



Hanes.

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

SOME HOPEFUL SIGNS FOR THE FUTURE?

By
D.L. Davies,
(Editor).

Many of us concerned about the historical and industrial heritage of the Cynon Valley have for a long time been worried about the pace at which much of the evidence for that heritage has been lost during the past twenty-five years.

The contraction of the coal industry in the district has resulted not only in the widespread clearance of individual sites, buildings and features but in the disappearance of an entire landscape. Little or nothing of that background to life in this locality has been consciously retained or developed in order to educate our successors in this place about what life was like here for our forbears; and why, to a degree, things are as they are today. If nothing is done - and done soon - to remedy this situation, it will almost be as if the industrial experience of our people had never occurred. For a Socialist-controlled local authority such as that in the Cynon Valley, we would have thought that this consideration alone would make a telling point.

Much of the industrial and social change of the post-war era has been for the good. The C.V.H.S. in no way opposes useful change. Our concern is that the future of the Cynon Valley should be a mature one, not least in being able to give due consideration to its background.

Industrial change has not been the only agent of rapid alteration. The new Aberdare by-pass road, to be opened on the 17th of December, has dramatically altered the features of local transport history by being built along the course of the old Taff Vale Railway line. A similar transformation occurred when the New

Cardiff Road was built along the route of the old Aberdare Canal of 1811, between Plasdraw and Abercynon: and how much evidence for the Canal now survives?

Religion provides a further example of rapid loss. During the past five years, some dozen or more nonconformist chapels have closed; and the Anglican Church is not without its difficulties either.

What has happened to their records? What photographs or surveys were made? What effort went into recording their rich oral, cultural & musical traditions?

At last, there are some hopeful signs that progress is possible in an attempt to meet problems such as these - or some of them at least.

Useful discussions have taken place between the C.V.H.S. and the borough council concerning a local museum, and also a commemoration of the Cwmaman-born poet, Alun Lewis, the 70th anniversary of whose birth occurs next year. We look forward to the prospect of progress in these areas. Then the proposed Hen Dy Cwrdd Trust (of which more within) offers an exciting opportunity to rescue much local nonconformist material. The publication of local history titles also continues apace; and we look forward keenly to the appearance of 'Old Aberdare' vol. 4 during the early months of 1985.

Your attention is drawn to these and other matters in this issue of 'Hanes'. We hope you will enjoy reading about them. May we take this further opportunity to invite those interested to join the Society? Relevant details appear within.

ON THE RECORD:

- NOTES ON SOME LOCAL COMPANIES AT THE PUBLIC RECORD OFFICE,

by JOHN MEAR, Secretary of the C.V.H.S.

The Public Record Office at Kew, London, contains among very many other things brief details of thousands of defunct companies obliged by law to register with the Companies' Registration Office, and to submit periodic returns to that quarter.

The following is a list of companies registered between 1856 and 1920 and whose titles begin with 'Aberdare' ('A' in the list) or with 'Hirwaun' ('H'):-

A and Aberaman Omnibus Co. Ltd.
A & District House Property & Investment Co. Ltd.
A and Plymouth Co. Ltd.
A and Trecynon Brewery Ltd.
A Athletic Club Ltd.
A Brick Co. Ltd.
A Cinemas Ltd.
A Coffee Taverns Co. Ltd.
A Constitutional Club Buildings Co. Ltd.
A Cottage Co. Ltd.
A Electrical Co. Ltd.
A Electric Lighting Co. Ltd.
A Football Club Ltd.
A Fruit Stores Ltd.
A Gas Company.
A Graig Coal Co. Ltd.
A Hall (Incorporated).
A Liberal Club & Coffee Tavern Building Co. Ltd.
A Lyric Theatre Co. Ltd.
A Merthyr Collieries Co. Ltd.
A Merthyr Colliery Co. Ltd.
A Merthyr Patent Fuel Co. Ltd.
A Merthyr Steam Coal Colliery Co. Ltd.
A Merthyr Steam Coal Co. Ltd.
A Northern Union Football Club Ltd.
A Patent Steam Fuel Co. Ltd.
A Printing & Publishing Co. Ltd.
A Public Hall Co. Ltd.
A Public Offices Co. Ltd.
A Reform Club Co. Ltd.
A Rhondda Steam Coal Co. Ltd.
A Steamship Co. Ltd.
A Syndicate Ltd.
A Temperance Hall Co. Ltd.
A Tinsplate Co. Ltd.
A Town Association Football Club Ltd.
A Valley Motor Services Co. Ltd.
A Valley Steam Laundry Co. Ltd.

H Aberdare Steam Coal Co. Ltd.
H Coal & Iron Co. Ltd.
H Brass & Iron Foundry Co. Ltd.
H Victoria Hall Co. Ltd.
H Gas & Coke Consumers Co. Ltd.

