

HANES

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

PRESIDENT: THE LORD ABERDARE.

HANES ON THE LAW

UP BEFORE THE BEAK.

The office of Justice of the Peace (or Magistrate) was introduced into Wales after the passing of the Act of Union in 1536. Appointments would have been made from the ranks of the more important landowners in the parish, such as the Herberts of Hendre Bailey, the Joneses of Dyffryn, and the Mathew family. A published roll of The Justices of the Peace in Wales and Monmouthshire, 1541 to 1689, records the name of Wm. Mathew of Aberaman (Brecon Circuit – Glamorgan) serving from 1622-1636.

There is specific reference to a "Justice Jones" of the Dyffryn in *Gardd Aberdar* (Thomas Dafydd Llewellyn). The Jones family occupied Dyffryn House prior to its purchase by the Bruces in 1750. Justices of the Peace had administrative and judicial functions, and the latter became increasingly more important after the 1830's. Initially Justices enjoyed considerable freedom as long as they obeyed the general directive "to keep and cause to be kept the King's Peace."

The local Justices in this parish in the early Industrial period were Messrs. J.B. Pryce, G.R. Morgan, E.M. Williams, (both of the Gadlys), Rowland Fothergill, William Thomas, (The Court, Merthyr Tydfil), and The Revd. Charles Maybery.

In 1872 the County Magistrates serving this area were Henry Austin Bruce, David Davies (Maesffynon), George Elliot (Aberaman), Richard Fothergill M.P., James Lewis of Tydraw, Rees Hopkin Rhys, Llwydcoed, Dr. R.T. Roberts, and David Evan Williams of Hirwaun.

The Magistrates' Court was first held in a small room at the Boot Inn, High Street, moving to a more dignified setting in the Town Hall. In 1849 a new police station was built in Station Street, which was later enlarged, and a courtroom built along side it. (See Plate No. 193 "Aberdare – Pictures from the Past" Vol. 1. C.V.H.S. 1986.) The writer of the caption to this picture says, "Idlers would stand outside on court days to watch convicted prisoners being taken to the railway station on their way to prison"

"Petty sessions are held every alternate day in connection with Merthyr; J.C. Fowler Esq. is the presiding and stipendiary magistrate." (1865 Town Directory).

In 1866 the Licensee of the Roberts' Arms, 2 Station Street, applied for a double licence, submitting that as the pub was opposite the courthouse, it would be convenient for those who attended... also it was the nearest house to the T.V.R. Station. The Petty Sessions continued to be held there until 1914 when a fine new Police Court (correctly Magistrates' Court) was put up in Market Street on the site of the Old Armoury. This building with its fine classical façade is now a nightclub known as "Judges & Jurys". (Sic.) R.A. Griffiths, the Stipendiary Magistrate who "expressed the hope that the Legal Champions would be happy in their new cock-pit", formally opened the Court in January 1916

In recording the locations of these various Court Houses we should perhaps mention that a 1778 Rent Roll of The Lordship of Miskin (WWP/Tr/2/2.box Tr.1-8) lists a property referred to as "Tyr y dadley* now called Gadlys Ycha". We may never know why it was known by this name at that time. The Essay *Gardd Aberdar*, however mentions a tradition "that wrong-doers were placed on trial at these places (Alternative names were Neuadd Isaf and Neuadd Uchaf) before there were located here facilities such as those which exist now." All we can say is that these properties were once owned by the Mathew family (see above), or they might have had some judicial significance during the time Manorial Courts had power.

Aberdare and Merthyr Tydfil had their first Stipendiary Magistrate in 1829. He was John Bruce Pryce, followed by his son, Henry Austin Bruce in 1847. His successors included, J.C. Fowler, Albert de Rutzen, John Bishop, Walter M. North, (died 1901), Sir T. Marchant Williams, (born in the Gadlys area), and R. A. Griffiths.

* See Deric John, *Cynon Valley Place-Names*, (Llanrwst 1998) p.58. which states "Llwyn y dadley (the dispute, discussion bush) is interesting. Dr. Brynley Roberts informs me that dadlau infers a legal dispute – more like a court. It could possibly be land that was the subject of dispute. Cf. Y Dadleu Dy trans. As "The Court House", see Meisg. 105".

(More articles on aspects of the law will appear in future editions of *Hanes*.)

CRIME.....

The Murder of John Davies.

On the second of September, 1865, "a harmless Mountain Ash blacksmith's striker" who worked at a smith's shop near the Upper Cwmpennar Pit, went missing. His name was John Davies. He was 19 years of age and the son of a T.V.R. policeman.

On New Year's Day, 1866, a man also named John Davies, who farmed Ffynonyglog Farm, discovered the striker's headless remains in Craig-y-Duffryn woods. The deceased's skull was found some yards from the body, the legs of which, it was discovered, had been bound around with rope yarn.

