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

ISSUE NUMBER 82

SPRING 2018

WOMEN FIGHT FOR THE VOTE

In this issue we consider women's suffrage. We also look at what was happening in our valley one hundred years ago when Britain looked as if it had almost lost the war; and finally there is an obituary for E.J.K. Rees, a founder member of our society.

This year is the centenary of The Representation of the People Act that was passed on 6th February, 1918. It gave women over thirty the right to vote if they were a registered property occupier (or married to a registered property occupier) of land or buildings with a rateable value greater than £5. This was a poor compromise and some may say an insult to the women under 30 who had no property qualification but who had fought long and hard for the right to vote. The age of 30 was probably determined because it would keep women in the electoral minority (43%) as so many men had died in the First World War. In fact many soldiers returning from the war before 1918 did not have the vote as they had to have this property qualification. This was now rescinded for them as all men over twenty-one gained the vote.

There were two types of women who fought for the vote: Suffragists who used peaceful means to obtain the vote, and suffragettes who used violent means, e.g. setting fire to pillar-boxes and smashing windows. One of the adopted suffragette colours was purple, and I have used this in articles about them. Suffragists' adopted colours were green, red and white but I have used green in articles about them.

We will look at not only what happened in this valley but also what happened in Wales and even a little of what happened in England!

Suffragists decided to march to obtain the vote.

Below is a photograph of a Welsh women's procession in London on 17th June 1911. The gentleman in bardic clothing is Rev. Drew Roberts.



Aberdare Women's Liberal Association

How did the Women's Suffrage Movement start in the Cynon Valley?

Mrs Ann Griffith Jones (wife of Rev. Rhys Jenkin Jones) was the founder of the Aberdare Women's Liberal Association, AWLA, which was formed on 10th November 1891 at Trinity Vestry. Mr D.A. Thomas, the sitting Liberal M.P., delivered an address and explained the objectives of the association. His wife Sybil was elected as President.

On 26th November, a meeting of the committee was held at Ysguborwen House at the invitation of Mrs Sybil Thomas. Afternoon tea was enjoyed, then additional ladies were added to the committee and representatives of the various areas of Aberdare were elected.

It had its inaugural public meeting at the Temperance Hall on 4th February 1892. Mrs Ann Griffith Jones moved the resolution, "That this meeting warmly approves the formation of the Aberdare Women's Liberal Association." Mr D.A. Thomas seconded the resolution, which was unanimously carried.

Mrs Wynford Thomas moved the resolution, "That this meeting enthusiastically supports the application of Liberal principles to womanhood, and advocates the extension of the Parliamentary suffrage to women on the same terms as it is, or may be, granted to men, and pledges itself to support the progressive suffrage party in the various Liberal Federations". The resolution was carried.

Just over two months later it had a membership of 554, and two years later it had

600 members. In Wales, only Cardiff's association claiming over one thousand members was larger at that time. Aberdare's sister association in Merthyr was only half its size!

The ladies of Mountain Ash also took up the cause. On 27th January, 1892, a public meeting was held at Bethania Hall to start an association of their own. It was a very enthusiastic meeting but sadly its existence was brief. Lloyd George must have feared the wrath of suffragists of Mountain Ash, due not only to his opposition to the women's suffrage bill of 1910, but his insistence in the autumn of that year that no women were to be admitted to a Liberal rally at Mountain Ash in an attempt to forestall suffragette attacks. This outraged already exasperated Liberal women.

Keir Hardie was one of the staunchest supporters of women's suffrage in the Labour Party and in Parliament. In the late 1890s the Liberal Party's and Gladstone's support of women's suffrage was waning and some of the disaffected members of the AWLA canvassed for Hardie at the 1900 election.

Source: *Women's rights and womanly duties: The Aberdare Women's Liberal Association, 1891-1910*, edited by Ursula Masson, South Wales Record Society, 2005.

Sybil Thomas

For all of her life Sybil Thomas was a very active law-abiding suffragist. Some husbands were totally against women obtaining the vote but not her husband: David Alfred Thomas, Lord Rhondda, (from 1916), M.P. for Merthyr and Aberdare, 1888-1910, and who in 1911 became vice-president of the Men's League for Women's Suffrage.

Sybil was President of the Aberdare and also the Abergavenny Women's Liberal Associations. From 1887, the Thomases lived at Llanwern House, outside Newport. From 1895 to 1900 Sybil presided over the Welsh Union of Women's Liberal Associations.

