

CYNON VALLEY HISTORY SOCIETY

CYMDEITHAS HANES CWM CYNON

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HANES

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

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SUMMER 2018

Welcome to this summer edition.

It is 80 years ago since The Coliseum Theatre in Trecynon was opened so we look back at that event. We also look back, mostly through The Aberdare Express, to see what life was like in the summer of 1918. There are also articles about Aberdare's first solicitor, and about Gwen Obern who sadly died recently. Concerning our society, we have a report on our summer outing to Monmouth and Tintern Abbey, the new lecture programme and news about some new fascinating local history books. Happy reading!

80th Anniversary of the Coliseum Theatre



Left to right: Mr. D. Emlyn Thomas (miners' agent), Mr. T. Beynon, Mr. T. Voyle (treasurer), Dr. G.L. Pierce (High Constable), Coun. J.R. James, J.P. (chairman Aberdare District Council), Mr. W. Daniel (South Wales Welfare organiser), Mrs. Charles Kenshole, Mr. E. Stonelake, J.P. (chairman building committee), Alderman W.M. Llewellyn, J.P. (president), Mr. John Prowle, J.P., Mr. G. Warlow, Mr. G.H. Hall, M.P., Mr. Morgan B. Williams (chairman management committee), Mr. W.J. Powell (secretary), Mr. G. Barling (vice-chairman management committee), Mr. Howell Palmer, Dr. J.M. Wilson and Coun. Morgan Richards.

The theatre, which cost £10,000, was opened on 17th September 1938 by Alderman William Morgan Llewellyn J.P., pictured holding the key. It was planned that Arthur Horner, (President of the South Wales Miners Federation) should perform the ceremonial opening, but he was unable to attend. Alderman Llewellyn as well as opening the hall with a gold key, announced he would pay £100 for a much-needed road at the back of the building. Many speeches were made including one by George Hall, M.P., who concluded his speech by saying: "The success of this hall is going to be measured by the amount of work done in it by the people of the district and by the quality of the work. Into your hands this hall is given as a sacred charge!"

The following week there was a celebration programme that opened on Monday with a concert by the Miss Mae Richards Dancing Troup from Barry, accompanied by the Bindle Rhythm Kings. There was a large audience which enjoyed a capital programme of varied dances and sketches etc.

On Tuesday evening large numbers of Welsh drama enthusiasts turned up to renew their acquaintance with the renowned 'Cwmni Dan Mathews' from Pontardulais. This had won the Eisteddfod premier prize on ten occasions and performed *Dros y Gorwel*, a translation by Dan Mathews himself of *Beyond the Horizon* by Eugene O'Neill, the famous American playwright. The audience loved it and gave unstinted applause to the nine players, including four members of the same family.

There was a fiasco on Wednesday night when a concert by the Cardiff Red Triangle Concert Party entitled "Miles of Smiles" was presented but it was an unmitigated disaster! The hall was practically full at the start but at the end, it was three-quarters empty. The *Aberdare Leader* does not disclose the reason for its unpopularity which would be very interesting to know, but tells us there was an avalanche of criticism directed at the committee who claimed to have been misled, and who stated that never again shall a show come to the hall without the committee first seeing it!

High standards resumed on Thursday night when the Pendyrus Male Voice Choir gave a feast of music to a large audience of 750 people. Arthur Duggan conducted this choir with power and finesse. The Leader said, "It would be difficult to forget the rendering of Dr Parry's *Pilgrims*, of the chorus, and of *Charge of the Light Brigade* and that immortal composition, *Iesu o Nasareth*."

The week ended triumphantly with the Bristol Drama Group who performed Noel Coward's *Hay Fever* to a full house.

Sources: *Aberdare Leader* 24th September and 1st October 1938.

