

CYNON VALLEY HISTORY SOCIETY

CYMDEITHAS HANES CWM CYNON

PRESIDENT: THE LORD ABERDARE

VICE PRESIDENTS

MRS TYDFIL THOMAS O.B.E., J.P., M.A., ELFED BOWEN B.Sc.

www.cvhs.org.uk

HANES



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

ISSUE NUMBER 90

SPRING 2020

ANTI-CORONAVIRUS ISSUE

Dear Everybody, We are living in dark days with public houses, restaurants, cafes theatres, libraries and museums all closed. As I walk through Aberdare town centre, it looks like a ghost town with most premises shut up. Some of you may be self-isolating or hardly able to leave your house except to buy essentials or go for a walk.

So to bring some sunshine into your lives and cheer you up, we look at a local woman who had poverty-stricken Irish parents who rose to become Chairman of Aberdare Urban District Council — Ann Nora Jenkins; a man who worked down a Cwmaman coal mine who rose to win a National Eisteddfod medal for poetry, a bare knuckle boxer who had a lovely tenor voice, a book review and a look back at an Open Day at the Cynon Valley Museum.

Happy Reading! May we all soon be able to get out and about!

Ann Nora Jenkins (née Julian)

Every Cynon valley historian has heard of Florence Rose Davies the first woman Glamorgan County Councillor from this valley, but if you mentioned the name of Ann Nora Jenkins you would receive a blank stare, yet she became the first woman Chairman of Aberdare Urban District Council.

Her father was Michael Julian, (b. 1846), an Irish immigrant from Cork who worked in Hirwaun, as a shoemaker.

Her mother was Catherine Keaton, (b. 1848), also from Cork who came over to Wales after the Irish potato famine. Their eldest child was Ann Nora who was born in Hirwaun on 26th November, 1863. Later, in 1871, they lived in 5 Davies Row, Trecynon with five more children.



By 1883 she had completed a five-year apprenticeship as a pupil teacher at the Hirwaun Joint Girls School. Her reference said of her that, "She is thoroughly honest and is conscientious in her work. She has a good voice and can sing well." After spending her sixth year at a Cwmaman school she took charge of the school at Ystradfellte, and while she was there, she met William Gibbs Jenkins, a railwayman. Aged 21, she married William, who was 24 in 1884. Their first home was at Griffithstown near Pontypool. They were instrumental in starting a movement to build an Anglican church there — Mrs Jenkins

played the organ in the church. They left Griffithstown when William was promoted to yard foreman at Aberdare and in 1891, he was again promoted to stationmaster at Trecynon. There she quickly became active in the religious life of the town and she returned to the teaching profession. After serving nine years as an uncertified teacher at St Fagan's schools, she passed her Teachers' Exams and became an elementary school teacher. When the local Education authority dismissed all married women teachers, she took charge of a private school with much success.

She took a prominent part in the politics of the National Union of Teachers, (NUT), being the chairwoman of the local branch.

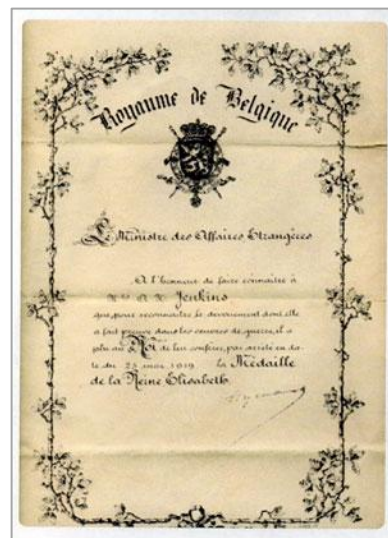
She was a staunch churchwoman and served on the Diocesan conferences. She possessed a broad religious outlook and often preached in Nonconformist pulpits.

From 1910 to 1922, she was a member of the Merthyr Board of Guardians for the Llwydcoed ward.

Within three weeks of the first shot being fired in World War 1, she had organised a Ladies Relief Committee, of which she was the chairman throughout the War. With Mrs Mander of Glanynys, she organised the fund to completely equip eight cottages in Llwydcoed that were used to house Belgian refugees. She was also largely responsible later for securing suitable work in different parts of the country for the 50 Belgian refugees who came to the valley. In 1919 she was rewarded by being awarded the Queen Elisabeth of Belgium Medal for her exceptional services to the suffering Belgian people. The following year, Britain also recognised these services with the award of an O.B.E.