On 24th February 1914 she with a group of women's suffrage supporters went to Downing Street to hand in a petition on that subject to Asquith but he refused to meet them. In fact, for some months, they had asked Asquith to receive them but he had constantly refused. The group moved to Parliament Square and held their meeting by the statue of Richard the Lionheart. Sybil, in her costly black and grey fur coat, tried to get on the statue a dozen times and they delivered speeches about the P.M.'s denial of right to



Sybil Thomas

petition. They were arrested and marched to Scotland Yard. The next day was Sybil's fifty-seventh birthday. She spent much of it in a cell at Bow Street!! Each of the defendants was ordered to be bound over to keep the peace and be of good behaviour for six months on the payment of £5. They all refused these terms so were given one day's imprisonment, which simply amounted to being held in the cells until the court rose that afternoon. Margaret, her daughter, sent the protestors an enormous lunch, and D.A. declared that he was proud of his wife: "she answered the magistrate very well indeed". He presented her with a Greek Archimandrite gold cross, studded with diamonds and emerald. An inscription was added later commemorating both her birth on Ash Wednesday 1857 and her dramatic birthday on Ash Wednesday 1914.

Conscious of the scandal that could be roused by imprisoning the wife of a former Liberal M.P., and immensely wealthy businessman, all the defendants' cases were dismissed.

Her daughter Margaret Haig Thomas Mackworth was an ardent suffragette. There is an excellent article about her in Hanes Issue 70.

Source: *Turning the Tide: the Life of Lady Rhondda* by Angela V. John.

We now move from a suffragist of the nobility to two working class suffragettes: one an unknown, the other known.

Suffragette chained herself to Park's railings during Royal Visit

When King George V & Queen Mary visited Aberdare in June 1912, amongst the vibrant patriotism there was a dissenting voice. A suffragette chained herself to the railings of Aberdare Park and began shouting about votes for women at the royal group. She was quickly removed and was "packed off on the next train". Her address was recorded as Clements Inn, the H.Q. of the Women's suffrage movement. No local newspaper recorded this event. It would be interesting to know the name of this lady.

Source: Cynon Valley Museum Women's Suffrage Exhibition.

Mary Keating Hill

She was the most famous woman in the Women's Suffrage movement in the Cynon Valley.

Mary Keating's parents Cornelius and Mary Keating were born in Ireland. They came to Mountain Ash where she was born in 1863, the eldest of seven children. One of her brothers was Joseph Keating, the famous novelist. In the 1881 census, they are shown living at 46 Cardiff Road, Mountain Ash. The family must have been very poor as they had six lodgers to help to pay the rent. Mary worked as a milliner.

In 1894 she married George Hill, an insurance agent, and the couple moved to Cardiff. There she founded a branch of the Women's Freedom League.

She was sent to jail in December 1906 for her beliefs. Set out below are some newspaper articles about her.

Suffragette Raid Scene in Lobby (of House of Commons) - Cardiff Woman arrested

About half a dozen women suffragists, (their leader was Mary Keating Hill), gained access about nine o'clock on Monday evening to the central lobby of the House of Commons, and made several futile efforts to deliver speeches. They were ejected from the St. Stephen's entrance of the House. They began shouting, "votes for women. We will go back — that is our place". With a reinforcement of constables, Inspector Jarvis attempted to get them away but a fresh contingent of about 60 women appeared to come from all directions and added to the disturbance. By ten o'clock, eleven were in custody. In the meantime an enormous crowd assembled and witnessed the removal of the women to Cannon Row police station.



The Evening Express of 18th December added information about Mrs Keating: She, (aged 40, from Diana Street, Cardiff), feels strongly on the question of women's suffrage and left Cardiff on Monday morning in order to take part in the demonstration in London. Mrs Hill is a very clever woman and is a great friend of the Pankhurst family. The women were sentenced to a fine of 20 shillings or 14 days imprisonment. I believe that her fine was paid against her wishes as she was arrested ten days later.

Mrs Patricia Woodcock of Liverpool, on being sentenced exclaimed, "I will do the imprisonment, I won't waste the money. I will buy a new hat with it!" (Laughter)

Evening Express 18th December & *The Times*, 19th December, p15

Mrs Keating Hill – Mountain Ash suffragette imprisoned in Holloway Jail.