Naturally, not all local enterprises traded under titles which include the name of the chief place in the area. Collieries at the top of the Dare Valley, for example, have had a complicated history which is reflected in the various names under which they have from time to time operated. These were:-

Bwllfa & Merthyr Dare Colliery Co. Ltd.
Bwllfa & Merthyr Dare Steam Collieries Ltd.
Bwlla Colliery Co. Ltd.
Bwllfa & Merthyr Dare Steam Collieries (1891) Ltd.
Bwllfa & Cwmaman Collieries Ltd.

Another company which had connections with Bwllfa was the Snyder Dynamite Projectile Co. Ltd. They conducted experiments with large guns and armour plates, and intended to build an explosives factory nr. Bwllfa colliery. But that is another story.

* * * * *

(EDITOR'S NOTE):

I'm sure we are all grateful to Mr Mear for providing 'Hanes' with this fascinating information; but, as he implies, the above list can easily be added to by inquiring at the P.R.O. about companies whose titles include other local place-names somewhere within them (& those with 'Aberdare' in a position other than first). For example, there are at least 4 'Cwmaman companies' with records there: C Cinema Co. Ltd; C Cottage Co. Ltd; C Coal Co. Ltd; & Aberneol Housing Co. Ltd. There must be others including names such as Cynon; Aberaman; Dare, & Mountain Ash.

* Orders for copies of 'Hanes' should be addressed to Doug Williams, 29, Tudor Tce., ABERDARE (+ s.a.e.); & letters/articles to D.L. Davies, 5, Milton St., Cwmaman, ABERDARE.



(OLD PHOTOGRAPHS: No.2. SOURCE: D.L. Davies)

This is a picture of the editor's great-great-grandmother, Mrs Lettice George, taken on her 95th birthday, in 1911. (Her first name is a variant of 'Letitia', & should be stressed on the final syllable).

It is interesting because much information about her (added to by the editor's research) has survived within the family; and because her life was typical of those of many people who formed the industrial society of the 'Coal Era' in 19th & early 20th century south Wales.

Mrs George was born as Lettice Evans in the remote Carmarthenshire parish of Llanfihangel Rhos-y-Corn, nr. Brechfa, in 1816, the daughter of David Evans, mason. Her baptism does not figure in the local parish registers; and this suggests either that her father had nonconformist leanings or that he was of no particular religious loyalty.

Her family shared the same name & parish of origin as that better-known Aberdare Evans: the Unitarian Revd. Thomas Evans, minister of Hen Dy Cwrdd from 1811 - 1833. When T.E. was tried for sedition in 1801 (resulting in two years gaol), one of his two co-defendants was a certain 'David Evans, yeoman, of Llanfihangel Rhos-y-Corn'. Whether there was a relationship between this co-defendant and her father remains to be confirmed.

Little is known of Lettice George's early life beyond what may be inferred of the existence of a humble countrygirl in the Carmarthenshire uplands during the first half of the 19th century.

Like most ordinary people, she first emerges in official records after the commencement of general registration in 1837 & the expansion of the census in 1841. In 1845, she was employed as a 'Servant' at Llandeilo; and married John George, a (farm?) labourer, born in 1815 in the nearby parish of Llangathen. Both lived in properties belonging to the estate of Lord Dynevor, & were almost certainly in the employ of that estate. During the period 1839 - 1843, Llandeilo was a centre of the Rebecca Riots; and it is very likely that Lettice George would have witnessed some of the scenes enacted there.

Like thousands of others during the 1840's, the Georges were drawn by the prospect of higher wages in the developing coalfields of south Wales; and by 1851, they were living in Crawshay Bailey's new iron & coal settlement of 'Treaman' (i.e., the grid of streets between Regent St. & Station St., Aberaman). By 1871, they lived at 18, Gooseberry Hill (i.e., the row of old cottages alongside the Fforchneol Arms, Godreaman, now a part of Brynmair Rd.). She & her husband had five children, two of whom (quite typically) died in infancy. John George was by then a colliery haulier; but he died in 1872. In 1874, her only surviving daughter also died, and Lettice George moved to 13, Aman St., Cwmaman, to raise her grandchildren there. Thus, sudden illness & death were regularly present in the everyday lives of ordinary people.

It was after they moved the urban Wales that they took another step typical of many others & rejected all links with Anglicanism. Lettice George was baptized in the River Cynon, nr. the Plough Pit, in June, 1849, & her husband in July the same year. They were founder-members of Gwawr Baptist chapel, Aberaman, when the 'cause' met at the King William Inn, Cardiff Rd. (now a Pentecostal Church!)