Death of Lord Rhondda

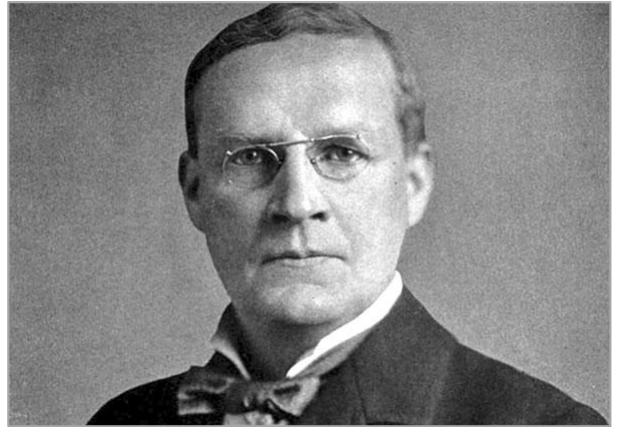
The *Aberdare & Mountain Ash Express* in its issue of 6th July devoted three pages to the death of Lord Rhondda that occurred on 3rd July 1918

David Alfred Thomas, 1st Viscount Rhondda, was born on 26th March 1856 in Ysguborwen, Aberdare.

He was a Liberal M.P. for the two-member Merthyr Boroughs constituency, which included Aberdare, from 1888 to 1910. Surprisingly he often got on well with his fellow constituency M.P. Keir Hardie, although their politics were poles apart.

Later in life, he became manager of the Cambrian Collieries and later its owner. It was one of his collieries, Penygraig where a strike started in 1910 which led to the Tonypandy Riots.

Lloyd George in 1916 made him Minister of Food Control where he introduced an efficient system of rationing. The *Express* said, "In the work of his own department he often spared others but never himself; and the ill-health which influenced his resignation, we fear was the direct consequence of his persistent overwork."



Lord Rhondda caught influenza and consequently suffered from pneumonia and so he placed his resignation in the hands of Lloyd George. The Prime Minister refused it, pressing him to remain in office, but he later died in harness. His passing occurred at Llanwern on the morning of Wednesday, 3 July 1918; he was aged sixty-two.

Spanish Influenza

Not only the high and mighty died of this epidemic like Viscount Rhondda, but lowly employees died of it as well.

In July there were 300 to 400 cases in Abercynon. There were men being carried out of the colliery every day in ambulances just as if there had been a big accident there. A vicar reported that 95 were absent from Penrhiwceiber Girls School all suffering from influenza.

The Express 6th July

Deaths and a Sunday School Demonstration

In the Abercynon column on 13th July, there were two contrasting articles: one after the other:

Private Ebenezer Richards of Abercynon was killed in action on 10th May. He leaves seven children.

On Thursday the annual Demonstration of the Nonconformist Sunday Schools was held. The procession was a very large one; over 1,500 children and adults joining the procession. Tea and buns had been provided at the chapel vestries for the majority of the Sunday Schools. After tea, the children were marched to fields where games had been arranged for them. The weather was exceptionally fine, and the children all thoroughly enjoyed themselves.

The Second Battle of the Marne

Even in early July it looked as if Germany was going to win the war. On 15th July 25 divisions – 250,000 troops were assembled to assault the French position but after two days of combat they were defeated by the troops under the heroic French General Gouraud with a loss of 50,000 in killed and wounded.

Meanwhile the Kaiser with forces of the same strength were launched against the

Allies, chiefly French and Italians after three days the Germans were winning but on the fourth day General Foch with a large army launched a tremendous counter-attack and caught the Germans in the nick of time, when they were organising a new army under a fresh commander from Russia, before it could properly occupy its positions. Here French and American forces went forward with a swing, recovering miles of ground and they captured nearly 25,000 prisoners, 500 field and heavy guns and 1500 machine guns. The Germans retreated across the river Marne and the British, French and Italian divisions forced the enemy back into the lines, from which he had started, leaving nothing to show for the sanguinary sacrifices made in the adventure.

This cost the enemy not less than 150,000 of his best troops.

It has given the American troops their first opportunity of proving their mettle in a battle of the greatest magnitude and they have proved themselves equal to the best on the whole front and soldiers to be depended upon.

The Express 27th July

Execution of Czar Nicholas

The *Express* had no sympathy for the czar's sad demise. It said that he was physically and mentally a weak man, with a character akin to that of our Charles I, in its instability, and to George III in its utter faithlessness to men who were called to serve him in the office of state. Ill-educated, narrow-minded, uninformed in world politics, he could neither govern with sovereign capacity himself, nor allow the ablest statesmen of his country to govern for him without incessant interposition of his own eccentric will to frustrate their good intentions. His favourites were all greedy time-serving hypocrites, (an obvious reference to Rasputin), who had a free hand to run their hapless country on its wild course to perdition. One hardly knows in the light of the facts whether the unfortunate Russian monarch is most to be pitied or blamed for the miserable career which has now been terminated. [He never really wanted to be czar, and then he made so many wrong decisions, e.g. trusting Rasputin, going to war against Germany and making himself the head of the army. Ed.]