Five suffragists were arrested for creating a disturbance in the House of Commons. The charges against the prisoners generally were disorderly conduct and obstructing the police. The leaders of the women's movement were present in court with the latest "martyrs".

In the case of Mrs Keating Hill, the prosecutor remarked that he did not know how the court would deal with her, as she had recently been previously fined. Evidence of her disorderly conduct having been given, defendant said she would do everything to bring about this reform. Agitation like this was the only way of success. She was fined 40 shillings or twenty-one days as a first class misdemeanant. All the defendants expressed their intention of going to prison.

Glamorgan Gazette 28th December 1906, p2.

Mrs Keating Hill who was seen in Holloway Gaol on Friday afternoon, sends the following message to her friends in Wales:—

Tell them that I am all right, and quite well. When I found I was the only Welsh representative here I was glad that I came, for I should not like gallant little Wales to be left out in the cold regarding this movement. I hope that if necessity arises there will be many more women in Wales willing and ready to follow my example. When the French threatened to invade our land, the women of South Wales took their places and marched along the coast amongst the defenders. That spirit

should animate us now.

Miss Hodgson, a member of the central committee, who had seen Mrs Keating Hill and other imprisoned suffragettes, states that the member from Cardiff, [Mountain Ash actually Ed.], is bearing up better than any of them, and does not appear to be affected in the slightest degree.

Evening Express 29th December 1906, p.2.

In the course of an interview with a member of the "Press," on Saturday, Mr Joseph Keating, the brother of Mrs Hill, said that many people had expressed their hearty sympathy with Mrs Hill, and great indignation at the treatment that is being meted out to her.

"There are 21 women in prison at the present moment on similar charges," added Mr. Keating, "but there is a growing belief that the Government will not allow them to remain there during Christmas. They would consider it too severe a punishment for so slight an offence".

"My brother, Matthew, saw my sister for two hours preceding her journey to Holloway. She was in quite good spirits, but just a little sad at the thought of being away from her children at Christmas."

In the course of further conversation, Mr Keating said that Mrs Hill has prepared for her sojourn in prison and had taken books with her. "She will study French", said he. "She was to have received a first class certificate in the intermediate stage of French at the Technical School prize giving last Thursday night, but, of course, she was in London. Now she will continue her studies in prison. She can speak English and Welsh fluently."

Aberdare Leader 29th December 1906, page 6.



Mary Keating Hill (centre) coming out of Holloway Jail

Mrs Keating Hill left London on the 3.36pm train this afternoon for Cardiff, her sole companion was a reporter from the *Evening Express*.

Evening Express, 11th January 1906, p.3.

Cardiff Suffragettes Congratulate Mrs Keating Hill

A large number of the members of the Cardiff Branch of the Women's Social and Political Union and other friends of the female suffrage movement met at the Gladstone Hall, Wyndham Arcade on Monday evening to welcome Mrs Keating Hill after her return from Holloway. Miss Ethel Gillett presided and conducted a very enjoyable programme of music etc., after which speeches in favour of the removal of women's political disabilities were made by several women, and lastly, and very vigorously, by Mrs Keating Hill.

She was congratulated all round for the stand she had made.

A resolution was passed recording hearty approval

of and unstinted admiration for the splendid stand made by Mrs Keating Hill in the cause of justice and political equality for women of the United Kingdom.

Evening Express, 15th January 1907, p.2.

Aberdare & Mountain Ash were very unhappy that the heroine of the hour should be referred to as "a Cardiff lady."

The *Aberdare Leader* criticised the Cardiff newspapers saying, "They insist upon claiming Mrs Keating Hill, as a Cardiff lady. It is unfair that Mountain Ash should be deprived of the honour of rearing such a valiant and plucky woman!"

Aberdare Leader, 12th January 1907, p8.

In April 1911 in order to boycott the census which many suffragettes did, she stayed the night with fourteen other suffragettes in a shop in Albany Road, Cardiff.

More could be said about Women's suffrage in Wales. An excellent book on the subject is Ryland Wallace's book: *The Women's Suffrage Movement in Wales, 1866-1928*.

CYNON VALLEY MUSEUM

The museum has an excellent exhibition about Women's Suffrage in the Cynon Valley and is on display until 14th April.

