

CYNON VALLEY HISTORY SOCIETY

CYMDEITHAS HANES CWM CYNON

PRESIDENT: THE LORD ABERDARE

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

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Welcome to Issue 101.

In this newsletter there is an obituary of Phyllis Brace, a well-known musician of this valley. Continuing on the musical theme there is an article about the Aberaman Institute Amateur Operatic Society. Jean John continues her memories about her happy School days. This winter many people are struggling to pay their ever-increasing bills for everything including petrol, gas, electricity and food. Despite this, we are, overall, better off than the local people of 1922, the period that is the subject of the first article in this newsletter.

Nevertheless,

The Members of the Committee send all our readers Best Wishes for a Happy Christmas and a Healthy 2023!

Christmas and New Year Events from the Aberdare Leader of 1922/23

A Cantata and a concert

The Cantata "Princess Tiny Tot" was performed by the children of Abercwmboui Wesleyan Mission. The characters, some of whom were Little Bo-Peep, Humpty-Dumpty, Little Jack Horner, Red Riding Hood, Father Christmas and Five little pigs. [It must have been a delight to have seen it. Ed.]

On Boxing Day, an excellent concert was held at Aberdare Hospital. Mr Illtyd Hopkins, President of the Hospital committee, was the Chairman. There was an orchestra of seven and there were fourteen items.

Eisteddfodau

There were many eisteddfodau held during this period

At the recent Aberaman Eisteddfod, Cwmbach and Trecynon Male Voice choirs won equal first prize. The winning conductors Mr Herbert Davies and Mr T.J. Stephens were presented with their gold medals.

Hirwaun Christmas Eisteddfodau

Tabernacle Welsh Congregational Chapel had a successful competitive meeting and the standard of the entries surpassed former results.

The Chair Eisteddfod held under the auspices of Cymrodorion Plant was held at Ramoth Baptist Chapel on New Year's Day. It attracted numerous competitors from the whole of the valley.

Football

Proposed Football Club Amalgamation.

At a meeting held at Aberdare Higher Standard School, supporters of Aberdare Football Club stated they had resolved to amalgamate with Aberaman Football Club.

Owing to "Someone having blundered", as the chairman Mr I Davies expressed it, the meeting commenced in the playground because the school was closed. The Chairman said he had attended so many committee meetings lately that he was getting tired of football matters, but he believed they were turning the corner, and their work was bearing fruit.

The Cenotaph

There was a public meeting at the United Services Club, Wind Street to decide whether the Cenotaph should be placed in Victoria Square or in Aberdare Park. After a lively discussion, it was decided the Cenotaph should be placed in Victoria Square.

The Miner's Christmas Eve by Ben Evans of Aberaman

Some extracts from his poem:

'Twas Christmas Eve in the "Workhouse",
The cages were running fast
Raising men from the humid Hades,
To face a wintry blast;
And with the others Shon Dafis went
To get his weekly pay,
For working in the deep dark mine
To keep the wolf at bay.

Shon's little wife was waiting,
In the hovel, he called his house,
For the "pay" her man was about to bring,
But in his face was a fearsome gloom,
For Shoni's pay was short that day (about a pound)
Of the "minimum" wages due.

Then in the quiet of the hearth
Shon told her how things stood,
And banished were the dreams of the season's
cheer
They'd hardly enough for food.

(When the children had gone to bed, Shon & his
wife went out and bought some toys for their
children)

Next morning when the children woke,
Their stockings to search with glee
It gladdened their parents' hearts to hear,
"Look what Santa has left for me!"

"The Messiah" at Cwmaman

The Cwmaman Public Hall was on Christmas Night the Mecca of practically all the music lovers of the district, when the 23rd annual performance of the Choral Society took place. This organisation is regarded as one of the premier ones of its kind in Wales. Despite the unfavourable weather, there was a crowded assembly who greatly enjoyed the oratorio "The Messiah". A massed choir of 200 voices, assisted by a high-class orchestra of 25 performers, was further augmented by four of the leading artistes of the Principality including Tenor, Mr D.L. Davies of Nantyffyllon (not Llwydcoed!).

