

# CYNON VALLEY HISTORY SOCIETY

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# HANES

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

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## PASSCHENDAELE, THE LITTLE THEATRE, AND GALLIPOLI.

In this issue we look at some of the men who died and survived in the long horrific Battle of Passchendaele 100 years ago, and an account of Gallipoli by Lieutenant-Colonel Morgan Morgan of Mountain Ash. For some light relief we look at the first part of the history of the Little Theatre in Aberdare. Alas it has closed, been demolished and there are now houses built on its site. I spent many happy hours watching plays there. Many of you did as well, I am sure! Happy reading!

## PASSCHENDAELE

Lieut. Clifford Stanton



THE LATE LIEUT. STANTON.

Clifford Stanton was the eldest son of the local Member of Parliament, Charles Butt Stanton. Before the war he was an assistant cashier at Tower Colliery, Hirwaun. It was ironic that earlier in 1917 the Aberdare Leader (of 31<sup>st</sup> March) tells us that he spent a few days at home on leave and told his father that he was a little grieved to see the long queues for potatoes in Aberdare. It added "he looks exceedingly fit and well," but ironically a few months later he would be dead. Aged 24 he served as a Lieutenant in the 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Welsh Regiment, amongst the soldiers who fought at the battle of Passchendaele. In a letter home, one Signaller David Edward Jones said the following about the battle in a letter dated 2<sup>nd</sup> August to his parents: "I suppose you have seen in the papers of the great push. We were in it, of course. I am glad to tell you that the Welsh took a prominent part and were first over on a good front and got away easy. But I am sorry to inform you that

Lieut. Clifford Stanton was killed in it. He was killed by a shell and it happened at

4.05 am on July 31<sup>st</sup> just after we started off. You may tell his parents that he suffered no pain, as he was killed outright."

*Aberdare Leader* 11<sup>th</sup> August 1917

Pt Jack Evans who acted as a servant to Stanton said that when going into action he was severely wounded in the leg by a shell. He was up again in a few seconds and placed himself at the head of the company, and led them forward till he fell fatally wounded into his arms. Evans remarked, "We loved young Mr Stanton, he was among the bravest."

*Aberdare Leader*, 26th January 1918

How true that was, because in August 1916 Stanton went out under cover of night to capture a German flag that had been sported on an enemy's trench for days. It was a perilous adventure, but he brought back his prize all right!

Even Lloyd George wrote to his father saying "I cannot tell you how deeply grieved I am to hear of the death of your gallant boy".



Aberdare Boy Wins the M.M.

Pte. H.A. Oxenham M.M.

Oxenham of the 24<sup>th</sup> Royal Fusiliers has been granted the Military Medal for gallantry in a raid on the enemy trenches in France. He is the son of Mr and Mrs W. Oxenham (plumber), 22 Whitcombe Street, Aberdare. Before enlisting he was in partnership with his father. It is rather a coincidence that his cousin Sgt W.C. Oxenham of Seymour Street, Aberdare also won the same distinction a month ago.

*Aberdare Leader*, 3 November, 1917



Late Corporal Dd. E. Lewis,  
Godreaman.

Corporal David E. Lewis  
of Godreaman

He belonged to the Royal Engineers and served in France where he died of enemy gas poisoning. When war broke out he was in South America. Being an old Army man having served in the South African War, he rejoined his unit in the early days of the present war. He was in Aberaman 7 weeks ago

when he was presented with a watch by the Aberaman Fund. He was 36 years old and married. His C.O. in writing to his wife said, "Your husband was one of the best soldiers in the company and I think the bravest. He was always to the front when there was any dangerous undertaking to be accomplished and his steadiness and fearlessness always inspired confidence in the other men. You may be proud to know that no soldier has given his life for his country in a more gallant manner than your husband. The officer in charge of his section of the Tunnelling Company says he was chosen for the work in which he lost his life because of his qualities as fitting him for the charge of men and individual action"

*Aberdare Leader*, 27 October 1917

### John Lewis Davies and David John Jones

These two Abercynon men were both drivers in the Royal Field Artillery, and both were sadly killed in the same accident on the morning of 11<sup>th</sup> September. In newspaper reports it was reported that, "They were transporting ammunition when a bomb dropped from an enemy aeroplane injuring both so badly that they died soon after."

*Aberdare Leader, 29<sup>th</sup> September 1917*

### Camp Life in France, by Ap Pennar, Mountain Ash

Ap Pennar painted a happy almost carefree, happy holiday camp existence. The mud, rats and grim deaths of the trenches are not mentioned:

"Two large huts are used by the men as dining halls and each hut has its own staff of orderlies. In various corners of the camp are commodious lavatories, a barber's shop, the cookhouse, and a dry and wet canteen. In parts of the camp are small gardens in which potatoes, cabbage and other vegetables are grown. [Miners would be queuing up to join the army, as their hovels were horrendous compared to this seemingly idyllic army life. Ed]

Ap Pennar tells of, "On rare occasions some of the men drink not wisely but too well of the vile stuff sold in the French cafes then fireworks can start. One night will remain green in my memory in a Royal Marines camp. A wild Irishman became irresponsible and for hours made the night hideous with noise. All the other men were in their bunks sleeping or at least, attempting to sleep, while the Irishman paraded up and down the hut challenging every man in it, but more particularly the Scots. At last his noise became intolerable to a burly Scotsman who jumped out of his bunk and with one blow silenced the Irishman for the rest of the night.