The Express, 27th July

Russia in Turmoil

There are a series of isolated movements of a military character all directed to overthrow the Bolshevik lunacy reported from Vladivostok to the Volga, and the successful military diversions have arrived within 350 miles of Moscow.

It is extremely significant of the dwindling strength of the Lenin-Trotsky party that their government has been transferred from Moscow to a small town 150 miles to the east and off all the main lines of communication. The way is open for the liberating forces to reach the capital; we may witness soon a new government representing the best strata of the Russian people and with real national support at its back.

British & American forces have proceeded along the coast on the White Sea and the latter halfway to Petrograd.

With the whole of Siberia out of the Bolshevik grip and the new forces in

possession of many governments west of the Caspian, and within marching distance of Moscow, the Bolsheviki will be defeated.

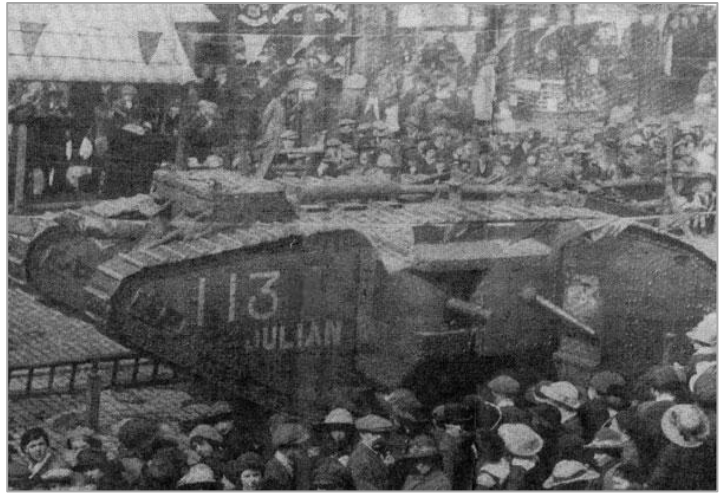
[This did not happen, despite by late 1918 over 200,000 foreign troops from eleven countries had invaded Russian soil. Ed.]

The *Express*, 20th July

Julian the Tank thrills Aberdare

In early June 1918, the residents of Aberdare gave a hearty welcome to this tank. The tanks were recognised in 'turning the tide' in favour of the Allies and helped to end World War 1.

The *Leader* reported that "Whether he was appealing for funds or fighting with the boys at the front, "Julian the Tank" is not likely to forget the people of the Aberdare district. During his two-day campaign in the town, he won the hearts and pockets of the townspeople to the extent of



£259,000 which went towards War Loans. [This was a tremendous amount, several millions of pounds in today's money, which demonstrated the people's patriotism. Ed.] A varied programme took place: in addition to speeches by C. B. Stanton M.P., Miss Hilda Davies was especially popular with her harp solos, and Miss Jones of Cwmaman delighted the vast audiences with her penillion singing. Master Manley, (champion cornet soloist), generously gave a number of selections at intervals, and Mr Arthur Norton, manager of the Aberaman Grand Theatre provided a party of artistes. Messrs W. Gwynne and W. Lewis (Eryr Llwyd) rendered vocal items.

"It was about 9.30 on Saturday night when 'Julian' took his leave for the Taff Vale Station en route for Merthyr. His departure was witnessed by a throng between 25,000 and 30,000 people."

In his final address the High Constable Charles Kenshole thanked the inhabitants for the decorations which they had displayed. He had been assured that "Julian" had not been greeted with a greater show of flags and bunting during his campaign. A most pleasing feature of the great event was the manner in which the workmen had responded to the appeal. They had come forward magnificently, and had invested their savings in a truly patriotic spirit. Subsequently the High Constable sent the following telegram to the Prime Minister – "Aberdare has raised £259,000 towards War Loans, and the inhabitants desire me to assure you of their loyal support in this present crisis — Charles Kenshole, High Constable".