The Great Pilgrimage

Thousands of suffragists (non-militant campaigners for votes for women) marched in the summer of 1913 from all the corners of England and Wales to London to demand that women should have the vote. The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies organised it. Some men marched as well.

This 6-week protest march, called the Great Pilgrimage, where rich and poor, young and old defied convention, risking jobs, family relationships and even their lives to persuade the country to listen to them. They held many meetings en route to gain support but often they were met with fierce and violent opposition. The finale was a mass rally of 50,000 mostly women and a few men at Hyde Park on 26th July. A deputation went to see the Prime Minister Herbert Asquith to demand that women should have the vote but he rejected their demand.

"The contingent from Land's End were met at Bristol on 14th July by a Welsh group from Pontypridd and



Blaenavon," (page 196*). I can find little information about this event except that the Pontypridd women marched to Cardiff and the Blaenavon women marched to Newport, and women from Abersychan, Pontypool and Griffithstown joined them on the way.

*Source: *Hearts and Minds* by Jane Robinson. This book is a gripping and fascinating account of these brave, courageous women, many of whom walked 200 miles, and who endured hatred and violence for their beliefs in female equality.

South Wales

Here women gathered in Cardiff from several locations on Sunday 13th July. "To begin with, showing the depth of sincerity of these women, they first of all invoked Divine guidance for their enterprise by attending morning worship at St. Andrews church. The hymn they sang which gave the keynote to their purpose was:

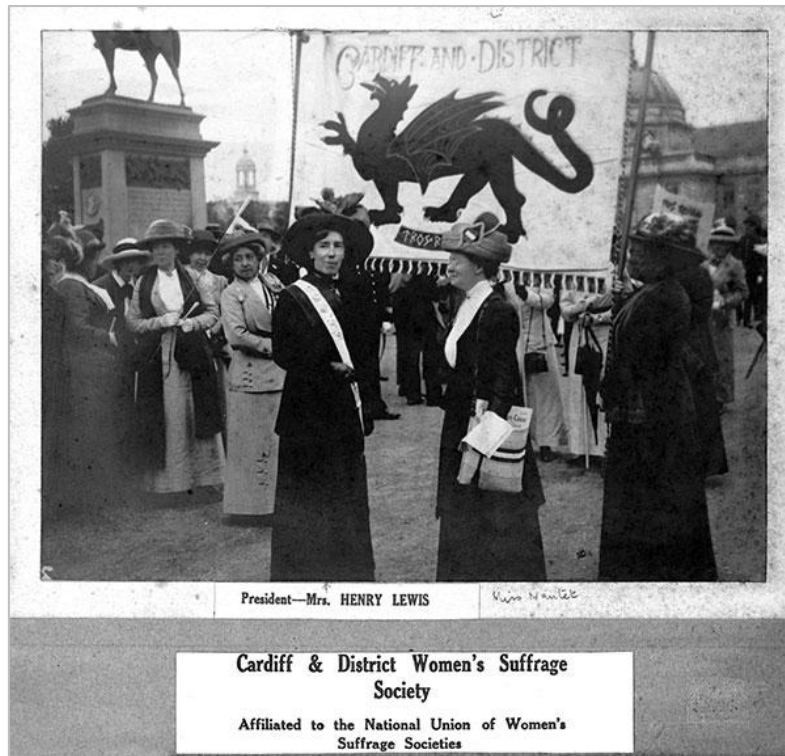
"Through the night of doubt and sorrow,
Onward go the pilgrim band."

From the church they went to their rendezvous in Cathays Park beside the new City Hall.



The colour theme was red, white and green (the colours of the suffragists as opposed to the purple, white and green of the suffragettes). There were about one hundred women headed by a banner announcing the pilgrimage, followed by the flaming Red Dragon banner of the South Wales contingent.

Heading the procession was Mrs Mabel Lewis (wife of Henry Lewis) of Greenmeadow, the President of the South Wales and Monmouthshire National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, a leading figure in the Cardiff Suffrage Society. She was from a landowning family with industrial interests and lived in a huge gothic mansion in Tongwynlais.



Many of the women were university students who wore their gowns to show that they were graduates or students. Others wore their nursing uniforms.

A shrill whistle gave the signal for the start and the band played *Men of Harlech* as the procession marched along Kingsway and past the castle, they could have avoided Queen Street but they took courage and were rewarded with interest and respect. From there they marched, drove or cycled to Newport, holding meetings along the way in small villages.