*Aberdare Leader, 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1917*

## The Little Theatre



Parva Sed Apta  
Small but Capable



Trecynon Amateur Dramatic  
Society



Mr William Jenkins

It started life as the Trecynon Amateur Dramatic Society, and was founded in 1909 by Mr William Jenkins, "Meirionydd," as a Welsh Drama Society. The society originally met at the Park View Inn, Trecynon and each member contributed 6d per week to keep the society solvent. In the early days, plays were performed for charity — Aberdare Hospital and victims of colliery accidents etc.

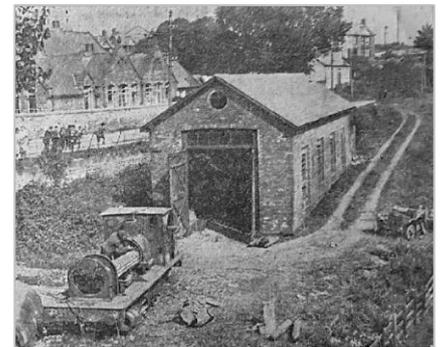


Evan Rhys Dennis

Mr Jenkins was the official producer in the early years and he produced many plays, and, he was also a notable actor. He achieved much success outside the Little Theatre too. In musical circles he conducted the Trecynon Juvenile Choir for eleven years and on two occasions led them to victory at the National Eisteddfod. He was a man of many talents and a veteran to be proud of! Also, he could see the talents of people, and he saw in Rev. Evan Rhys Dennis, Pastor of Hen Dy Cwrdd Unitarian Chapel, the makings of a great producer, so in due course he passed the producer's baton on to him.

In 1929 thanks to the inspiration stemming from the Trecynon Dramatic Society, the valley had 30 dramatic societies!

Towards the end of that year, a disused engine shed was bought from Sir D.R. Llewellyn at the instigation of Rev. Dennis. It took a little over £1,400 to convert it into The Little Theatre and was formally opened with the first performance ever of "Woman of Compassion," on 13th February 1931. It was the first Little Theatre in Britain to be owned by an amateur dramatic society.



Tom Davies of Yr Efail, Trecynon, the secretary of the society, was in charge with the administrative side of things and he had a great deal to do with buying the engine shed. He had been a machine gunner during World War 1 and joined the society straight after demobilisation. He was the secretary until the late 50s and during that time, he was a teacher at Llwydcoed Junior School and secretary of Bryn Seion Welsh Presbyterian Chapel, Trecynon.



Tom Davies

Davies and Rev Dennis were a great partnership and under the latter, the Little Theatre in the thirties had the most exciting years in its history. Performing eight plays in each season was a tremendous strain on the actors and producer alike. Performances were also given in outlying areas such as Hirwaun. These performances were for charity, notably for the purchase of boots and shoes for children.

In 1934 the company won first prize for the third time at the Neath National Eisteddfod. Two Welsh plays and six English plays were presented during the 1933/34 season and NINE plays were presented during the 1934/35 season.

In 1936, the audience membership was 1,250 when the Little Theatre produced nine plays in that year. Each play was presented to a full house of 325 every night. Season tickets were 7/6d. People were so poor that they paid by instalments through collectors who called regularly at their homes.

As a producer of plays for almost 30 years, Mr Dennis must hold the record for Wales. Until his retirement in 1948, he produced over a hundred full-length plays and fifty one-act plays. How could one man have done all that? He was a tremendous producer; he insisted upon clarity of diction, audibility, teamwork and timing. He was blessed with more than the average ration of patience, tact and

sympathy — three qualities that every producer must have. He began as a man of Trecynon but he became a man of Wales. He was in great demand as an adjudicator at drama festivals but very rarely accepted because he felt his first responsibility was to the Little Theatre, and in this matter, he forfeited many financial rewards.

The Second World War was almost a death blow to the theatre — from 1942 it was requisitioned as a food depot by the Ministry of Food who held on to it well into the 1950s because rationing went on till then.

Rehearsals were held at Hen Dy Cwrdd vestry and performances were given at the Coliseum, which had opened in 1938.

But the Little Theatre made a full recovery by 1947 when its members contributed much to the British Drama League Festival's success at the Coliseum, which was held for the first time outside England.