Aberdare's New Year

At Aberdare, the New Year was ushered in the usual way. Large crowds lined the streets to await the chiming of midnight and as soon as the hooters gave the signal that the year 1923 had dawned, the church bells pealed forth merrily, while children ran along the streets shouting into letterboxes, "A Happy New Year and please give us a New Year's gift."

Aberdare Tramways Employees Strike

The workers refused to work on Sundays because the Council refused to pay them time and a half for working on Sundays. Instead the Council paid them time and a quarter, which rate they were receiving since October.

The reason for the council's decision was that it was losing £10,000 per year on the tramway system.

Grand Christmas Ball at Mountain Ash

A Grand Christmas Ball was held at the Drill Hall, Mountain Ash, where there was a distinguished gathering. Mr Bumford Griffiths' orchestra was in attendance.

Future Hopes Dashed

1922 was an exciting year for the world: Howard Carter discovered of Tutankhamun's nearly intact tomb in the Valley of the Kings. The BBC was founded in that year.

Sadly, for the majority of people in the valley they could not afford to buy a wireless or go to any balls or concerts, as they were so poor.

In 1922 there were one and a half million unemployed in Britain.

The year before, the government handed back the coal mines to the owners who proceeded to cut wages by up to half and increased the hours of work by one hour without payment, so the miners were poverty-stricken.

A correspondent wrote about Mountain Ash Matters in the Aberdare Leader on 6th January 1923: "We have buried 1922 and all its sorrows, sicknesses and unemployment with a fervent hope that the resurrection will only be deferred eternally.

The past year has been one of the most critical in the history of Mountain Ash for the whole community is dependent upon the coal industry.

The rainbow has already appeared in the drizzle and a splendid future emerges from the grave of 1922. One feature of the brighter outlook is the splendid optimism shown by the traders of Oxford Street with their tempting shops."

(Sadly, the rainbow and splendid future would evaporate, and things would get far worse than that with the Great Depression waiting in the wings Ed.)

Phyllis Brace: A Lifetime of Music in the Cynon Valley



Phyllis Brace

Another of the Llwydcoed matriarchs has sadly passed away. Haulwen Marsh died last year and now regrettably, in October, we also lost Mrs Phyllis Brace.

Phyllis Jones (as she was) was born in Harris Terrace, Penrhiwceiber in 1930, the daughter of Sid and Doris Jones. She had a brother Leslie whom she adored. Her childhood was happy, and she went to Mountain Ash Grammar School. The school competed in the 1946 National Eisteddfod that took place in the town. She was a member of the school chamber group and school orchestra which won second prize.

Music played a huge part in Phyllis's life: at University College of Wales, Aberystwyth; she joined the madrigal group where she met Edwin Brace; they fell in love and later would marry. They would probably have married on Saturday 11th August 1956 but there was a problem. The National Eisteddfod was being held at Aberdare then and Phyllis and Edwin were both singing on the evening of the concert in Handel's Messiah which was being sung in Welsh, so they got married on the following Monday. Music had to come first!

They moved back to Penrhiwceiber and bought a house in Morris Avenue, just a street away from her birthplace. Later they moved to up-market Llwydcoed where they lived at 2 Church Avenue and later moved to No. 15, where they spent the rest of their lives. They had two daughters Kathryn and Elizabeth, and a son Richard.

She taught music at Mountain Ash Comprehensive School and later became the Head of Music. She was four feet ten and a half inches tall and was nicknamed "Mighty Mouse" by some of the pupils but what she lacked in height she more than made up in strength of character and her encyclopaedic knowledge of music.

She was a founder member of the Mountain Ash and District Choral Society and rose to become its conductor in 1972, and later its President. In 1991, she handed the baton over to Andrew Badham. That was a sad year for her as Edwin, her dear husband, died aged 58.