A large number of those who joined the procession on leaving Cardiff went only part of the distance to Newport. Amongst those was Mrs Mabel Lewis. The party arriving at the outskirts of Newport numbered about 50. On the way, they halted at Castleton and held a meeting there. They were joined at Newport by a considerable number of suffragettes who had at 6pm organised in King's Hill Field a mass meeting, which was largely attended.

"This (Monday) morning the pilgrimage will be resumed from Newport, en route for the Severn Tunnel. A halt will be made at Magor for a meeting. The party will take the train to negotiate the Severn, and march on to Bristol."

Western Mail, Monday, 14th July, pp6&8.

"Cripple Suffragette"



Rosa May Billinghurst was sadly called "the Cripple Suffragette". In a wheelchair after a childhood illness, she was shocked by the lives she saw in the local workhouse where she volunteered. Her wheelchair did not prevent her fervent espousal of the Suffragist cause, using it to "charge the aggressors at a rate of knots that carried all before her". The police would counter by roughly tipping her out of her chair, letting down her tyres and removing their valves so they could not be reinflated.

In December 1912, she was charged with damaging letterboxes in Deptford and was sentenced to eight months in prison. Subsequently she was forcibly fed in prison, becoming so ill that she was released after two weeks. After this spell in prison, she continued to support the WSPU's leadership and carried on campaigning by chaining herself to the railings of Buckingham Palace.

Source: <https://inews.co.uk/news/uk/rosa-may-billinghurst-disabled-suffragette-abused-police-force-fed-prison/>

OBITUARY — EWART JOHN KENVIN REES, D.L., M.A., (OXON)

E.J.K. Rees was born in 1922 in Aberaman, Aberdare. He was the son of Tom Rees, chief cashier with Powell Duffryn and later the NCB. The family lived at The Oaklands, Aberaman. Ken was educated at Christ College, Brecon and Jesus College, Oxford, where he studied Classics and Theology. He served during the 1939-45 war and held a commission in the South Wales Borderers. In later years, he was very proud of his regimental associations and kept in touch with his old comrades. His only son is a commissioned officer in the regular army.



On leaving the army, he entered the legal profession qualifying as a solicitor. He was a partner with Marchant Harries & Co of Aberdare handling the conveyancing side of the practice.

He gained a great knowledge of the history of Aberdare and district through the thousands of local deeds, documents and plans that passed through his hands during his professional life. With Dr Alistair Wilson, he founded the Cynon Valley History Society in 1971 and was its second Chairman (1973-4). Early committee meetings of the society were held at his offices in Station Street and Bute Chambers. A great contribution to the history of Aberdare was his comprehensive list of names of and notes on local inns and pubs; his sources for this included many old deeds which showed that many local dwelling houses had previously been pubs and beer houses. Unfortunately, he was not given credit for this work, which was much copied by others, during his lifetime.

In 1949, he married Vera, a daughter of Rev Dr Charles Rees, vicar of Aberaman; Ken and Vera had three children. His home at Aberdare was at Belmont Terrace, Aberaman. When he retired from the law, he moved to Nantgaredig, Carmarthenshire, returning to Aberdare often, especially on Remembrance Sundays where he led the parade at Aberaman British Legion, of which he was President for many years.

He was appointed a Deputy Lieutenant of the County of Glamorgan. E.J.K.R. was a Past President (1979-80) of Aberdare Rotary Club and a member of St David's Lodge, Aberdare. Ken died 21 December 2017 at Nantgaredig.

Geoffrey Evans

An article that Ken wrote about Aberdare's first solicitor Henry John Hollier will appear in the next issue.

The Cynon Valley in Spring 1918

In the spring of 1918, Britain and its allies were staring defeat in the face. The German Spring Offensive had started and it looked unstoppable. The editorial of the *Aberdare & Mountain Ash Express* of 13th April was terribly bleak: it stated that it was "The Gravest Crisis in our history since the Norman Conquest". Lloyd George moved the new Military Service Bill that proposed raising the age for compulsory National Service from 41 to 50 years — higher than in France, Italy or Germany. The future looked black; Britain was desperate for more soldiers. With Russia defeated all the German troops on the eastern front came over to the Western front. The *Express* stated on 2nd March that, "Mr Arthur Ransome, the special correspondent of the *Daily News* at Petrograd seems to possess greater facilities than other English correspondents for movement among the inner circles of the Bolsheviks". Little did the newspaper know that the author of *Swallows and Amazons* was married to Evgenia Shelepina, Trotsky's personal secretary. Things got even worse in the first week of March when there were air raids by Gotha machines over London and by Zeppelins over the eastern part of Yorkshire. Despite almost certain defeat looming cultural life went on in the valley as normal. Aberaman Operatic Society performed *The Mikado* at the Grand Theatre on the first week of April.