The Queen Elisabeth of Belgium Medal



The Award Certificate

This brought her to the notice of the populace, so it was not surprising that in 1919 she took a further step in politics becoming a candidate for the Llwydcoed ward of Aberdare Urban District Council. "In a well-attended meeting to support her candidature, she stated that she had been all her life a worker, she considered she had a perfect right to be called a Labour woman. Foremost on her programme were the education of our children and health and housing". (Aberdare Leader 5th April, 1919). There were three candidates for the seats: David Richard Llewellyn of Fairfield House polled 2133 votes, Nora received 1501 votes, they were elected, Isaac Edwards of Cwmdare received 727 votes and he was unsuccessful.

In the following issue, she wrote a public letter in the *Leader* thanking the electorate for her success in the polls:

"Please accept my sincerest thanks for the splendid support you have given me in the

election in spite of the scurrilous attack upon me by Mr John Prowle and the defeated candidate. It is gratifying to know that Messrs Prowle and Edwards are not the deciding factors in an election for this Ward”.

Prowle was a fellow member of the Merthyr Board of Guardians and the chairman of the Assessment Committee of that board.

Concerning women entering the local political arena, Mrs Maria Richards stood for a seat in 1914 in the Town Ward but was unsuccessful and Florence Rose Davies became a councillor in AUDC in 1920 so Nora pipped her by a year!

In 1922, 1925 and 1928 she was re-elected but in 1934 she was narrowly defeated. There must be a story behind that, but as Aberdare library is closed, I am unable to find it!

Nora and William led a very happy married life, living at Station House, Trecynon, where they had one son: Phillip and one daughter Harriett Catherine.

William, her husband sadly died in 1932.

Nora occupied many positions of authority: she was a Justice of the Peace, a governor of Aberdare County School, and a Serving Sister of the Order of St John. She opened Hirwaun library on 23rd November, 1939 and opened a new boy's school in Hirwaun.

She died peacefully at her house Bod-Awelon, Brecon Road, Hirwaun on 5th December, 1942 aged 79 years and was buried at St Fagan's churchyard.

From poverty, she became a beacon in her community, which she served with the utmost diligence.

Sources Merthyr Express, 5th April, 1924.

I would like to thank Mrs Carol Powell, a relative of Nora, who gave me much information about her, and to Mr Alun Williams who found for me the 1919 election results.

“Dan Mountain Ash”: Famous Mountain Fighter

Usually it was the big men who won these fights but Cwmbach produced a fighter, who although less than five feet in height defeated all comers in over 200 mountain fights locally. He was Mr Daniel Davies, better known as “Dan Mountain Ash.” He worked for many years as a collier at Penrikyber Colliery.

The diminutive “Dan” with gnarled hands and scarred face was generally pitted against weightier opponents — several full heavyweights! — and fought with a ferocity rarely excelled in the rings of today.

In those days the “purse” was a mere pittance, often merely a few drinks, yet on many occasions the hard fought battle went over 20 or 30 rounds, and even more before the victor was declared. In all his fights, the highest sum he won was a mere £70!

Indicating a scar over his left eye, Dan told me of the blow that had caused it — almost blinded him — but handicapped as he was, he continued fighting, and defeated his heavier opponent.

Mr Davies spoke in a quiet cultured manner and was a prolific reader of “the classics” both poetry and prose, and his quotations from them were delightful. He was also the possessor of a good tenor voice, had sung in local male and mixed choirs and was always keenly critical of musical renditions.

His end came with unexpected suddenness as a result of a seizure that overcame him at his house in Thomas Street, Miskin. He died aged 77 years, [which is quite amazing of a man who had boxed in 200 fights — Ed.]

Source: *Aberdare Leader* 17th August, 1935

The Poet "Dewi Llwyd," (David Lloyd)

From a transcript of an article about David Lloyd from the *Aberdare Leader* of 31st August, 1957.

Had it not been for his niece and a friend, it is highly probable that his widely acclaimed National Eisteddfod prize-winning poem at Llangefni by Dewi Llwyd, Cwmaman, would never have been entered! Even so, it arrived with only three days to spare.

Dewi Llwyd, of course is the bardic name of one of the most illustrious residents of "Poets Corner", Cwmaman, Mr David Lloyd, 13 Milton Street. So with his very first National Eisteddfod entry, by winning the prize for the best colloquial poem, Mr Lloyd entered the realms of the truly great national poets, and this at the age of 77!