Source: *Aberdare Leader* 8th June 1918

The British Film Institute National Archive has a short silent film that shows the visit of 'Julian the Tank' to Merthyr Tydfil. The link is

<https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-tank-julian-in-merthyr-1918-online>

Home Rule for Wales

The Clerk of Aberdare District Council asked the members whether they would now appoint representatives to attend a conference to further the movement in favour of Home Rule for Wales. A circular letter had been received stating that the conference would be held when the details of a proposed Bill for Federal Home Rule would be published. At the last conference held at Llandrindod Wells, Mr T. Walter Williams attended. It was moved and seconded that two delegates be appointed to attend.

Mr W.M. Llewellyn moved a direct negative, believing that the present time was inopportune for such a measure. Besides, he was of the opinion that England and Wales should be together for all purposes. He was not in favour of Federal Home Rule at all, and he was satisfied with the present position under the British Parliament. Mr Llewellyn did not find a seconder, and the motion that two delegates be sent was carried. The chairman of the Council, (Mr George Powell), and Mr T. Walter Williams were appointed as delegates.

The *Express* 3rd August 1918 page 5.

Laughter at the Metric System

At the Mountain Ash Education Committee meeting, the Director said that he was in receipt of a communication from the Decimal Association. Rev. George Neighbour said "Dismal Association?" (Laughter). The Director added that the main points in the letter were requests to pass resolutions in favour of the metric system and to assist in showing schools the great advantage of the Decimal over the other systems. He (the Director) recommended that the committee adopt the course. Mr Bruce Jones was in favour of deferring the matter. The Director might prepare a comprehensive report so that members might study it during the holidays. He did not know what the metric system was. Mr Bowles said, "One member says it means 17 ounces to the pound!" It was resolved to support the requests.

Aberdare Leader 20th July, p.4

The Scribe in the Scraps column the following week said that as the committee was unsure what the metric system was, commented, "It may relieve them to know that it has nothing to do with the "metric system" of Welsh poetry!"

The First Aberdare Solicitor by the late E.J.K .Rees

"The first Aberdare solicitor i.e. one whose principal practice was at Aberdare as distinct from at Merthyr, and who had branch offices in Aberdare was Henry John Hollier.

In Scammell's South Wales Directory of February 1852 he is the only Aberdare solicitor listed, practising at Windsor Street, Trecynon where there was also the Police Office/Station under Sergeant William Parsons.

Hollier came from a distinguished family. His grandfather, also Henry Hollier was the steward to the First Marquis of Bute. In addition to looking after his affairs, he became the Town Clerk of Cardiff in 1786-89 and was later an Alderman of Cardiff. His son, also Henry Hollier and father of our Henry John Hollier, was appointed Receiver General of Taxes of the county in 1813 and was admitted as a Burgess of Cardiff in 1815. However, he embezzled the taxes and in 1818, his estates were

seized by the Crown and sold off to repay his debts.

Henry John Hollier was born at Raglan in Monmouthshire in 1826. He qualified as a solicitor in 1851 aged 24.

When the local Board of Health was constituted on 22nd September 1854, as a result of the Rammell Report into the terrible sanitary conditions of Aberdare, Hollier was appointed its first clerk, a position he held until May 1872 when he was dismissed for failure to give full time services to the board.

In 1857 he married Minna Louisa Kent aged 16 at Clifton, Bristol. She was the daughter of Adolphus Kent, a wine merchant.

Sometime between 1861 and 1865, Hollier moved to The Oaklands in Aberaman. This was a large mansion with large outbuildings, gardens, orchards, fields and a long entrance drive. It seems likely that Hollier was himself responsible for building this house. He either had made a considerable amount of money in his private practice or had inherited family monies. They had two daughters: Minna and Lucy and a son who just lived for a few days. Tragically, Mrs Hollier died on 5th January 1863 shortly after giving birth on December 29th 1862 to their son Henry. He had died a few days later on January 1st.

After his dismissal from the Board of Health in 1872, Hollier moved his office to Station Street, Aberdare next to the old Magistrates Court Offices and Police Station and in the offices later occupied by Messrs. William Thomas and Williams. There he was joined by Rees Williams, the first Aberdare-born solicitor.

Hollier was still living at the Oaklands in 1876 when it was struck by lightning and almost totally destroyed. The Volunteers who were drilling at Aberaman Park rushed to rescue the furniture and contents. My great uncle William Jones, who was an eyewitness, told me that they also rescued and consumed a great quantity of wine from the cellar!

