

# HANES



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Newsletter of the Cynon Valley History Society Cylchlythyr Cymdeithas Hanes Cwm Cynon

**PRESIDENT: THE LORD ABERDARE.**

## OLD WELSH CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS

In this our 2006 Christmas Edition of Hanes we also look back at a number of old Welsh Yuletide customs. These ancient traditions were probably once observed in the Cynon Valley, and some at least are still celebrated in remote parts of rural Wales.

The origin of many of these quaint customs are lost in the mist of time; their demise here from the 1840's, the result of industrialisation, urbanisation, and the severity of some religious sects, particularly the Methodists.

Let us start with Y Plygain (a Carol Service. The name derives from the Latin, pulli cantio – "cock crow"). The form of this service went back to the pre-Reformation midnight mass, and was originally celebrated between the hours of three and six on Christmas morning. At a later date it commenced at 6.00 am. The old church of St. John would be decorated and ablaze with candles, the light of which was believed to have a deep symbolic significance. At 5 am the Mathew Bell (alas no longer heard) would start ringing, summoning people to the Service. Those taking part in this ancient act of worship, including some Dissenters even, would walk or ride for miles to reach St. John's. The service consisted of Morning Prayer, and the singing of carols- solos, duets, trios and choruses, that would continue until 8 or 9am when the tired and cold congregation would leave the church. They then met at the Inn, parson's house, or one of the larger houses or farmhouses for oatcakes, strong ale and cold meats. Sporting activities for the young men followed – rabbit and squirrel hunting, or football. The latter was the most popular pastime. The game was played by an unlimited number of players, and the event frequently went on until dark, different parish churches representing opposing goal posts! Thus the "pitch" might extend from St. Cynog's, Penderyn to St. Gwynno's, Llanwonno! covering miles of ground. Another church service might follow, and Christmas day would then end in general feasting.

On Boxing Day, for those who still had sufficient stamina, there was fox hunting.

New Year's Day was marked with further hunts, or be celebrated with New Year's Water, when water freshly drawn from a well was carried around the village in a bowl, and sprinkled on the occupants of selected houses.

Another old custom, known as Calennig was also held on New Years Day, when small gifts were solicited. Participants would carry an apple or orange decorated with holly and oats, and mounted on three wooden skewers. This was then carried from house to house. The custom in Wales can be traced back to medieval times. This continued until fairly recently, and may perhaps still take place. (Remember the rhyme? *Please put a penny in my old box hat. If you haven't got a penny a ha'penny will do. If you haven't got a ha'penny, then God Bless you!*)

Another strange custom was that of the Mari Lwyd, a horse's skull covered with a white sheet and decorated with coloured ribbon, carried on a pole by a man who crouched beneath the sheet and operated the jaw. This was led from house to house during the hours of darkness throughout the Christmas season. Readers of our 2005 Christmas Edition will recall that this custom was still being observed in Llwydcoed in the late 1920's (See Hanes No 33, page 4.)

Further recollections of Mari Lwyd were recorded by John Davies. "Pendar" (1864-1940) *Only a few times in my boyhood days do I remember seeing and hearing the performance of Mari Lwyd. The first I remember was at the Black Horse public house in Cardiff Street.* In his brief account Pendar sets out a few of the rhyming discussions that took place prior to the "queer old lady's" request to enter the premises. How valuable further details would have been had Pendar been able to stick to the point instead of digressing into his usual pointless conversations with the imaginary Dai!

Overall the Christmas season, or in Welsh y gwyliau, lasted not only for the traditional twelve days culminating in Gwyl Ystwyll (Epiphany) but frequently went on much longer.

### Sources and further reading.

Meic Stephens (Editor) *The Oxford Companion to the Literature of Wales.* (Oxford 1986).  
Trefor M. Owen. *The Customs and Traditions of Wales – A Pocket Guide.* (UWP. Cardiff 1991)

## YET MORE GHOSTS OF CHRISTMAS PAST

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(CHRISTMAS 1902)

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GRAND DISPLAY OF FANCY GOODS  
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NOTE THE ADDRESS: -

C.A.HARRIES,  
12 & 13, CARDIFF STREET, ABERDARE.  
(C.A.Harris, Chemist, seedsman, fancy repository and paperhanging establishment - Editor)

The Aberdare Leader 13th. December 1902.

