

CYNON VALLEY HISTORY SOCIETY

PRESIDENT: THE LORD ABERDARE

VICE-PRESIDENTS: TOM EVANS, JOHN F. MEAR AND KEN COLLINS

www.cynonvalleyhistorysociety.org

HANES



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

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ABERDARE ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS AGO

The first section of this Edition of Hanes recalls a little of what happened in the town and district in 1859, and was considered newsworthy in the English papers of the time. The population of the parish that year was fast approaching the figure of 32,299 recorded in the census of 1861.

Nothing of great note occurred in England that year; however 1859 was the year in which Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was born, the great Isambard Kingdom Brunel died, Darwin published his "*On the Origin of Species*", and there was a rain of tiny fish over England.

In Wales there were Liberal victories at elections, evictions of tenants and a religious revival.

TRADE

The Aberdare correspondent of a Bristol newspaper gave a gloomy account of the coal trade in the district but commented *the universal opinion is that as the spring advances the coal trade will revive and Aberdare will eventually resume its wanted activity and prosperity.*

BRISTOL MERCURY, 8 JANUARY.

The Welsh Iron Trade - Iron Trade work is slack, but a revival is anticipated as the demand from America is becoming better, and there is a good enquiry from France and Russia.

BIRMINGHAM DAILY POST, 26 JANUARY.

WANTED. An accomplished pianist (lady or gentlemen) for a convivial room. Constant engagement if suitable. Apply stating lowest terms to Mr. John Jones, Cardiff Castle Hotel, Bute Street.

(There was a Music Hall at this establishment. The Era published theatrical intelligence.)

THE ERA, 13 FEBRUARY

DISTRICT NEWS

Shower of Fish- Much excitement has been occasioned in the valley of Aberdare by the fact of a complete shower of fish falling at Mountain Ash on Friday week. The roofs of some of the houses were covered with them, and several were living, and are still preserved in life and appear healthy in glass bottles. They were from an inch to three inches in length, and fell during a very heavy shower of rain and storm of wind.

BRISTOL MERCURY, 26 FEBRUARY.

The Revd John Griffith, Vicar of Aberdare, took an interest in the phenomenon, visited Mountain Ash, and wrote the following letter to **The London Times** setting out the evidence of a local eye witness, John Lewis:

On Wednesday, February 9, I was getting out a piece of timber for the purpose of setting it for the saw, when I was startled by something falling all over me – down my neck, on my head, and on my back. On putting my hand down my neck I was surprised to find they were little fish. By this time I saw the whole ground covered with them. I took off my hat, the brim of which was full of them; they were all jumping about. They covered the ground in a long strip of about 80 yards by 12, as we measured afterwards. That shed (pointing to a very large workshop) was covered with them and the chutes were quite full. My mates and I might have gathered bucketsful of them, scraping with our hands. We did gather a great many – about a bucketful – and threw them into the rain-pool, where some of them are now. There were about two showers, with an interval of about ten minutes, and each shower lasted about 2 minutes. The time was eleven a.m. The morning up train to Aberdare was just passing. It was not blowing very hard, but uncommon wet; just about the same wind as there is today (blowing rather stiff), and it came from this quarter (pointing to the S of W). They came down with the rain in “a body like”. This evidence, says the reverend gentleman, has been taken for the purpose of being laid before Professor Richard Owen, (a zoologist – Ed.) to whom he is also about to forward some of the fish. Some of these, he states were 5 inches long.

LIVERPOOL MERCURY, 14 MARCH (From the London Times)

SUCCESS.

David Davies of Aberdare has been admitted Licentiate of the Society of Apothecaries having previously passed the necessary examinations.

(Probably Dr. David Davies of Bryngolwg, Medical Officer of Health –Ed.)

DAILY NEWS, 5 March

PENYDARREN

Penydarren works will not now be dismantled as Richard Fothergill has negotiated to purchase them with a view to carrying on operations. He is likely to live at Penydarren House which has so long been empty.

BRISTOL MERCURY, 12 March.

ROASTED ALIVE AT LLWYDCOED.