Hollier rebuilt The Oaklands, but moved to Penarth in 1881.

By 1891 Hollier had retired and was living in Cornwall and was looked after by a female domestic servant. In 1901 he had moved to Clifton, Bristol where he was looked after by his daughter Minna and two female domestic servants. He died there in 1906 aged 80.

Hollier's name is perpetuated by the small stretch of roadway leading from the bottom of Clarence Terrace and the entrance to the Oaklands drive to the bridge at Aberaman and known as Hollier's Trip."

This is an edited version of E.J.K. Rees's article.

Although Hollier was undoubtedly the first solicitor with a private general practice in Aberdare mention should be made of William Edwards of Fedw Hir, Aberdare. He was a son of Thomas and Margaret Edwards of Ty Newydd, Ystradyfodwg (Rhondda) and the brother of Lt Col Edward Edwards who is believed to have been killed at the battle of the Alamo.

Thomas qualified as an attorney in 1800 and practiced in Penderyn and Merthyr Tydfil and possibly locally. However there would not have been any great demand for legal work in this area at that time. (Ed.)

Mrs Carol Southgate (the daughter of the late E.J.K. Rees) donated the above pamphlet to Aberdare Library. She has kindly donated many of her father's documents to the library and some to the society.

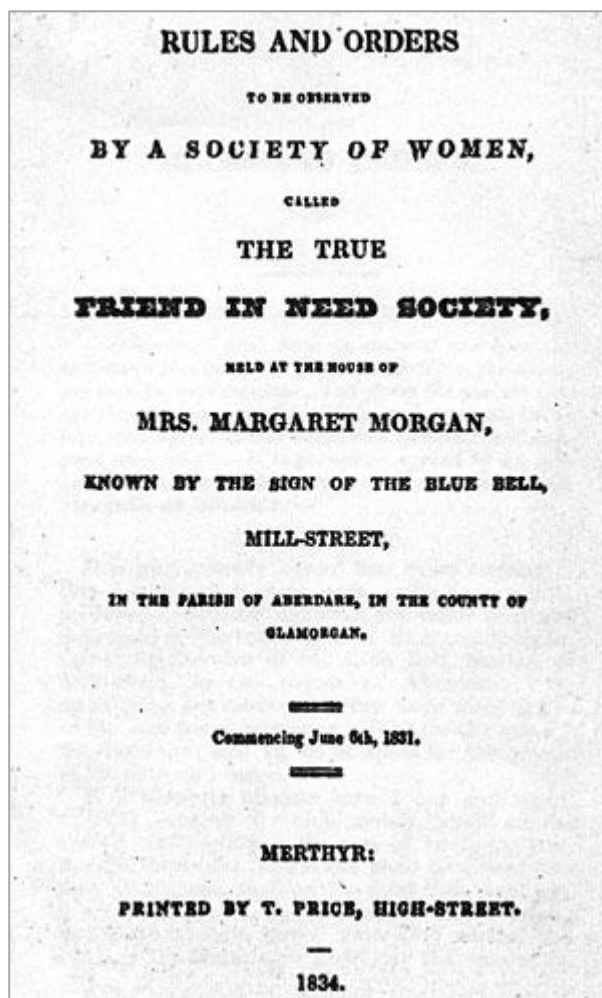
An Early Women's Friendly Society.

We think of women in our valley starting to organise themselves only in the 1890s but in this Women's Friendly Society "every member met once every 4 weeks on a Monday evening between 6 and 9pm. Each member would contribute 6d to the box towards raising a fund for the good of the fraternity, and 1d to be spent for the benefit of the aforesaid house.

The society was to help women who were ill: "Any member that hath paid for one whole year into the box, if she happens to be lame, or sick and unable to follow her ordinary occupation, she shall have 3s 6d per week paid out of the stock for one whole year".

There were penalties for absences: "Whosoever absents herself one club night without sending her club money, shall on the second club night pay the sum of 1s to the box and 2d for drink." The penalties increased steadily so that "if she absents herself five club nights, she shall on the sixth club night pay the sum of 3s to the box, 6d for drink, and 9d fine, or be excluded from this society."

The society was only for women below the age of 45 and there were almost the same number (42) of rules in it.



