

# CYNON VALLEY HISTORY SOCIETY

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# HANES

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

ISSUE NUMBER 87

SUMMER 2019

We leave the contest to become the UK's next Prime Minister and look at an Aberdare "martyr" who died fighting for democracy in the Spanish Civil War. Another brave man we remember was a merchant seaman who lived in Abercynon. We tell the strange story of Cwmbach sisters who became sisters-in-law, memories of Runge's shop and look forward to the events celebrating the 150th anniversary of the opening of Aberdare Park.  
Happy Summer Reading!

## TOM HOWELL JONES



There were ructions and huge arguments between "royalist" and communist brothers, sisters and parents in 36 Monk Street, Aberdare in the early 1900s.

This was the family that Tom Howell Jones was born into in 1901 with six brothers and two sisters.

He left the Town Council School when he was 14 and eventually worked at Tower Colliery where he became the Lodge Chairman in 1935. He spent weeks canvassing miners in their homes to join the miners' union and he fought management to get pensions for widows of men who had died in the mine.

Despite his uninspiring occupation as a collier, Tom managed to educate himself in his leisure hours. He possessed a fine library; he read both widely and deeply and

even taught himself German in order to read Karl Marx in the original German.

He loved walking in the countryside and gardening.

In 1936, he suffered a serious accident that resulted in crushed vertebrae, after which he had to wear a supportive belt.

Tom was always quiet, unassuming, and hated publicity of any kind. It therefore came as a surprise to all his friends and acquaintances when he suddenly departed for Spain by walking over the Pyrenees in November 1937. His last words to his mother was "Cadwch y Ffydd," (which means keep the faith, i.e. the Communist faith)

In Spain his thoughts were often about his mother and family. In a letter he wrote: "I have no regrets. I came here of myself. I know I hurt my mother. She could only see the separation and not the cause". Yet Tom felt very guilty. He said in a letter: "Mam is my only anxiety out here."

The Fascists had arms, tanks and aircraft from Italy and Germany. Tom in one of his letters said, "The Fascist success for which bloody England is responsible. They, (the fascists), would never have made this advance if we had the arms."

In February 1938, Edwin Greening was in Tarrazona de la Mancha on his way to the cookhouse when he came face to face with Tom. Edwin writes, "He was almost stunned when he saw me, and he nearly shook off my arm. I met him again that night and we had a good chat." Later, Edwin writes, "Tom and I were in the Major Atlee Company as scouts. We went into action together for the first time; it was a rearguard action in which 25 of the British battalion were ordered to hold up a force of thousands of Franco troops until evening." (Ed. That was amazing!) "We did hold them up until after which we got away through the mountains."

"From April 1938 until July 1938, Tom and I lived together although we were in different companies. Our brigade was garrisoning a sector of the Ebro"

On the morning of 25th August, Tom and Edwin Greening and others were on Hill 666, a very exposed almost endless ridge with no cover from attacking aircraft and artillery.

Edwin Greening takes up the story in his book *From Aberdare to Albacete* and graphically tells of Tom's death:

"The morning of the 25th was very quiet and it was one of the most beautiful days I have seen in Spain: warm, blue and wonderfully clear. At about 10 o'clock the enemy laid down a heavy barrage that grew in intensity until an hour or so later all hell broke loose. Amid the din of battle I heard a large explosion near Tom's post, (five yards away). I shouted if he was safe, and he answered affirmatively; then the next moment there was another terrible explosion nearby, and again I shouted to Tom; but this time there was no reply. I ran out from our post to Tom's and there lying amid the ruins of his dugout Tom lay terribly wounded with his three comrades. I pulled Tom up and held him in my arms, but Alun Menai Williams, our chief medico pulled me away and said: "They're all gone, Edwin. Get back to your crevice before the next salvo comes.

A few minutes later Alun, Lance Rogers and I came back to Tom and with his head pillowed in my arms, he passed away. And for the first time for many a year I shed a tear. I got Tom's blanket and found a crevice six feet long. We lowered

Tom in and Lance and I went hurriedly around collecting stones for Alun to cover Tom's last resting place. When we finished our tragic task, we three said in the growing dusk, 'Goodbye Tom. We will never forget you!'. I added, 'Even after 50 years pass!'

Writing to a friend Evan (Slavin), Tom wrote a month before he died, "I'm in fine health. When I get home we will do that hike of the Somerset coast you always wanted. (Ed. Sadly he never did.)