Following her move to Cwmaman, one of her three sons, David, married a girl named Mary Thomas whose maternal grandparents were both born of old agricultural families of the parish of Aberdare. Thus, by marriage, Lettice George's family merged with the old rural society of the district.

Mrs George lived an active life until shortly after her 95th birthday, when she fell badly & suffered severe shock. She died "yn llawnder ei dyddiau" on 15th May, 1911, and was the last person unable to speak English meaningfully in a family which has remained Welsh-speaking.

HOW TO JOIN THE CYNON VALLEY HISTORY SOC:

**Please contact: Mr John Mear, Secretary,
7, Tudor Terrace, ABERDARE (878349).**

DAI BENLAS - A HIRWAUN HERO:

- By DOUG WILLIAMS, Publications
Officer of the Society.

Not many people apart from the occasional angler now walk the banks of the upper river Cynon, enjoying its rural aspect from the old weir on the Gelli farm (where the feeder to the Hirwaun Ironworks left the river); downwards through Pwllyn Merched; around the bend there & under the railway arch into Pwllyn Railway, with new housing on the right-hand bank extending over to Penmark Row and the Garth.

Standing on the dressed-stone abutments of the railway arch, cast an eye between the left-bank of the river and the bottom of the old slag tip some distance away. There, you will see a mass of tangled undergrowth, with brambles & alder branches trailing into the river as it flows on to Pwllyn Tabbles.

Venture into this undergrowth and you stumble over the rubble & remains of what was once the longest terrace of houses built in Hirwaun. Big Row (or 'Row Fawr' as it was known) was built to house local ironworkers and miners. At first, it reached from the railway through the upper ironworks to Ty Mawr; and it could be truly said that its people lived in their work! As time passed, the works grew and Big Row shrank until only some ten houses remained by the end of the 19th century. People from every calling lived there: puddlers, miners, moulders; and, in 1842, even Dr Forrest the company doctor, & Mr Dixon, the local schoolmaster.

In the opinion of 'Old Brocks' (Hirwaun residents), the most famous person born & bred in Big Row was Dai Benlas, or David J. Lewis, whose father had been one of the local constables. Dai became a moulder in the ironworks; but from his schooldays he practiced another craft - that of mountain fighter or pugilist: fighting in the folds of slagtips & mountains, and cheered on by spectators who gambled on their heroes whilst others kept watch for the police.

Once, while at Aberdare, he drifted into Bill Samuel's boxing booth, then visiting the town. Bill was a champion exhibitionist, & offered a sovereign to all who could stay three rounds with him. Dai accepted the challenge; and, within two minutes, Bill found himself flat on his back outside the ring! His standing grew, and they say he did not lose a single fight, being recognized by some as 'Champion of Wales'!



PHOTOGRAPHIC EXHIBITION: A large photographic exhibition of considerable local interest has just opened at the Welsh Industrial & Maritime Museum, Bute St., Cardiff. It is entitled 'Heads of the Valleys', and focuses on the industrial & social background of the upper valleys as displayed in photographs. Well worth a visit between now & April, 1985.

H.T.V. SERIES: In the New Year, H.T.V. are televising a new series on the history of Wales. They wish to see 'viewing groups' set up all over Wales in order to provide them with feedback. Our Society is organizing one such group. Members interested in taking part should contact John Mear as soon as possible.

LOCAL HISTORY TITLES: A number of items of note have appeared recently. Prime among these must be the biography of Alun Lewis by Dr John Pikoulis, of U.C. Cardiff (Poetry Wales Press; 323pp., £12.95). It was hoped to include a review in this issue of 'Hanes'; but this will now be held over pro tem. Then there is 'Mountain Ash Remembered', by Bernard Baldwin: a popular & succinct account of town life mostly during the 20th century. Well worth buying at £6.95 from Ewington's.

The P.T.A. of Ysgol Gymraeg Aberdâr have also published 2 photo-calendars for Aberdare and Mt. Ash for 1985. Excellent value at £1 each.

HEN DY CWRDD TRUST: A Steering Committee was established at a meeting on the 30th November to further the setting up of a Heritage Centre focusing on local nonconformity. The Chairman is the Revd. Eric Jones, Clifton St, & the Secretary is D.L. Davies. Ann Clwyd MP is to be invited to become President. More details to appear in the press shortly.

OLD ABERDARE VOL.4: The C.V.H.S. hope to publish this by March, 1985. Copies should be sought quickly, as previous volumes have sold well & are often difficult to buy later.

.../DAI BENLAS (continued):

Dai felt that if he stayed in Wales he would have no-one better than him to box. So, he sailed to America in about 1875/80, & became a professional boxer there. He was a popular figure with the boxing public; and when last heard of he was living in the state of Iowa.

(With acknowledgment to local tradition & the notes of John Davies, 'Pendar'.)