A man roasted alive – On Tuesday last a labourer named William Thomas, aged 20, who was employed at a limekiln in Llwydcoed, Aberdare was engaged in feeding the kiln, and having furnished a fresh supply of stones he stepped upon the kiln for the purpose of levelling it. A portion of the mass suddenly gave way owing to the additional weight, and, horrible to relate, the unfortunate man gradually sunk in, and was unable to extricate himself. His pitiful cries for assistance brought many other workmen in the neighbourhood to the scene, but before they could succeed in grasping Thomas he had completely disappeared in the smouldering mass. The men set to work underneath the kiln and removed its contents until the body was recovered after the lapse of a considerable time. The deceased was completely roasted alive, and the skin and flesh having peeled off, the body presented a horrible appearance.

LIVERPOOL MERCURY, 16 MAY

THE COURT

The Earl of Derby has presented the Revd. John Griffith M.A., Vicar of Aberdare to the Rectory of Merthyr Tydfil rendered vacant by the elevation of the Venerable Archdeacon Campbell to the bishopric of Bangor.

THE DAILY NEWS, 7 JUNE

NEW FACILITY

A Money Order Office is to be opened at Aberaman on 1st July

DAILY NEWS, 24 JUNE

AWARD

At the third exhibition of the season, the Royal Botanical Society awarded a silver gilt medal to Mr. J. Floud, gardener to Richard Fothergill for four Pineapples.

MORNING CHRONICLE, 7 JULY

WHOLESALE SHEEP STEALING IN WALES.

A large gang of sheep-stealers has been formed near Aberdare. One farmer alone is stated by the local papers to have lost over 200 sheep during the last year; and last week there were discovered in an old pit no fewer than forty five sheep skins, and one calf skin. Some time ago two other lots of skins, sixty-five in all, were discovered in the old levels at Cwmdare. The offence has been brought home to three or four of the gang who are committed for trial.

THE HULL PACKET AND EAST RIDING TIMES, 29 JULY

VALE OF NEATH RAILWAY.

From an abstract of the twenty-seventh half yearly report of the directors. "The opening of Swansea docks is announced to take place in September, whereby a vast outlet for traffic will be furnished, and the increased trade of Milford has led to a larger consumption of steam coal conveyed over our line. The recent completion of the line from Southall to Brentford has also, by giving a direct broad-gauge communication with the Thames, opened a new source of traffic. Preliminary arrangements have already been made for the conveyance of considerable quantities of steam coal from Aberdare to London by this route."

DAILY NEWS, 16 AUGUST.

REVIVAL

The churches at Aberdare have been blessed with a most powerful revival this year; from 1000 to 1200 members have been added to the church of our denomination in the parish of Aberdare alone in the last six months. (The Revd. Thomas Rees of Beaufort concerning the Independent Body)

BIRMINGHAM DAILY POST, 13 SEPTEMBER.

TRADE

The iron trade of Merthyr Tydfil and Aberdare is tolerably brisk.

BIRMINGHAM DAILY NEWS, 26 SEPTEMBER.

APPOINTMENT

The Revd. Evan Lewis of Llanllechid has been appointed to the vicarage of Aberdare by the preferment of The Revd. John Griffith to the rectory of Merthyr Tydfil.

NORTH WALES CHRONICLE, 8 OCTOBER

A DISTINGUISHED PREACHER.

His Lordship the Bishop of Bangor officiated at St. Elvan's Church, Aberdare, his discourse was *plain, practical and good*. Owing probably to the inclemency of the weather and to a want of publicity of the fact of the bishop's visit the congregation was by no means a numerous one.

Ibid, 12 NOVEMBER

A JUDGMENT

In the Court of Exchequer this morning, Mrs. Harris, a young widow who keeps the Crown Inn at Aberdare, obtained £1000 damages in an action against Mr. Thomas a gentleman of fortune at Merthyr, for breach of promise.

BELFAST NEWS, 24 NOVEMBER.

(Mrs Harris was 28, she had been living with her brother-in-law who kept the Crown, and there the Defendant first became acquainted with her. The Defendant was a son of Dr. Thomas (The Court) a man of great property, and the ground landlord of Merthyr Tydfil, who left his two sons a fortune of from £1600 to £2000 a year each. During his father's lifetime Mr. Thomas became acquainted with Mrs. Harris. He promised frequently to marry her, and urged her to consent to a secret marriage during his father's lifetime, but this was objected to by the lady, and finally it was agreed that the marriage should not take place until after the death of the Defendant's father. On the death of his father, the Defendant married Miss Mary Thomas, who was his cousin, and who had some £150 or £200 a year, and whose sister was an innkeeper. He had previously behaved in the most offensive manner to the Plaintiff; he had broken his promise to her, and had added to the injury by putting on the record a plea, which he knew to be untrue, that she was at the time a married woman. The Plaintiff's husband who had been an innkeeper, had gone to sea for the benefit of his health, and he died in May 1853. The Plaintiff did not become acquainted with the Defendant for two years afterwards and then all the circumstances of her early life had been fully explained to him. There were no letters or correspondence between them, as the defendant, although heir to so large a property could not write. A number of witnesses were called, who fully proved the promise and the defendant's excuses.