Death of Brave Gwen Obern

Gwen Obern died aged 100 on 7th April this year

On 5th December 1940 Gwen aged 22, missed her bus to the Royal Ordnance Factory at Bridgend. Yet she was determined to get to work as she had only been there two days and didn't want to get into trouble. When she eventually got to work, she put on her long white coat and thick shoes with wooden soles as she was in the Training Department inspecting detonators. She said, "I remember a terrific flash and people putting something very wet on my face. My life would never be the same again". In that explosion five people died and she was one on the 12 workers who were seriously injured. She lost her sight, one hand and the use of her other hand and she bravely underwent 76 operations



Gwen in her youth, and at 90 years

including skin grafts.

Despite these terrible injuries she achieved great success. St Dunstan's, (now Blind Veterans UK), arranged for her to be trained as a professional singer and she performed across the UK and in South Africa making 75 records, and appeared on TV and radio.

Nine months before her terrible accident she had married Ernie, a miner. She was greatly supported by him. He passed away in 2006 aged 91.

In 1996 she was awarded the Freedom of the City of London, where she visited regularly to march with St Dunstan's as part of the Remembrance Day commemorations.

Photograph Acknowledgement: *Cynon Valley Leader*
Source: *Cynon Valley Leader*, 26th April 2018

SOCIETY NEWS

Summer Outing



Tintern Abbey



Brother Thomas and Sister Mary

On a Saturday in July, twenty brave society members went on a safari, enduring scorching heat, to Monmouth and Tintern Abbey.

Our first historical landmark we saw was the medieval stone-gated bridge over the river Monnow, which is the only one of its type remaining in Britain.

The castle, of which only a fragment remains, was the birthplace of King Henry V in 1387. A statue of him has pride of place outside the Shire Hall in aptly named Agincourt Square.

In 1840, at Monmouth's Shire Hall, Chartist protesters John Frost, Zephaniah Williams and William Jones became the last men in Britain to be sentenced to be hung, drawn and quartered after being found guilty of treason following Chartist riots in Newport that led to 20 deaths. The sentences were later commuted to

transportation to Australia.

Admiral Horatio Nelson came to the town in 1802 to visit the Kymin. Lady Llangattock was a great admirer of Nelson. She collected many memorabilia of the famous admiral, and bequeathed them to the town. These may be seen at the museum. Some of the CVHS members even endured the debilitating heat by walking there to see the fascinating artefacts.

After lunch we were driven to Tintern Abbey, a Cistercian abbey where 'Brother Thomas' in a monk's habit accompanied by 'Sister Mary' gave us an interesting yet humorous account of a monk's life there, as well as a history of the abbey. Some of us went to a refectory where we had a cream tea and were grateful that we did not have to wake up at 1.30 am to attend a church service as the monks did!

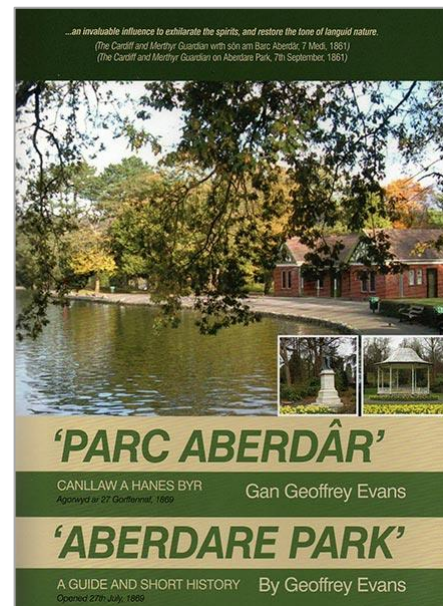
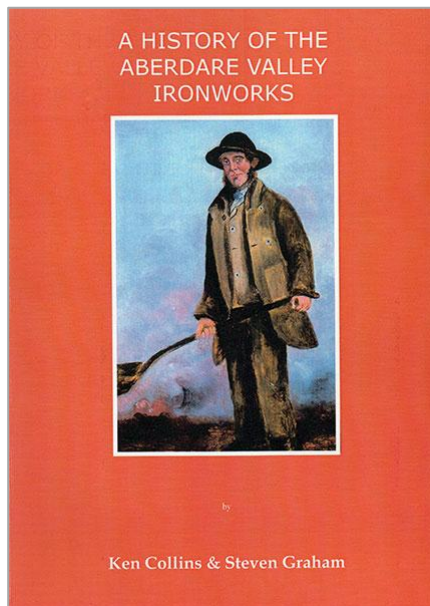
Society Lecture Programme 2018 — 2019