Born in Cwmystwyth, David Lloyd came to Cwmaman at the age of two and lived there ever since. He worked mostly underground for over 50 years, mostly at Cwmneol Colliery, retiring only when the pit closed down in 1949. He was then, of course 70 years of age, but he admitted that he would have liked to have carried on a little longer. He is married, and he and his wife Elizabeth have a son Islwyn.

David Lloyd has been interested in poetry since early life.

He has been writing poems since he was quite young and has had many successes. He won the Aberdare Rotary Club Cup in the poem competition at the O.A.P. Eisteddfod four times. Among his most treasured possessions is a miniature eisteddfod chair, an exact copy of the Bardic chair, which he won at Hebron, Aberaman, with a poem on the subject of "Unemployment"

He has written hymns, essays and humorous songs as well. He is, by the way, an elder of the Soar Welsh Presbyterian Church, and has been a lay-preacher for 30 years.

Of his latest success, he says that he took the theme of his poem-"Thanksgiving day" from the 1904 revival. Fifteen poems were entered in the colloquial poem competition, and this was his very first entry in the "National", although he is an old eisteddfodwr and recalls always getting excited as a boy when eisteddfod-time came round.

"I just fell in love with the subject of this poem", he says. "I went right through the 1904 revival myself and the poem is based on my own experiences as well as what I have seen in other poems. It's all facts!" The poem consists of 212 lines.

He was unable to say just how long the poem took him to write. He suffers from a bad chest and cannot sleep well at night. He did most of his writing during his sleepless hours. After it had been finished it was typed, and then he became very ill and was unable to "look for the commas and semicolons". However, his niece and a friend decided to send it in just in time and it arrived for consideration only three days before the closing date, with the success that we all know.

Society member D.L. Davies comments on the newspaper article:

The author of the piece in the *Aberdare Leader*, above, was without doubt drawing very deeply on the sweet waters of our parish well when he said that David Lloyd had "entered the realms of the truly great national poets... at the age of 77" on the back of a winning colloquial poem at the National Eisteddfod of Wales at Llangefni in 1957.

The poem is not a "great" poem or even a particularly original one in content or expression. However, it doesn't distract from the achievement of a hard-pressed collier firstly in aspiring to write poetry at all, and secondly in having reached a sufficient, (if not

“great”), standard to have won a prize in a wider literary competition. This aspiration and its result, rather than the quality of the poem, was David Lloyd’s real achievement.

Lloyd also wrote an extended essay in Welsh on the history Cwmaman for the village eisteddfod held in August 1912. It would have been held in all probability at the local Miners’ Hall & Institute. Almost certainly, the eisteddfod would have been held in support of a scheme to build a cottage hospital at Godreman that took root some ten years before among the miners of Cwmaman. This scheme was subsequently overtaken by a wider proposal to establish at Abernant House a general hospital for the entire Aberdare district. Rather than compete with this wider scheme, the miners’ hospital committee at Cwmaman agreed to join it and made over their funds to further that aim. Lloyd’s essay was published with the title ‘Hanes Cwmaman’ the following year, 1913, as a paperbound, booklet. It remains largely untranslated – except poorly in parts.

The Lost Jewish Heritage of Rhondda Cynon Tâf

On 29th February, there was an Open Day about our Lost Jewish Heritage at the Cynon Valley Museum.

Stanley Soffa was the speaker and described the work of David Hart who was the leading Jew in Aberdare. Hart was influential in starting the synagogue in his house at 19A Seymour Street in 1887.

The Chief Rabbi visited Aberdare on 25th May 1894. “He proceeded at once to the residence of Mr. David Hart, where the Jews in the district meet on Sabbath for worship.” He was met by Mr Morris Jacobs, President of the congregation and a large number of resident Jews.

Sadly a few months later on 12th, July David Hart died at his residence there.

The synagogue held its last service in 1957. Mr Soffa brought good news that he and his associates have bought the synagogue in Merthyr Tydfil, and they hope to renovate it and open it as a Jewish Heritage Centre.

There were many Jews in the valley; they started small businesses including that of Morris Jacobs an Outfitter and Victor Freed initially in the furnishing business.



On the left Stanley Soffa with the Hebrew alphabet, and right, with other exhibits that were shown after the lecture

After the lecture, many Jewish related objects in the Museum’s collection were on display. There was also an exhibition about the Jews of South Wales, and some people were taught how to write their names in Hebrew.