Sources: From *Aberdare to Albacete* by Edwin Greening and two relatives of Tom's, Judith Langdon and Gaynor Richards.

Footnotes: In the previous issue concerning William Durston, the Moscow Archives accused him of "being a dubious element who possibly deserted." But this is false because Edwin Greening in his brilliant book *From Aberdare to Albacete*, on page 156, states that, "he, accompanied by two others from a Spanish company went out on patrol duty near Gandesa and never returned, so he was reported as missing presumed dead."

In the previous issue, I omitted to say that Edwin and Ronald Brown were given a hero's welcome when they returned to Aberdare in December 1938.

For more information on the battle of Jarama see Ben Hughes' book *They shall not pass*, which tells of the heroism of the British Battalion.

## Captain Owen Charles Morris, DSO, 1905–1971

Owen was born in Pwllheli but soon moved to Abercynon. After his marriage, he lived at 5 South Street, Abercynon. He joined the Merchant Navy, and passed his master's certificate in 1928 and served on several ships.

During World War 2, he was the captain of the *Zamalek*, which had been built in Troon, Scotland in 1921, but was converted to a convoy escort (rescue) ship in 1940. It was extremely cramped, only able to hold 26 officers and 56 ratings with survivors initially only accommodated on deck. Despite this deficiency, Owen ran the vessel most efficiently for all of his captaincy of 52 months, and he held the record for saving the highest number of people during that period: 665 people.

He and his ship became famous in Convoy PQ 17 in July 1942 bound for Arkhangelsk, Russia, when 24 Allied Arctic ships out of a convoy of 35 ships were sunk by Nazi aircraft and U-boats.

His ship despite being relentlessly strafed and bombed picked up 150 survivors. As a result of his bravery, Morris was awarded the Distinguished Service Order (D.S.O.) on 29th September 1942. He is one of only two merchant sailors to be awarded the DSO. He also received the King's commendation for Brave Conduct, which was awarded on 9th November 1943 and the Lloyd's War medal for Bravery at Sea; this medal he valued the most. Not to be outdone, the people of Abercynon presented him with a pocket watch, and his chapel Tabernacle Methodist, presented him with a clock.



Capt. O.C. Morris

During the Convoy PQ17 battle, not only did Morris have to fight Germans but once he almost had to shoot Russians because during one bombing raid a bomb exploded twenty feet from the bows of the Zamalek and a number of Russians who had been recently rescued, began to abandon ship thinking that the Zamalek was sinking. Morris threatened to have them shot to make them change their minds.

During the Suez crisis of 1956, Morris was on the Zamalek in that canal. It was captured by the Egyptians and was half sunk, on Nasser's instructions, to block movement through the canal.

Owen Morris's son David said, "It was a sad end to a brave little ship". Morris was interned but in November, he was released and returned to Abercynon.

In 1962 his wife's health deteriorated and he came home to look after her. She died in 1969. He did not return to sea but took a position at the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff until his retirement.

Later illness forced him to move to High Wycombe to be cared for by his daughter, Gwenfor, where he died in April 1971.

Sources : Abercynon history blog.

I am grateful to David Maddox who obtained family recollections from his son David Morris, and help from Mrs. Heulwen Morgan who as a young child, (a neighbour in South Street, Abercynon), received a Russian Doll from Capt. Morris which she still treasures.

## Sisters and Sisters-in-law: Mary Ann and Sarah Williams of Cwmbach

by Jill Morgan



Mary Ann, (left), and Sarah Williams, (right), were sisters from Rose Row, Cwmbach, born almost 10 years apart, (1851 and 1860), in a family of 12 children. But they would become sisters-in-law and their circumstances would take them thousands of miles away from the Cynon Valley to the wilderness of southern Utah — both to the same country and county, but to where they lived apart for the remainder of their lives. How did this happen?



When the Williams family were introduced to Mormonism, all of them converted and were baptised into the faith except Sarah, who continued to attend the Methodist chapel. Her older sister Mary Ann was the first to emigrate to America. She had already met and become engaged to Ben Perkins whose family had converted to Mormonism in Treboeth, (Swansea), when he was a child. Ben emigrated with his family in 1868 and sent the fare for Mary Ann to join him as soon as he could. Once Ben and Mary Ann were settled in Utah Territory, they wrote asking Sarah to join them, sending her the fare, but she chose to wait until the rest of her family emigrated in 1878. Sarah had still not converted and was warned by her pastor in Cwmbach that she should '*take care lest those Mormons ensnare you*'. She did not tell him that her entire family was comprised of Mormons!