This affected her deeply but her strong Christian faith, her family and friends rallied gave her immense support.

She was the organist at St James Church, Llwydcoed for 27 years, taking over from Edwin who had played it for the previous 32 years.

Music was not her only interest, she was a member of the U3A, the Soroptimists and the Daffodil Festival held at Green Street Chapel every year.

Her last public appearance was at the Annual Dinner of her beloved Mountain Ash Choral Society last September. Despite being seriously ill, but with grit and determination, she came to say goodbye to her beloved choristers. She died at home a month later on 23rd October.

Phyllis was dearly loved by many people as was seen by the packed congregations at her funeral on 8th November at her home church and at Llwydcoed Crematorium.

I am grateful to Phyllis's daughter Kathryn for contributing information about her mother.

Memories of Aberdare Girls County School, (1942–1949), Part Two by Jean John, née Buxton.

It was the school plays that excited me when I was higher up the school.

There was a strong tradition of drama at the school and alternate years would see a production at the Coliseum in Trecynon. Other years there would be an Inter-house Eisteddfod where the competition to win was uppermost. Alafon won the shield for overall marks and as House Captain I had to walk on stage to collect the trophy; I was so proud.

I was fortunate to take part in two school plays and the excitement, fun and theatrical experience was tremendous. It meant long hours of rehearsals after school and walking home in the dark, but I built up my self-confidence, had more self-discipline and had an outlet for my creativity because of it.

There was a bond of friendship established within the cast and everyone looked out for one another. When I was Tony Lumpkin in "She stoops to Conquer" by Oliver Goldsmith, I had to swivel around on a gate-legged tabletop in a manoeuvre to get to the back of the stage. Little did I know that one leg of the table had not been properly secured and I was about to make a catastrophic landing on stage with the table on top of me. Luckily, my fellow actors had seen my predicament and moved swiftly to steady the table. Marjorie Jones (Ginger) carried on polishing glasses and placing them on a tray as though nothing had happened until calm was restored on centre stage. Team spirit and resourcefulness were part of the character building hidden in the curriculum.



I Have Five Daughters, 1948. Jean is in the back row, second from the left.

There was an amusing incident when Miss Rees didn't get the full response she wanted when Kathy Marsden as Mrs Bennett in 'I Have Five Daughters', an adaptation of Jane Austen's 'Pride and Prejudice', had to sniff the fake smelling salts. Unbeknown to poor Kathy, Miss Rees substituted real smelling salts and told her to take a good sniff. Kathy couldn't stop coughing, but Miss Rees had made her point and got the reaction she needed. We wondered what other tricks were in store, but it achieved an excellent review in the 'Aberdare Leader'. I loved playing Lady Catherine de Burgh who was a domineering aristocrat.

We revelled in receiving the professional, huge wicker hamper full of period costumes and trying on wigs and costumes for the first time. I would not have missed it for the world!

Dr Dorothy Graham was the Headmistress in my time, and she must have had a hard time following in the footsteps of the icon Miss Cook, who came before her. There was a compassionate side to her that not everyone saw, and it was revealed to me when I was in hospital feeling sorry for myself after a serious attack of peritonitis. Miss Graham had trekked up the long drive to Kenshole Ward (at Aberdare Hospital) to see me and bring me a book and good wishes for a speedy recovery. This was over and above her normal duties and she gained great respect as she fostered that caring ethos for years to come.

There was not a great deal of contact with the Boys' School in the early years of my school days, but this improved when Mr Gwilym Ambrose became the Headmaster there. We were even allowed, as a huge concession, to have a joint school ballroom dancing class. If we knew that the boys had a rugby match or were practising on their playing fields in Robertstown, we'd hotfoot it up the old tramroad to watch them play and cheer on the sidelines. We kept these excursions very quiet, though I suspect the staff knew all about them.