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(CHRISTMAS 1927)

We believe that most, if not all, Christmas Television adverts and programmes are recorded during the summer months. Studios are temporarily transformed into winter wonderlands, laden with artificial snow and lit Christmas trees. In this tradition your Editor is researching and writing the Christmas Edition of Hanes during the heat waves (which we either enjoyed or hated) of July and August.

For our usual nostalgic view of former Christmases we turn back the clock to 1927. It will be recalled that this was the year following the General Strike, and Miners' lockout, but despite the fact that there had been a reduction in colliers' wages and families were still paying off debts accumulated during the strike, it appears that most people enjoyed their Christmas. The weather was seasonal with some snow.

### XMAS CAROLLERS

Although possibly not so numerous as in years gone by, several bands of carollers made their appearance at Aberaman on Christmas Eve. Some very good choirs were heard besides the usual jazz, mandolin and melodeon bands, and they paraded the streets until the early hours of the morning.

### HOLIDAY DANCES AT ABERAMAN.

The Welfare Hall Committee conducted their usual series of dances at the Welfare Hall. On Xmas eve an ordinary dance was held, and on Boxing Day a long dance. On Tuesday evening a Cinderella Dance took place. Miss Husey's Band provided the music, and the M.C. was Mr.J.Knowles.

### MYSTERIOUS GIFTS AT CWMAMAN.

On Christmas Eve several gifts were distributed in the village. Vouchers for 7s.6d. and 2s.6d. respectively were handed to specially selected cases, whilst boxes of toys, fruit and chocolate were left at the homes of people with children. Who the donors were is not generally known, but some people are inclined to think it is the Society of Friends.

## WEDDINGS

A number of "interesting and pretty" Weddings were solemnized in the town and districts on Christmas Day and Boxing Day.

### AN UNWANTED CHRISTMAS BOX

Edward Herbert Orman, butcher, 52 Oxford Street, Mountain Ash was summoned For leaving a motorcar outside his shop. Fined 10/-  
Defendant (To the Bench), "*Oh well, that's a nice Christmas Box!*"

### SALVATION ARMY, ABERDARE.

The weekend services were conducted by Commandant and Mrs. Waumsley, and the seasonal songs and addresses were much appreciated by the interested congregations. At the close of the Christmas night service two persons came forward to follow the Saviour. The Salvation Army's Young People's Band and Singing Community, and the Senior Band have been rendering seasonable music in Aberdare and the surrounding villages during the festive season. The band gave selections at the General Hospital to the inmates on Tuesday afternoon.

## A BLACK CHRISTMAS AT MOUNTAIN ASH.

The miseries of a raging blizzard and the vagaries of the electric lighting supply have made Christmas 1927 a black blot in the history of Mountain Ash.

Our industrial troubles as Christmas advanced were rapidly being pushed into the background, and shopping seemed to be indulged in during the preceding week with smartness and zest comparable with more successful times.

Our troubles commenced on Christmas Eve when the light that has played us so many tricks in the past failed during the day, and almost at the busiest time at night was out for a considerable period.

The efforts of shopkeepers who were in the unfortunate position of having no gas were frantic. Candles and all sorts of luminosities were foraged for, and the deplorable state of things made the best of as far as possible.

There is not much zeal, however, behind the selling of a turkey with the aid of a taper or fur-lined gloves by the flicker of a candle. After an hour the light came on again, but was fitful and unreliable until closing time.

On Christmas Day the climax was reached, and in the evening the whole outfit was "Phut!" Homesteads, churches, clubs and streets were in utter gloom. Some church services were abandoned, some were continued by candle-light, and in homesteads, where parties were gathered, old lamps relegated to the limbo of things forgotten were unearthed, this being literary true in one case where the lamp was lying in the garden.

The only light in the main streets was the snow, and in the smaller streets a flickering gas lamp vainly struggling against the mighty gusts,

Bethania and Rhos Chapels finished their services with candlelight, and at St. Margaret's a few dim gas jets in the north and south aisles were the only illuminant.