20 September	A.G.M.	Steven Graham will give a lecture about the <i>History of the Ironworks of the Cynon Valley</i> after the A.G.M.
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18 October	Mrs Jennifer George	<i>History of Abergavenny</i>
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15 November	Mr Robert Jones	<i>An historic walk around Abercynon</i>
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20 December	Chair's Christmas Party	To be held at the Cynon Valley Museum
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17 January	Mr Dean Powell	<i>Treorchy and the land of song</i>
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21 February	Mr Brian Davies	<i>Evan Thomas and his lamps</i>
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21 March	Mrs Anne Watts	<i>The Llywelyns — Princes of Wales</i>
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18 April	Mr David Maddox	<i>'Voices' Women in the valleys</i>
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16 May	Mr Geoffrey Evans	<i>The People's Park</i>
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20 June	Dr Stuart Broomfield	<i>Llywelyn Bren, a lesser known Welsh hero</i>

The Society meets except for the December meeting
at Green Street Methodist Church Vestry at 7.15pm.

Two New Local History Books

This summer sees the appearance of two new local history books.



Firstly, there is *A History of the Aberdare Valley Ironworks* by Ken Collins and Steven Graham. Ken sadly died before the book was finished and Steven has added 150 pages of text. This volume contains over 300 pages of the historical background, the early years and details of the seven ironworks that existed here. There are descriptions of the terrible working conditions that the employees endured as well as details of some of the accidents that occurred. There are also numerous newspaper articles on various aspects of this subject. There are over 40 photographs and many reproductions of original documents. This book is not just for people interested in this much-neglected subject, but also for the general reader who will learn much about a forgotten aspect of our valley's history. The book, which will be published in September, costs £16, but members do not have to pay for postage and packing.

Secondly, Geoffrey Evans has written a delightful bi-lingual book *Aberdare Park: a guide and short history*. It is wonderfully designed with numerous colour photographs and is packed with fascinating information about our park. The book costs £5.00 and is available now.

Both books can be ordered from Haydn Williams

email: haydnwilliams3@hotmail.com

They will also be on sale at our AGM.

Recent Historical Television Programmes

King Alfred and the Anglo-Saxons. An excellent 3-part series presented by Michael Wood, BBC4.

The Story of the Jews. A 5-part series presented by Simon Schama, BBC 4.

Chivalry and Betrayal: the 100 years' war. A 3-part series presented by Janina Ramirez, BBC4.

Elizabeth I's secret agents. A 3-part series BBC4.

The Plantagenets. A 3-part series with Professor Robert Bartlett. Highly recommended.

The First Georgians: the German kings who made Britain. A 3-part series presented by Lucy Worsley, BBC 4.

Napoleon. A 3-part series presented by Andrew Roberts, BBC4.

Welsh Greats: Aneurin Bevan, presented by John Humphrys, BBC2.

The Hour: Catrin Nye hosts a debate on the NHS, 70 years on from its birth, with a lively audience in Abercynon, including politicians, medics and experts. BBC2.

New Historical Books

The Old Firm's Proud Past, Volume 2: 1940-1990 by Martyn Ham. This 530-page volume records every game that Mountain Ash RFC played during these years. It costs £17.00 and is available from Mountain Ash RFC or from Mountain Ash library. Don't buy it from Amazon as it costs £30!

France, by John Julius Norwich. Aged 88, Norwich tackles a dauntingly vast subject: two millennia of history with admirable lightness and wit.

Victorious Century: the United Kingdom, 1800-1906, by David Cannadine. In this 500-page magnum opus on the subject, he creates a fascinating new interpretation of this period in all its energy, dynamism, darkness and poverty.

Cynon Valley Museum Events

July 12th to August 18th: a display of photographs and newspaper items about 'The start of motorcycle racing at Aberdare Park', by our society.

July 27th to September 1st: Glyn Brimacombe, Abstract Ultra-Violet Art Exhibition

August 24th to September 29th: 80th Anniversary of the Coliseum.

September 7th to 22nd: Aberdare Art Society Annual Show

Feedback

I would be grateful for feedback about any articles in this issue. Articles on any subject about our valley's history for possible publication are welcome

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