On Easter Monday, the 24th Annual Cottage Hospital Eisteddfod was held at the Grand Pavilion, Mountain Ash. The *Express* reported on 6th April "despite the attenuated train service, the increased train fares, and the food restrictions, crowds of visitors poured into the town by the first train available." The entries, numbering 750 broke all previous records. It was disappointing that only two choirs entered the Chief Choral Competition. Understandably, most men were away fighting in France. Briton Ferry came first with 97 points and Penrhiwceiber were second and last with 94 points. The lack of adult choirs was certainly made up by the number of juvenile choirs — thirty-three in one day! Yet the war could not be forgotten.

A touching incident happened just prior to the adjudication of the Chief Choral competition. The Rev. John Phillips requested that the vast audience stand and join in the singing the tune "Moab" as an expression of sympathy with the brave boys who were in France and elsewhere, as well as with the thousands of bereaved and anxious families".

Society News

Our Summer Trip this year is to Monmouth and Tintern Abbey on Saturday 7th July. The cost is £20 per person inclusive. This includes the cost of the coach, entrance and tour of the abbey led by a "monk."

Cynon Coal

There are 14 copies remaining of this magnum opus of the history of coal mining in our valley at the bargain price of £7.50 +p&p.

Please contact Haydn Williams email: haydnwilliams3@hotmail.com

Recent Historical Television Programmes

Nelson in his own words — A drama documentary, which shows that this naval hero had some not so great, attributes. BBC2 & 4.

Wellington: the Iron Duke Unmasked. Another absorbing drama documentary in which Richard E. Grant plays this other towering British hero who had several

Achilles heels. BBC4

Brunel: the Man who made Britain. The builder of railways, bridges and ships, and who worked 18-hour days. Channel 5. 2 parts.

Blitz: the Bombs that Changed Britain. BBC2 4 parts.

Historical Films

There are two about Churchill. The first is called *Churchill*. This historical drama portrays Winston Churchill, (Brian Cox), on the eve of D-Day, as he grapples with his fears that the invasion will be a disaster akin to the Battle of Gallipoli during WW1. The other film is *Darkest Hour* starring Oscar winning Gary Oldman in the title role. Clement Atlee stood should to shoulder with Churchill against those wanting to appease Hitler, but in the film he is airbrushed out. Do the Americans not like Socialists??

WNO Production

This Summer Welsh National Opera will be celebrating the life of pioneering Welsh suffragette and businesswoman Margaret Haig Thomas in its new all-female production *Rhondda Rips It Up!* Local venues: Cardiff, New Theatre – 14 June, 7:00pm; Brecon, Theatr Brycheiniog – 16th June, 7:00pm; Treorchy, Park & Dare – Wednesday 27th June, 7:30pm.

New Local History Books

Local historian Geoffrey Evans has written a book about Aberdare Park entitled *The People's Park*; it costs £5.00. The park celebrates the 150th anniversary of its opening next year. The book will be launched in early April.

Running errands in Hirwaun long ago by Glenys O’Gorman costs £1.

This booklet has fascinating reminiscences about Hirwaun in a bygone age and is on sale at Hirwaun library and local newsagents

Aberdare by Michael Yelton tells the story of the municipal trams and buses of Aberdare. The trams and trolley buses have two short chapters but 61 pages concentrate on the bus fleets that are described in detail, and the routes they traversed. The book has 97 pages that are packed with text, numerous photographs, tables and diagrams. It is published by Venture Publications, and costs £16. It is available from MDS books.

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.

Acknowledgements

Ryland Wallace for his fascinating lecture based on his book that he delivered at the Cynon Valley Museum.

The Museum of London for the photograph of the Welsh ladies in procession in London at the Coronation in 1911.

Cardiff Central Library and the National Museum of Wales for the photographs of the Great Pilgrimage at the City Hall, Cardiff.

© Published by The Cynon Valley History Society.

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Registered Charity No. 510143

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