On Monday light failed again until late in the evening, and on Tuesday morning electricity might just as well be in Timbuctoo for all the good it is to Mountain Ash.

(From The Aberdare Leader January 1903.)

#### Erratum

We apologise for the several errors to be seen on page one of Hanes No.36. Most of these were generated in the copying/printing stages. E.g. The appearance of underlining and brackets in the text, and the transposition of Cynon to Conan, for to four and reliability to reiability. The appearance of Court of Arms in place of Coat of Arms was an Editorial error for which the Editor apologises.

### **Chairman's Christmas Message**

**May you all enjoy a traditional and happy Christmas,  
And good health and prosperity throughout 2007**

**ALAN ABRAHAM.**

## THE COST OF YOUR CHRISTMAS. (IN 1954)

The Christian Bookstall at Aberdare Market was selling packets of 8 Scriptural Christmas Cards from 1/2d to 2/3d a pack

The price of admission to the Memorial Hall's Xmas Eve Long Dance was 3/-.

Cardiff City played West Bromwich Albion on Christmas Day. The price of a cheap rail trip from the Low Level Station to Ninian Park Halt was 3/6d.

If you were not a football fan there were rail trips to Chepstow Races on Boxing Day for 11/-, or to Cardiff to see the Pantomime "Babes In The Wood" at The New Theatre, prices 5/6d to 8/- (including theatre admission).

For your Christmas smoke a box of 20 Grosvenor State Express Cigarettes (tipped) could be bought for 3/7d.

Scotch and Irish Whisky could be purchased at Emrys Evans & Son, the Chemists for 18/3 and 35/-, Brandy at 22/9 and 44/-, Gin 17/7 and 33/9, Rum at 18/5 and 35/4d Port 9/6 to 22/-, Sherry 9/6 to 28/6d. Empire Wines from 8/6. British Wines from 6/9d, and Segavin at 10/- and 14/6. For the more sophisticated there was Cherry Brandy, Benedictine, Cointreau, Grand Marnier, Chartreuse, Crème de Menthe. Advocat etc.

The shop also stocked Table Wines, Champagne, Cocktails, Pimms No.1, Dubonnet ("Do 'ave a Dubonnet!") etc.

Under the heading "When It's SPORT- the menfolk are happiest!" Victor Freed Ltd. suggested the purchase of Television Sets (some with Automatic Picture Controls – no fading or aeroplane "flutter". with APC the picture remains rock steady at all times ) from 49 To 79 GNS (12 to 17 inches.), or on terms. Radiograms could be had from 32 Gns to £72/5s

The paper carried a note that there were 2607 Television Licences in force in Aberdare, and over 10,000 sound radio licences, including 94 in cars!

**Did you have a T.V or car radio in 1954?**

A "Christmas Gift Parade" tempted readers to buy "The Saucy Drummer" 12/9d. ( Airspun" Face Powder with Instant Beauty powder base ) or an attractive pack of Toilet Water, Soap, Talc, 4 "fluffettes" of Bath Salts, Mueget, L' Aimant, Chypre, Paris or L'Origan 21/- to 87/6d. (At Emrys Evans & Son). Alternatively you could "Be an Angel" and give Her Coty beauty products. **For Him**, "Shaving Luxuries" including, An After-shave Lotion with Avocado Shaving Cream, in a distinguished gift box at 12/6. .

**\*Electric gifts – a joy to receive! \***

Finally the South Wales Electricity Board urged readers to "Give Electrical Gifts!" as presents. Their suggestions included kettles, "Teasmade" machines, clocks, irons and blankets.

That Christmas, 1954, the once grand Boot Hotel announced the opening of its NEW LOUNGE. Fforchaman pithead baths were formally opened (bringing the number of baths in NCB Area No.4 to eleven), and the Aberdare Magistrates' granted a general extension of Licensing Hours in the town to 11pm. on Christmas Eve, Boxing Day and New Year's Eve.

**A Note on Money.:** GNS = Guineas or £1.1.0d. Decimal currency was introduced in the UK on the 15<sup>th</sup> February 1971. 5 new pence = 2½ old pennies.