Ben and Mary Ann had settled in southern Utah, in the Mormon settlement of Cedar City, so when the Williams family arrived in Salt Lake City, Ben and Mary met them.

In 1879 however, the couple were among a group who were asked to establish a new settlement some 300 miles to the southeast. They asked Sarah to go with them, to drive a wagon and help look after the children. She apparently saw it as an adventure and agreed to go. However, what was anticipated as a six-week journey turned into a six-month challenge! Meanwhile, Sarah's biography relates that she *'still considered herself a Methodist at the start of the journey, but as she traveled with the Saints, [members of the Mormon Church], she became impressed by their faith, and spirited hymn singing they showed along the way.* By the time the group reached their destination — a new settlement they established and named Bluff — she was ready to be baptized.



The young Benjamin Perkins

Shortly after her baptism, Ben made her the proposal to become his second wife. The doctrine and practice of polygamy in particular was hard for her to understand. She returned to her parents' home in Cedar City to think it over, but one year later, she did indeed become Ben's polygamous wife. Not only was this a difficult decision for Sarah, it was a source of great consternation to her parents — and some resentment on the part of her sister Mary Ann, even though Ben could not take a second wife without her giving consent. The family accused Sarah of going after her sister's husband and for some time would not allow her into their home. So Sarah returned to Bluff with Ben after their marriage, and in the ensuing years raised her growing family, (nine children in all), mostly on her own, feeding them from her garden, trading with the Native American Indians — a harsh life in unforgiving surroundings so completely opposite to the Welsh valleys she had left behind.

Opponents of Mormonism and of polygamy were trying to bring to justice those who—as they saw it—were breaking the law by taking plural wives. So Mary Ann and Sarah couldn't live together, not even in the same town. And then in 1890, the *Manifesto* was issued by the Mormon Church — a declaration that polygamy would no longer be preached or entered into by members of the church. So Ben was forced to move his two families (eventually totalling 18 living children — as four of Mary Ann's children had died shortly after birth) from place to place for their own protection. He kept them apart and travelled back and forth to see them as often as he could. In December 1888, he was put on trial, given a fine of \$300 and sentenced to prison because of his polygamous marriage. However, by June 1889, he was released for good behaviour and was excused the fine. And when the furore over polygamy finally subsided, he moved back to San Juan County and built homes for Sara and her children in Bluff, and for Mary Ann and her children almost 50 miles away in Monticello. The two sisters were reconciled eventually but it was only when Mary Ann died in 1912 that Sarah was finally able to live with Ben freely as his wife.

## Recollections of Runges, Jewellers, Cardiff Street, Aberdare

By Glan Davies, Watchmaker at Runges

An edited version of the illustrated lecture delivered to the Probus Club in 1993

### Part One

What I intend doing is to say something about clocks and watches in general and the Runge's shop in Aberdare and my life in particular.

By the mid 19th century, social and political movements in Europe were creating insecurity and upheaval amongst much of the population. Many German watchmakers fled to this country to escape serious unrest in their own country. So we find many German names in the lists of watchmakers in Wales and here in Aberdare. For example, Felix and Hannah Eschle, in Commercial Place, from c1868; Joseph Schwerer, also in Commercial Place from c1871–c1887; and George Rombach, in Canon Street 1871–c1911. These were just three of the seventeen watchmakers operating in Aberdare at that time.

In 1902, Bernhard Runge settled in Aberdare with his wife and three sons. His father Herman Runge had fled Germany during the time of unrest and rioting and moved to Birmingham.

Bernhard Runge's first job was with a watchmaker in Canon Street, where Lewis the Shoe Shop is now, [Ed. next to the Palladium Cinema]. Then he set up his own business at Smith's Corner, until W.H.Smith bought the premises. He then moved to Cross Street and finally to the small shop in Cardiff Street, where he worked spending a few hours at the bench right up to a fortnight before he died at the age of 92 in 1961. His life wasn't without tragedy as one of his sons died in his teens, and Eric, the son who was interested in the business was killed in action in France in 1917 at the age of 19, fighting with the 1st Battalion, Grenadier Guards. It was of course, Bernhard's daughter Dora who worked in the shop and carried on the business after her father's days, until about a year ago [i.e. c1992].