A few weeks later another striker, Derbyshire born, Robert Coe aged 18, was arrested on suspicion of murder. Coe was initially brought before the Stipendiary Magistrate at Merthyr Tydfil, and remanded in custody. Committal proceedings were swiftly heard at the Workmen's Hall, Mountain, Ash, and the accused was sent for trial at the next Glamorgan Assizes to be held at Swansea. A plea of "Not Guilty" was entered. At the subsequent trial (Swansea 14th.March 1866), the prosecution alleged that the motive for the killing was theft, and that John Davies had been murdered for his week's wages, amounting to £1.13. which he had received very shortly before his death. The crime, the jury was told, was premeditated, Coe having borrowed the axe, which he had used to decapitate poor Davies on the very day of the crime. Coe, it was alleged, had met up with Davies, lured him into the woods, and there killed him for the sovereign, two half sovereigns, and the three shilling- pieces he had in his purse.

Coe was found guilty of the killing and sentenced to be publicly hanged at Swansea. His was to be the last public execution in Wales. Prior to the sentence being carried out Coe confessed to the crime, and a note of this, taken from the "Aberdare Times" is given below.

THE CONFESSION TO THE SWANSEA PRISON CHAPLAIN.

"For the satisfaction of the judge and jury, as well as others concerned in my trial and conviction, with feelings of deep sorrow, I now acknowledge to you the justice of the sentence under which I am soon to suffer the penalty of death. It was not until the morning of Saturday, the 2nd September, that I conceived the remotest idea of murdering poor John Davies. When I first asked the man for the loan of the hatchet it was for the alleged object of cutting rods...on that morning, however the thought struck me that it would be a good instrument to commit the deed I meditated. After getting John Davies to make an engagement to go with me in the afternoon to Dyffryn wood for the purpose of picking blackberries. At one o'clock. I went to borrow the hatchet. I carried it to the blacksmith's shop and hid it. Later (at 4 o'clock) I took it. together with a piece of rope yarn, which was in the shop, and went to the upper pit to meet him according to promise. We went together to the Cefnpennar Inn. I called for a pint of beer, paid for it, and also for three other pints, which I had drunk before. We drank part of the pint and then went to the wood. He asked me on the way what I wanted with the hatchet, and I answered to cut a walking stick. When we had been in the wood about a quarter of an hour, and had got some distance from the hedge, I struck him a blow from behind on the back part of the head with the pole (the head) of the hatchet. He fell backwards without speaking a word, or uttering a groan that I observed. I instantly gave him several strokes on the neck with the edge of the hatchet, until the head was severed from the body. Then I tied his legs with the rope yarn, and took his money from his pocket, which amounted to 33s. I had no other motive whatever for killing him but a desire to obtain his money. It was the only way suggested to me to effect the end. It did not occur to me to strip him of his clothes, but I left him as soon as I could and never went near him afterwards. There was a great deal of blood on the hatchet which I hid in the wood near the works, where it remained for about three weeks. Then I fetched it, washed it in dirty water and took it back to the house where I had borrowed it. There was also some blood on my trousers, but as it was not very observable, I went straight to my lodging, took off my dirty clothes, dressed myself and, went to Mountain Ash, thence to Aberdare and returned to my lodging about eleven o'clock that night; went to bed, got up about 7 the next morning, put on the same trousers, and went to the works, rubbed some oil in the bloody parts of the trousers, then went back, washed and dressed myself, left for Newbridge, (Pontypridd), spent a great part of the day there, returned to my lodgings and hoped that the murder would never be found out. I had my trousers washed at Cefnpennar before I went to Cardiff on the 8th of October. My conscience gave me great uneasiness at times, but I never mentioned the circumstances to anyone until now. I might have asked the blacksmith at Newbridge whether he had heard of a man murdered at Mountain Ash, with his head cut off; but I don't recollect doing so in those words..." (April 11th, 1866 Robert Coe).

...AND PUNISHMENT

The Dyffryn Woods Murder *THE EXECUTION OF COE*

The public execution of Robert Coe for the wilful murder of John Davies took place at Swansea Goal on Thursday, 13th April 1866.

By every train on Wednesday, hundreds of people from the coal and iron districts of Merthyr Tydfil, Aberdare and the Swansea Valley poured into the town to witness the dreadful event. The crowds acted with unseemly eagerness...the madly eager crowd included decently dressed women...a few of whom (carried) tender infants.

The gibbet had been erected on the day previous. Many of the gin shops opened at 4 00.a.m. on the morning of the execution, and from not a few well lighted beer shops the sounds of some bacchanalian refrain fell unwelcomely on the ear of the passer-by, and reminded one that even the hideous scene about to be enacted was insufficient to keep men sober for one short night.

By 6.00 a.m. a huge crowd had gathered under the shadow of the gallows. A few minutes before 8.00 o'clock the prisoner was led out onto the scaffold, and placed in position under the beam by the executioner, (Mr.Calcraft). A white cap was placed over Coe's head, and as the prison chaplain recited the words of the Church of England burial service, Calcraft swiftly removed the bolt holding the trap door. The platform was draped with a canvas skirting 3 or 4 feet deep, so that as Coe's body fell only his head could be seen. At this point there were frantic screams, cries and groans from the assembled crowd. For a second or two after falling the wretched youth shook convulsively and almost immediately afterwards his head hung like a lead weight on one side. The noose had evidently been skilfully arranged, and death was almost instantaneous. The body was thereafter left hanging for one hour, then taken down for burial within the prison grounds.