I matriculated in 1948 after which I left to go to St. Mary's College, Cheltenham, to train as a teacher.

(Jean married Russell John in 1953. They wrote two books about Llwydcoed: 'Grey Trees', Jean's childhood memories of Llwydcoed; and 'Llwydcoed in old photographs'.)

Jean now lives in Bristol.

Aberaman Institute Amateur Operatic Society, 1907–1992 **by Rod Jenkins**

Formed in 1907, the Society's first production was "The Mikado", which was performed at the newly opened Grand Theatre, Aberaman in December 1908 under the baton of the late Mr T.J. Phillips. The title role of "The Mikado" was played by Mr David Rowlands, credited to be the youngest ever to fill that role.

This started a long journey for Cynon Valley's oldest amateur theatre during a period where many amateur dramatic as well as musical societies failed to survive. Scarcely without a break, despite World Wars, Depressions and financial worries the Society continued to produce well-known and difficult works for the people of the Cynon Valley and further afield to enjoy.

Throughout the Society's first 65 years, almost all the works were produced in the same hall which had been generously provided each year by the Aberaman Hall and Institute Committee.



Aberaman Institute Amateur Operatic Society, The Mikado, 1908

Following an accident to Mr Phillips in 1909, the baton was taken over by Mr E.R. Baker who went on to fulfil the role for the next 30 years until his retirement after the 1939 production of "Desert Wings", where he was given life membership of the Society.

Despite the 1914–1918 war and the Depression years of the 1920s and 1930s, the Society continued to function having to overcome great financial difficulties and loss of members who moved away in search of employment. Following the production of "Our Miss Gibbs" in 1930 production ceased for two years while the Grand Theatre was renovated and redecorated.

"The Mikado" was revived to restart production in 1933, which led to one of the finest periods of the Society's history between 1934-1939 with outstanding successes with "The New Moon", "Goodnight Vienna", "Desert Wings" and "Nina Rosa".

Yet one of the greatest successes attained by the Society under Mr Baker's direction and musical genius was that of the "Desert Song" in March 1936, produced by Mr D.J. Davies and dancing mistress Miss Ida Jones. The show really whetted the musical appetite of the people of the Cynon Valley because there was a complete sell out for the six evening shows and matinees which thrilled over 7,000 people. On the Monday night, nearly 3,000 people had gathered for one and a half hours before the doors had even opened and 1,000 were turned away. As the demand was so great, performances were repeated in November for six nights.

In 1940, the outbreak of World War 2 again temporarily halted production but in 1946, the Society restarted production when "Katinka" was performed under the baton of Mr Ken Bishop.

The next few years saw a resurgence of success with "Maritza" in 1947, and in 1948 by Ivor Novello's "Glamorous Nights". Works new to the local stage followed in subsequent years were: "Veronique", "Masquerade", "Romany Maid" and in 1952 "Waltz Time". Other works soon followed with equal success. The 1953 production of "Carissima" was memorable for the excellent T.V. scene, (which captivated the audiences because T.V. as a medium of entertainment had yet to come into many peoples' homes). "Pink Champagne", and "Brigadoon" produced by Mr C.L.Lewis, with Musical Director Mr D.E.Davies, and accompanist Mr Mansel Crosby soon followed.

1956 saw the revival of "Tom Jones", previously played in 1912, and the following year saw the Society reach its 50th Jubilee year with the production of "Land of Smiles".

The 1960s was a period of great musicals with Bizet's "Passion Flower" based on the story of Carmen, and in 1961 with a first production of "Carousel", by Rogers and Hammerstein. In 1964, the Society performed the last of the great musicals by Ivor Novello, the Welsh premiere of "The Valley of Song".

The last years of the 1960s continued with successful productions of "New Moon", "The Lisbon Story", "Waltz Time", and in 1968 Lehar's "Merry Window". The 1960s ended with a production of "Summer Song" a story based on the life of Anton Dvorak who wrote the New World Symphony.