Counsel for Thomas made an able speech in mitigation of damages, and characterised the promise as made in an idle moment by a man who was a mere ignorant lubberly lout of a Welsh squire, who could not read or write.

SOUTH WALES IRON AND COAL TRADE.

During the month just terminated trade throughout the district has undergone various fluctuations, and in certain parts slackness has been experienced. In the Aberdare Valley the coal trade has not been good, although a slight improvement is now perceptible. The make of pigs has been large, while railway iron has also sold freely and at good prices. From the continent considerable orders have been received, and the large firms have been well supplied with commissions.

BRISTOL MERCURY, 5 NOVEMBER

LOCAL VOLUNTEER CORPS.

On Thursday week a public meeting was held at Aberdare when a resolution to form a corps was carried unanimously, and a number of persons were immediately enrolled.

BRISTOL MERCURY, 10 DECEMBER.

PROVINCIAL THEATRES, SOUTH WALES (ABERDARE)

Mr. Chute's company from Swansea have been playing here in the Assembly Rooms during the past week to moderately good houses. Undoubtedly, the success would have been much greater had the room been fitted up in a respectable way, or even decently; but in this age of refinement, it is not to be expected that a cold, dirty, ill-lighted room will satisfy an audience, whatever may be the ability of the company, many of whom are well known *artistes*, and of them we cannot speak too highly, for they have striven hard to please, and will leave a good name behind them. Aberdare is a rising town, and affords scope for any enterprising manager who will bear in mind that intelligence advances rapidly in South Wales.

THE ERA, 11 DECEMBER

(The Assembly Rooms were located in the Market House – Ed.)

THE FULSOME FIFTIES.

A RAPIDLY GROWING TOWN CENTRE.

ABERDARE 1850 -1860.

The decade which began in 1850 was a remarkable period in the development of Aberdare, and its town centre in particular. The town would have been awash with money, but must also have been a vast construction site. These ten years witnessed the building of some of Aberdare's most important and imposing religious and public buildings. In 1851 the foundation stone of St. Elvan's Church was set on top of a prominent hillock in the centre of Aberdare; the work was completed by July 1852. In another part of the town the building of the Market Hall was about to commence. This sizeable complex was completed Ca. 1853-4. At Cardiff Street in 1857 work started on the fine West of England and South Wales Bank premises (Subsequently the Midland and now HSBC), this Italianate structure was reported to be *universally admired and certainly one of the most striking we have in this rapidly improving town*. A year later (1858) an elegant and striking Temperance Hall, in the classical style, adorned Canon Street.

Elsewhere in the town centre many chapels appeared; there was Sion, Cross Street built in 1850, Calfaria had been rebuilt in 1852, and Bethania also in 1853. Siloa which had opened in 1844 was rebuilt in 1855; In Station Street in 1856 the English Congregationalists were busily constructing Tabernacle, this church was to be rebuilt again a few years later in 1859. At Green Street the English Methodist Church, built in 1841, had been reconstructed by the end of the decade (1859). Aberdare elected its first Local Board of Health on 24 September 1854, itself a significant event and the old Market House in High Street swiftly became Public Offices; its undercroft was enclosed and an additional storey was added to the building to provide the necessary municipal accommodation.

There was also great activity on the ancient glebeland at Maesydre; the Dean and Chapter of Gloucester had granted building Leases for the development of this land in March 1854, and hundreds of houses were soon to appear on the flat space there, and superior shops sprang up in Canon Street that same year.

On the fringe of the town the engineers and navvies of the Vale of Neath Railway were bringing its line onto a difficult site high above the river Cynon, where a station was built. Near this site, which was to become known as the High Level Line, stood Nazareth Chapel, erected in 1860 at the end of our period. At the same time as the building of the Vale of Neath railway, other lines were being laid down in the Dare-Aman districts.