According to another source, (But not reported in *The Aberdare Times*), the crowd numbered 15,000 people, and the town presented the appearance of some public rejoicing or festive sports. The usual collection of showmen set up their stalls and carts right up to the gallows, and removed the wheels, which were then hidden to prevent the police from moving them on. The whole of the Swansea Police Force were marshalled on the ground, and had great difficulty in maintaining order. Four women armed with knives climbed the gallows, as if to attack the condemned man, and had to be forcibly removed. In the surging crowds women and children were trampled under foot, and 120 people were injured. The reports of this scene caused a public outcry against capital punishment, and were instrumental in bringing about the decision to carry out executions in private, (i.e. they resulted in the passing of the Capital Punishment Amendment Act of 1868.)

In an Editorial *The Aberdare Times*, later, but prior to the publication of the confession, commented that it considered that Coe, "had been most fairly tried, and justly condemned."

It ended its Editorial by stating that Coe would soon expiate his "crimson crime" on the gallows, and wrote, "In his behalf we paraphrase the Miltonic prayer:

"What in him is dark,
illumine;
What is low, raise and support, O God!"

Sources: **The Aberdare Times**, April 14th. 1866, and. Hunt W.W., **To Guard My People, An Account of the Origin and History of The Swansea Police.** (Swansea 1957.)

A CRIMINAL MISCELLANY

Our first page presents a snapshot of the office of the Magistracy in the Cynon Valley in its early days. The centre pages record the facts of what is probably the most notorious and cold blooded crime ever committed here.

On this our last page we publish our own "Newgate Calendar" of some of the crimes committed here between the years 1813 and 1862.

March 20th. 1813.

50 Guineas Reward

Whereas the dwelling house of Griffith Thos. Griffith of Llwydcoed in the parish of Aberdare, was broken into this morning between the hours of twelve and one o'clock by 4 men who stole therefrom one silver watch and upwards of £200 in guineas and who afterwards very much beat and abused the said Griffith Thomas Griffith and two boys who were in the house. The persons resident in the neighbourhood, for the more readily bringing to justice the perpetrators of so atrocious an act, hereby offer the above reward to any person who will give such information, that the offenders may be convicted thereof, and which will be paid on such conviction, on application to Mr. Mathew Wayne, Cyfarthfa Iron Works, Merthyr Tydfil.

If any one of the parties concerned will inform against the others, he will be entitled to the above reward and every means used to obtain a pardon.

It is supposed that the clothes of some of the men must be stained with blood from the wounds received by the said Griffith Thomas Griffith.

20th. March 1813.

In the spring of 1814, John Thomas, aged 62, was committed (for trial) by John Bruce Pryce charged with stealing a quantity of guineas and other gold coin from the dwelling house of Griffith Thomas Griffith in the parish of Aberdare..

Autumn 1814 Nehemiah Lee charged with burglariously entering the same house!

1859.

January. John Nolan and Thomas Murray were charged at the Brecon Sessions with "uttering base coin" (florins and shillings) at the Miners' Arms Hotel, Hirwaun, during the previous December. Both were found guilty and sentenced to ten months imprisonment with hard labour.

January. SACRILEGE. One night last week some person or persons broke into St. Elvan's Church in this town and carried away the whole of the plate worth upwards of 30 Gns. The perpetrators of the dark deed have not been found out. (The Cardiff & Merthyr Guardian 1st. January, 1859.)

(And in the next issue...)

The plate stolen from St. Elvan's was valued at £50 and not at £30. It was the gift of The Marchioness of Bute presented at the time of the consecration (1853) in memory of the late Marquess. There has been no clue whatever to the scoundrels who perpetrated the deed. We are informed that the Marchioness has in the most liberal manner undertaken to replace it exactly as it was before. This is only another of her Ladyship's munificence in the Diocese.

1862.

January. Late on a Saturday night the peace of John Street, Foundry Town was broken by a terrific fight between two Irishmen, Patrick Bransfield and Thomas Carroll, who attacked each other with knives. Bransfield, who had lodged with the other man for three years, received fatal wounds. The Coroner returned a verdict of wilful murder, and Carroll was committed for trial at Swansea.

IT IS WITH REGRET THAT WE HAVE TO MENTION THE DEATH OF YET ANOTHER MEMBER. WE REFER TO Ms LILLIAN HOPKINS OF TRECYNON. SISTER HOPKINS WAS FOR MANY YEARS A DEDICATED MEMBER OF STAFF AT THE ABERDARE GENERAL HOSPITAL. SHE HAD BEEN A MEMBER OF THE SOCIETY FOR MANY YEARS, AND WILL BE MISSED.

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