont" — the Pontypridd Clique — for his defeats. He published his works in *Y Gysawd Farddol*. He died aged 44 in Pontypridd Workhouse Infirmary.

### **Rev. Dr. D. Ben Rees (1937-)**

He is a Welsh and English language publisher, prolific author, lecturer and minister in the Presbyterian Church of Wales since 1962. His small publishing house, Modern Welsh Publishing, was established in Abercynon. There, he was the minister of Tabernacle Calvinistic Methodist Chapel and also at Hermon at Penrhiwceiber. His years in Abercynon included his marriage, in 1963, to Meinwen, a local teacher. In 1975, he wrote *Chapels in the Valley*, a study in the sociology of Welsh nonconformity with particular reference to the Cynon Valley. He has written many other books, including ones on Gandhi, Samuel Roberts, John Calvin and James Griffiths, MP. His autobiography, entitled *Di-Ben-Draw*, was published in 2015. He is now an adopted Liverpoolian.

### **Thomas Evans (1893 (Dowlais)–1977)**

Evans was the premier historian of the lower Cynon Valley during the latter part of the twentieth century. He was a teacher at Abercynon Senior School and later Headmaster of Abertâf Junior School. His publications are listed in the next section.

It was a pleasure to interview John Edwards of *Wenglish* fame; space permits me to include only a summary of his fascinating conversation with me. Also, I have to thank David Maddox for introducing me to some of the notable people of Abercynon with whom I was not familiar.

There are other notables of Abercynon but space forbids me to include them. I may put them in the Summer issue.

### **Some Sources on the History of Abercynon & District**

Evans, Thomas, *The Story of Abercynon*, (3rd ed. 1976). (a good general history); *History of the Navigation School, Abercynon, 1875 to 1945*, (1946); *The History of Miskin Higher or the Parishes of Aberdare & Llanwynno* (1955), and his translation from the Welsh of *Glanffrwd's History of Llanwynno*, (1950).

Parry, Rowland, *Abercynon: Past and Present*, (1996), (contains 300 photographs).

Bowden, Wilfred George, *Abercynon to Flanders and Back*, (1984).

Jones, Edgar, *A History of GKN, Volume 1*. (1987), (information about Abercynon Colliery).

Maddox, David, 'Abercynon and the Glamorgan Canal' in Yockney, J., (ed.) *Environmental Studies in the Cynon Valley*, (1984), pp225-240.

## A Big Welcome for Jeremy Corbyn at Aberdare



Over 1,000 people came to the Sobell Sports Centre, Aberdare, on Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> March to hear Jeremy Corbyn deliver the Keir Hardie Memorial Lecture. This was organised by the Cynon Valley Constituency Labour Party and funds from ticket sales, costing £5, would help fight the Assembly Elections in May. Corbyn told the meeting, "Our party would not have achieved what it's done in the last century without Keir Hardie's clarity and vision. But many of our members and supporters

feel that Labour lost its way". He said, "We're going to fight the Trade Union Bill".

To some his speech was rather lukewarm, and it would not have set the River Cynon alight. Yet one of the most striking aspects to some was that he did not rush away at the end, but remained behind at the very end to speak to his party faithful and to have photographs taken with them.

## SOCIETY NEWS

### Day Trip

This year's day-out is being organised to visit Ludlow on Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> July.

Departure: from Aberdare Library at 9 am and the coach will arrive back there about 5.30pm. The cost to visit the castle is £5.00 or £4.50 for seniors, which includes entry to the apartments. We hope to visit the museum at Ludlow. The cost of the bus is £15. Please pay for this at the May or June Lecture evenings.

### Past Lectures

In February, Jennifer George give a very interesting talk on one of her relations, George Hall, an M.P. of this valley from 1922–51.

We ventured to the south of England for our March lecture when Phil Bowen gave a lecture about Carisbrooke Castle.

David Maddox, in April, gave a fascinating lecture on William Abraham (Mabon), the Trade Union Leader and first M.P. for the Rhondda. The lecture opened with a film of his funeral where thousands of people had gathered. David used a PowerPoint presentation of professional standard, and we learnt so much about this giant of Welsh history. I for one was sorry when the lecture ended.

### Future Lectures.

On 19<sup>th</sup> May, Dr. Lloyd Bowen will give a lecture on Oliver Cromwell in Wales. Keir Hardie will be the subject of a lecture on 16<sup>th</sup> June given by Martin Wright.

Alun Jenkins our new Speaker Secretary is compiling an interesting lecture programme for September 2016–2017.

### The Men who marched away

Unsold copies of this book have been donated to The Royal British Legion.

## NEW BOOKS ON LOCAL HISTORY AND BEYOND

Our printer, Gwyn Jones, the proprietor of Dial-A-Print has produced an excellent book with 180 pages of photographs entitled **Penrhiwceiber Past and Present**. It is available from him at £12. His contact details are below, at the end of the newsletter.

The Celebrations of Alun Lewis's centenary may have past but a new novel by him written in the 1930s has recently been published: **Morlais** by Alun Lewis. It is the story of a miner's son Morlais Jenkins and is "founded on vivid and authentic passages of everyday life and is an enthralling story".

The celebrations of Patagonia 150 have also gone but I have uncovered three more books about this Welsh Colony: **Mimosa: the life and times of the ship that sailed to Patagonia** by Susan Wilkinson. It is the story of this ship that was built in Aberdeen, her voyages as a tea and cargo clipper, her legendary voyage to Patagonia and her final days on the mosquito-infested coast of West Africa.

**Beyond the Pampas: in search of Patagonia** by Imogen Rhia Herrad is an entrancing account of her search for the descendants of the Welsh settlers in Patagonia. She also discovered the stories of the local tribes who lived and suffered there.

The last book about Patagonia is entitled **Patagonia 150: Here to Stay** by Eirionedd Baskerville. It is a volume of photographs depicting 150 years of the Welsh colony in Patagonia with Welsh, English and Spanish captions.

## RECENT HISTORICAL TV PROGRAMMES

These two programmes are well worth watching:

Mary Beard's *Ultimate Rome: Empire without Limit*. BBC1 in four parts.

There is an accompanying book *SPQR: a History of Ancient Rome*.

*Jerusalem: the making of a Holy City* by Simon Sebag Montefiore. BBC4 in three parts. Once again, there is an accompanying book: *Jerusalem: the biography*.

Happy watching and reading!

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