Despite the wet and windy weather, the Open Day was well attended, but it is a matter of great disappointment that the museum will be closed until the Coronavirus pandemic is over.

SOCIETY NEWS

Regrettably, the lectures of March to June, 2020, have been cancelled because of the Coronavirus pandemic. We hope that our AGM will take place in September and that the pandemic will be over by then.

It has been decided that all our future meetings will take place at the Cynon Valley Museum, (near Tesco), from September 2020 onwards starting at the normal time of 7.15pm.

LECTURES 2020/2021

| Date | Speaker | Topic |
|--------------|---------------------------------|---|
| 2020 | | |
| 17 September | A.G.M. followed by Hywel Davies | Disestablishment of the Church in Wales |
| 15 October | Pat Evans | Musical Memories |
| 19 November | Dean Powell | William Price |
| 17 December | Geoff Evans | Larger Houses of the Cynon Valley |
| 2021 | | |
| 21 January | William Cowper | National Service |
| 18 February | Daryl Leeworthy | Elaine Morgan |
| 18 March | Mike Jones | Neath and Tennant Canal |
| 15 April | Anne Watts | David Lloyd George |
| 20 May | Rosemary Scaddon | Historic Llandaff |
| 17 June | 50th Anniversary Celebrations | |

LOCAL INTEREST BOOKS

- One of our members Rev. J. Eric Jones has written a book "Best Foot Forward" which is a light-hearted account of his life as a Unitarian minister who has served in the Cynon valley for almost 60 years.

He was the minister at Highland Place Church in Aberdare from 1962 until his retirement in 2003. In addition, he was the minister at Hen Dy Cwrdd, Trecynon until it closed in 1996.

The book is priced £6.95 and is available from the author: email eric.anne.jones@gmail.com

- Celia Morgan has written a book entitled The Church of St. Cynog, Penderyn that includes many colour photographs. It is priced £4.00 and is available from her via email:

siscelia.morgan@btinternet.com

Book Review: 'Best Foot Forward – A Journey' (2020): J Eric Jones. South East Wales Unitarian Society.

104 pages and selected bibliography. £6.95.

Few who take it upon themselves to review a new publication will have had the book in question delivered to the door and paid for with cash hidden under a milk-bottle. Such are the times we live in. It may be strange too, that a biography of a Unitarian minister should be reviewed by a decidedly Trinitarian priest of the Church in Wales. Yet the Rev. J Eric Jones, who came to Aberdare as a young minister in September 1962 and has remained here since, is no ordinary townsman.

The title of Eric's short biography, (it has only 98 pages of text, including many illustrations), is echoed in the headings of some of its 27 chapters e.g. 'First Steps', 'Stepping Out', 'Some unsteady Steps' etc. His was a Welsh-speaking, rural up-bringing on Cwmllydan farm, near the village of Cribyn in Cardiganshire. The nearest town was Lampeter and with limited means of transport and communication, the local community displayed all the riches of economic, social and cultural self-sufficiency. Cooperation was key to survival – and this obtained, too, in the community's religious life. Church and chapel cooperated rather than competed. Eric's later non-judgemental ecumenism and social engagement are to be viewed as the product of this background.

In turn, he takes us through the local experience of accommodating English monoglot evacuees in wartime, on to his not all-together happy schooling, his involvement with the Young Farmers Club, his tenuous connection, at that time, with the family Unitarian chapel in Cribyn, to his decision to seek ordination. Eric's ministerial training began in 1958 when he entered the Presbyterian College in Carmarthen. Interestingly, one of his tutors there was D.P. Roberts, (1884–1966), who travelled from Llwydcoed to Carmarthen to fulfil his duties each week. After a further period of study at Cardiff University, where he graduated in Welsh, Eric accepted a call to succeed the Rev Jacob Davies at Hen Dy Cwrdd, Trecynon and Highland Place, Monk St.

We're introduced to some of the characters with whom Eric worked at this time. At Hen Dy Cwrdd we meet Mrs Rev E.R. Dennis and her son Raymond, the 5 formidable Howells sisters, the local historian, W.W. Price, D.T. Williams, manager of the local Cooperative Society and Lillian Davies, aunt of Wales' most memorable folk/pop singer, Dafydd Iwan. At Highland Place the family of J. L Rowlands, co-founder of the Aberdare Leader in 1902 continued a loyal membership, (his daughter, Marion, Abernant Rd, celebrated her 100 birthday in March 2020: congratulations!). Highland Place was also the home church of Anne, whom Eric married in 1970. This year Eric and Anne celebrated their Golden Wedding Anniversary, albeit in enforced isolation. (Their two sons, Gwion and Dyfan, and 5 grandchildren join with many others in congratulating them!) Later on Eric was to add West Grove church, in Cardiff to his care, (1971), to be followed by the church at Cefncoed-y-Cymer, (1999).