I came on the scene, 60 years ago, [i.e. in 1923], as an apprentice, much to my mother's relief, and to mine I might add, as I didn't relish following my father down the "2-foot-9" in Brown's Pit. My pay was 5 shillings a week for the first year, increasing very slowly by small amounts as the years passed. I started like all apprentices doing the chores: cleaning windows, sweeping the pavement and dusting down the counters every morning.

Gradually, I was entrusted to wind all the clocks in the Boot Hotel once a week on a Monday morning. I remember Mrs. Hughes, the owner, was a very regal and imposing figure of a lady. I ran errands, not only for the business but for Mrs. Runge too. One errand that stands out in my memory and terrified me at the time concerned the delivery of a diamond ring to Mrs. George, Ty Draw House. I was told in no uncertain terms that if I lost the ring, (valued at about £800), I could lose myself as well! You can imagine how white my knuckles were during that walk across to Ty Draw, then to be told by the maid to wait in The Blue Room! I thought I was in Hollywood!

To be continued in the next issue.

## The 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Opening of Aberdare Park : Two celebrations

On Saturday, 13th July, there is a special musical event, taking place at the Library Square at 11am. Four choirs are planned to take part, Dare to Sing Ladies Choir, Cwmbach Male Voice Choir, Cwmdare Voices, Mountain Ash RFC Singers as well as the Llwydcoed Brass Band.

In the afternoon at Aberdare Park from 1pm., Llwydcoed Brass Band will once again entertain with Cwmdare Voices, Mountain Ash Choral Choir and the Phoenix Singers.

There will be a re-enactment of the opening of the Park with 'Victorian ladies and gentlemen' taking part.

Also there will be traditional children games: potato & spoon races, 3-legged races, etc., as well as Jazz Bands and Displays.

On Sunday 15th September at The Coliseum, Aberdare, to continue to celebrate the 150th Anniversary of Aberdare Park there will be a Good Old Days Music Hall. Fancy dress is wholeheartedly encouraged, so come suitably dressed in Victorian dress and be ready to sing along to all your favourite old time numbers.

The Friends of Aberdare Park are organising these events.

## Friends of Gadlys Ironworks

The inaugural meeting of this group, which took place on 23rd May, was well attended. It was chaired by Geoffrey Evans who was the promoter of the society. Its aim is to consolidate, conserve and promote the ironworks, which opened in 1827 and is one of the most complete in the UK.

Vikki Howells, our A.M. was very enthusiastic.

CADW has inspected the area and the vegetation clearance on the walls and top of the furnaces is to start immediately.

## SOCIETY NEWS

### Speakers programme for 2019-2020

#### **2019**

#### **September 19th**

AGM and talk by Christine Moore of the Welsh Religious Buildings Trust.

#### **October 17th**

Mike Chubb            The Story of Island Farm P.O.W. Camp.

#### **November 21st**

Prof. Bill Jones      Nineteenth century Welsh immigrants to USA and their correspondence.

#### **December 19th**

Christmas Party to be held at the Cynon Valley Museum.

**2020**

**January 16th**

Brian Davies      Evan Thomas and his lamps.

**February 20th**

Angela Powell      A reading of "Childhood in Holland" written by her mother.

**March 19th**

Mike Jones      The Neath and Tennant Canal

**April 16th**

Jennifer George      Alaskan adventure (story of the Gold Rush)

**May 21st**

Geoffrey Evans      The larger houses of the Cynon Valley.

**June 18th**

Steven Graham      National Eisteddfodau of the Cynon Valley

Annual Membership Subscriptions

As agreed at the AGM last year, Society subscriptions will be increased slightly to £12 from September 2019. Also, as agreed there will be no associate membership from that date.

**Cynon Valley Museum Exhibitions**

Incomers—People migrating into the valley 5th June to 17th August

Quilters Guild: Celebration 1979–2019, 5th July to 27th July

Miskin Art Society: Annual Exhibition, 8th August to 24th August

Horticultural Society: Prize-winners on show 19th August to 7th September.

Rugby in the Cynon Valley: An Exhibition exploring the successes of players from the Cynon Valley, featuring items from clubs across the area 30th August to 28th September.

**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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Registered Charity No. 510143

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

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JUNE 2019