Aberaman Operatic Society cast of "Camelot", 1972

The 1970s saw great turbulence and change, following productions of "Half a Sixpence" and "The Boyfriend", the 1972 production of "Camelot" was to be the last performance on the stage of the Grand Theatre Aberaman, as the hall was turned over to Bingo. The Coliseum at Trecynon became the new home but created new financial pressures due to the higher rates for the use of the venue. The first production at the Coliseum was "Hello Dolly" in 1973, which was a huge success and in 1975 the operetta "La Pericole", the nearest thing to Grand Opera, was performed.

Further finance boosting productions continued with "The Vagabond King" in 1976, and "The White Horse Inn" in 1977, produced by Mr Estyn Crew and under the baton of Mr Iorwerth Harris, a newcomer to the Society. The evergreen "Showboat" and "Passion Flower" saw out the 1970s.

"Summer Song" started the 1980s, produced by Mrs Violet Lloyd, was followed by "The Count of Luxemburg". For the Society's 75th Jubilee in 1982, the 50th Jubilee production of "The Land of Smiles" was reprised. In 1986 the Society returned to the now refurbished Grand Theatre with a production of "Viva Mexico" but returned to the Coliseum celebrating 84 years of performing before disbanding in 1992 with a final production of "The Sound of Music".

The number of local people who contributed without reward to the successes of the Society are too numerous to mention but included: producers, conductors, soloists, choristers, dancers, organisers, administrators, technicians and many other local people. Many went on to become life members and patrons. Local solicitor G. Spencer Bird, the Society's President for over 30 years, had been a guiding hand.

The material was gathered from past society production programmes.

Forgotten Buildings Heritage Walk around Aberdare

One of our new committee members Rod Jenkins is the new Research Officer at St Elvan's Church. In October he gave a fascinating guided tour around Aberdare. Here is the link to the walk, which is well worth looking at:

<https://www.stelvans.com/forgotten-buildings-heritage-walk.htm>

Local History book

The famous golfer Dai Rees often played at Aberdare Golf Club. Gwyn Evans, son of the late Tom Evans, has written a book about the club, which is 60 pages long, costs £7.50 and is available at Aberdare Golf Club.

A second book is "The Fothergills: Ironmasters in South Wales 1788–1875" by Wilf and Caroline Owen. It costs £5.00 and is available from the editor. The Fothergills owned Abernant and Llwydcoed Ironworks as well as others in South Wales.

Society News

The books belonging to the late Geoffrey Evans have been stored in a room in St Elvan's Church and all his papers have been stored in Highland Place Unitarian Church. We are grateful to Father Robert Davies and Rev. Eric Jones for these arrangements.

At our AGM in October, we welcomed two new committee members: Rod Jenkins and Sheila Parker.

Our next lecture will be on 19th January at 7pm at the Cynon Valley Museum. The speaker is Mrs Ann Watts who will give a lecture on David Lloyd George.

Closure of Local Gadlys Shop

The Gadlys Convenience Shop which was owned by Mr & Mrs Ahsan has sadly closed as they decided to retire. It blossomed in the 1980s but when Tesco moved to its present site and then especially when Lidl moved to a location just a short distance away, the shop sadly declined. [As I used to live in Oxford Street, I was a frequent shopper there and found it very convenient and so did the Gadlys populace. Ed.]

The Prime Ministers, by Nick Robinson

BBC Sounds has many 15-minute programmes about British premierships. There are two series about Prime Ministers from Sir Robert Walpole to Edward Heath.

Historical Television Programmes.

Did you know that it was women who started the Russian Revolution in 1917, not Lenin? This was one on Lucy Worsley's revelations in "Royal History's Biggest Fibs," a series of three that is worth watching on Catch-up.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I wish to acknowledge RCT Photographic Archive for the photographs of Aberaman Institute Amateur Operatic Society and The Cast of "I Have Five Daughters".

FEEDBACK

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

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