The town must have resounded to the sound of intense digging, hammering, sawing and horse drawn transport.

The period 1850-1860 was indeed the heyday of the architect, builder*, timber merchant, bricklayer and stonemason.

Equally important growth and development was underway in other districts of the valley at the same time. The Rammell Report lists the various collieries already in production in 1852 and records *there are, besides, a great number of new collieries in process of opening*.

The census returns reveal that the population rose from 14,999 in 1851 to 32,299 in 1861. In these ten years it had increased by 17,300 or 115.3%. (D. L. Davies in *Old Aberdare*, Vol.2, p.55).

What has been recorded here is merely the physical development of Aberdare; its human development and achievements is another story.

* Both St. Elvan's and the West of England Bank were built by Bristol builders.

SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

HISTORY AND HERITAGE DAY

Just as each Chinese year has a presiding animal, such as the Year of the Tiger etc., Aberdare in 2009 will be remembered as the *Year of the Plaques*; earlier in the year (February 11) the valley's first blue plaque was set up on the façade of the Navigation Hotel, Abercynon, originally the offices of the Glamorgan Canal Company (1792), followed, in April, by the Hirwaun History Society's nomination for a memorial at Ty Mawr House, for the Hirwaun Iron Works. The Aberdare History and Heritage Day commenced at 11.00 am on a gloriously sunny 11 June, when the first of three plaques was unveiled by Professor Hywel Teifi Edwards, previously professor of Welsh at Swansea University, at The Market Hall where the first modern National Eisteddfod had been held in 1861. The assembly then moved on to Canon-street and the Palladium where our President, Lord Aberdare, undraped the second plaque marking the building's historic use as a Temperance Hall; an important facility originally opened by his ancestor Henry Austin Bruce MP in 1858.

Our guests and Society members then proceeded, by way of a route passing through the grounds of the ancient parish church, to the Cynon Valley Museum where Vice-President Tom Evans was waiting to perform the last ceremony – the presentation of plaque number three which records the site of the very well preserved Gadlys iron works (1827).

The three ceremonies were performed in the presence of Cllr. Robert Smith, Mayor of Rhondda Cynon Taff Borough Council, and the Mayoress.

The unveilings were followed by a pleasant social event and excellent buffet, provided by the Borough Council and the Society, in which 50 or so people participated.

Five more plaques are still to be set up viz. Abernant-y-groes colliery site, 218 Cardiff-road, Aberaman (Arthur Linton, World Champion Cyclist), Agents Row, Abernant (birthplace of Welsh international rugby hero, Dr. Teddy Morgan), Robertstown tramway bridge and the Valley's oldest nonconformist chapel, Hen dŷ Cwrdd (1757).

WEBMASTER

We are delighted to announce that Society member Dr. Colin Rees of Winchester has kindly agreed to take over the running of our website. Although needing no introduction, Colin was born in Aberdare and has been living and teaching in Winchester since 1976 where he was, until retirement, head of his school's Science Faculty. Several years ago Colin set up the excellent Aberdare Boys' Grammar School Website (www.abgs.org.uk/), which is linked to our site, and has created so much interest for past pupils of the school worldwide. We now look forward to the improvement and development of our site, and a new age of cyber-history.

GIFTS

The Society's President, Lord Aberdare, has presented us with a copy of a book on Berlioz, of which he is the author, *The Musical Madhouse*, (University of Rochester Press, 2003). He has inscribed the book, "For Cynon Valley History Society from its appreciative President".

Overheard on June 11th, "Lord Aberdare's talk is about *Burials!*"

EXTRA CURRICULA ACTIVITIES.

It is hoped that the two additional Meetings (visit to St. Fagan's Church, Trecynon, and the Website launch social evening) held this season will lead to a resumption of the successful Field Trips of the 1970's. If any member would like to lead a future field excursion, or is interested in a particular venue, would they please contact the Secretary?

TOWARDS 2011

The Society will celebrate its 40th anniversary on 11 March 2011 and earnest steps are being taken to make the year a memorable one; a primary aim will be to publish a commemorative volume to mark the occasion. If any member has any old photographs or documents relating to the Society's past would they please contact the Secretary or either of the Joint- Editors?

This edition of Hanes is set in Book Antiqua.

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www.cynonvalleyhistorysociety.org

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