Within the denomination generally, Eric's talents and abilities were put to good use. From 1965–2011 he served as Secretary to the Welsh Department of the Unitarian General Assembly and in 1989 he became president of the Unitarian Assembly. For 40 years, Eric also represented the denomination on the committee of the Pantyfedwen Trust.

When Eric first arrived in Aberdare, he tells us that there were at least 20 nonconformist ministers in the town, together with some 10 Anglican clergy. Not all, however, extended the ready hand of fellowship. As a Unitarian minister, he was out on a limb theologically, and some clergy did not flinch from making that evident. It would have been interesting to have been provided with greater detail on this matter. Apart from not being invited to join the ministerial fellowship that existed, how else was hostility manifested? Who were the exceptions? Perhaps such things are best left undisturbed as they did little to confine Eric's work in the community. Building on his experience of youth work within his own denomination, Eric, upon arriving in Aberdare, joined a project providing holidays for needy children in the locality, and eventually became chair of the organising committee. He served as Governor of five different local schools, as well as twice serving as chaplain to the local Mayor, (as well as to the Mayor of Merthyr Tydfil on another occasion). Periods of supply teaching followed, notably at Aberdare Girls Grammar, (later comprehensive), School, where Anne also taught Maths.

From early days, Eric had competed as a soloist in local eisteddfodau. This musical interest continued in Highland Place and as a member of the Trecynon-based Ebeneser Choral Society. The book also charts Eric's work on behalf of Welsh Medium Education, locally and on a national level as Chair of 'Rhieni Dros Addysg Gymraeg,' (RHAG). In

1987, he became the founder editor of 'Clochdar', the Welsh-language community newspaper for the Cynon Valley. One activity that bridged Eric's commitment, both to his denomination and to the cause of the Welsh language, was his support for the restored Unitarian chapel at St Fagan's Folk Museum. From 1961–2015 he was responsible for organising the bi-annual services held there. Other commitments continued, including serving the religious broadcasting unit of the BBC, preaching engagements within and without his own denomination, and a steady request for his valued services at times of bereavement. In 2005, to general acclaim, Eric was invited to join the Gorsedd of Bards for his contribution to the local community in Aberdare.

A few constructive criticisms may be offered. The style of the book is conversationalist and often humorous, which makes for easy reading; but sometimes the narrative darts backward and forward confusingly. Having so many chapters in such a short book perhaps discourages a more forensic chronology. Also, while, for posterity's sake, I'm sure all the ministers, students, chairmen, secretaries and treasurers of the denomination deserve to be named. I, for one, would have valued greater detail on the recent social and religious life of Aberdare. Nobody is better placed than Eric to provide this; perhaps we are to await a second volume of recollections. It was strange, too, that while naming Jacob Davies and Lillian Davies as leading supporters of the campaign to establish Aberdare Welsh Primary School in 1949, no mention is made of the founding headmaster, Idwal Rees, whose influence remains stronger than that of either. Again, it would have been good to learn more about Eric's student friends at Cardiff, who included Daniel Mullins, the future RC Bishop of Menevia (1987–2001). Finally, a word about the book's binding. Already, after a few days of researching and cross-referencing, its pages are dangerously loose. If copies are obtained by the local library, as they surely should be, their shelf life is likely to be a matter of concern.

Eric is to be warmly thanked for his labours – both in producing this volume of memories and for the range of activities which provide their substance.

Hywel J. Davies

Feedback

I would be grateful for feedback about any articles in this issue. Also, articles on any subject about our valley's history for possible publication are most welcome.

© Published by The Cynon Valley History Society.

www.cvhs.org.uk

Edited by Steven Graham, 7 Hazel Drive, Aberdare, CF44 8DB

Tel: 07779 863611

E-mail: sgraham10@hotmail.com

E-bost: sgraham10@hotmail.com

Registered Charity No. 510143

Printed by Cynon Valley Museum, Depot Road, Aberdare: 01685 886729