It was during the following year that the "Little" players achieved their crowning glory winning the British Drama One Act Play final at the Scala Theatre, London, beating four other companies. The play was "Birds of a feather" by J.O. Francis with the superb cast who received rave adjudications to receive the coveted Lord Howard de Walden Cup. The company became the first Welsh amateur dramatic society to appear on television from Alexandra Palace on 21st June 1948.



Newspaper caption: "One of the leading drama festivals in South Wales was held annually at Dowlais. This picture was taken after the Trecynon Dramatic Society had made a name for itself by winning two cups outright, which meant six wins in all. Here are the members of the winning casts: Front Row: Richard Evans, Annie Margaret Rees, Tom Phillips (later County Councillor), the president; Rev. E.R. Dennis, the producer; Mrs Jennie James, Mr. James Ivor Davies. Back row: Mr. Tom Davies (secretary for many years), George Lewis, Molly Williams, Albert Davies, Marjorie Boytt, Jack Mansel Jones, Mrs. Cliff Thomas and Mr. J. Euryn Davies.

To be continued.

Sources: *Little Theatre, Aberdare Coming of Age celebrations 1931-1952*  
*Aberdare Leader* 15th December 1977

Nicola Davies, (granddaughter of Tom Davies), her reminiscences and information about him.

## Morgan Morgan's Short War by Dr Robert Anthony

On the evening of the 8<sup>th</sup> August 1915, Morgan Morgan, (1854-1930), of Maesydderwen, Mountain Ash must have felt apprehensive on his approach to Suvla Bay on the north-west coast of the Gallipoli Peninsula. On board the army transport vessel *Huntsgreen*, he was surrounded by his fellow soldiers of the 5<sup>th</sup> Welsh Regiment who must have been equally anxious given the disastrous course of the Gallipoli campaign thus far. Morgan's 61<sup>st</sup> birthday would be in six days' time; he may have wondered if he would live to see it.

Behind the narrow beach at Suvla Bay lay the bed of a shallow salt-water lake, mostly dry in summer, encircled by rocky hills, up to 1000 feet in height, covered in rough scrub and rent by fissures and 'nullahs' (dry ravines). If the terrain was not bad enough, the summer heat and flies were intolerable and much of the elevated ground was commanded by Turkish troops who were thus able to direct fire down onto the landing area and hinterland of Suvla Bay.

Morgan, as Lt. Colonel, had succeeded to the command of the 5<sup>th</sup> Welsh in 1912. He had originally obtained a commission in the Volunteers in 1883 but had never fought in a battle, nor fired a rifle in anger. In civilian life he had qualified as a mining engineer, later becoming an architect. In 1881, aged 27, he succeeded his father as land agent to Lord Aberdare following David Morgan's untimely death after a fall from a horse and trap near Pontypridd whilst on Lord Aberdare's business. The Morgan family had been land agents to the Bruce Pryce (Aberdare) family since at least as far back as 1821.

Morgan's encounter with a 'real' war is recorded first-hand in his field notebook, a slim volume with squared paper and a mauve cover. Although his experiences were obviously unnerving, the entries are laconic. After landing and spending the night of the 8<sup>th</sup> August on the beach, at first light the 5<sup>th</sup> Welsh advanced northwards and then east, under Turkish fire, towards Anafarta Ridge close to the main Turkish defensive line. During the day Morgan was ordered, for reasons that are unclear, to separate the A and B Companies of his Regiment from C and D and to remain with the latter. This he did, whereupon A and B Companies promptly disappeared. He tried to find them that evening but without success. He had been directed to bivouac that night at 'Brigade HQ', a stone cattle shed, and on arriving there at 10pm, following his fruitless search, he recounts:

*...lay down on the ground outside the shed but could not sleep and as it grew cold in the early morning, I got inside the shed and sat down although it was rather crowded with staff and the wounded. The Turks kept up a fusillade of musketry against this shed the whole night through.*

At 5am the following morning (10<sup>th</sup> August) Morgan was ordered to hold a small cluster of houses close to HQ 'at all costs', with a small party of about 25 but:

*....from this point it was impossible with a small party to advance, the musketry from the Turkish trenches being rather lively and in a few minutes one third of the party were hors de combat 2 killed and 6 wounded.*

Morgan moved those who remained of his party to the left and slightly to the rear and:

*....from this point I rushed over the open ground to a well....to replenish my water bottle. I found a good many men there on the same errand. It was a difficult*

*matter to obtain the water; it was evident that though the enemy could not be seen they had the range of the well.*

This is the penultimate entry in the field notebook. The following passage occurs in the *History of the 53<sup>rd</sup> (Welsh) Division*, of which the 5<sup>th</sup> Welsh was part:

*...the 53<sup>rd</sup> Division did not again attack. Their battle casualties from the date of landing to the 14<sup>th</sup> August – five days – amounted to 123 officers and 2,182 other ranks. But dysentery, which had made its first appearance....before troops landed at Suvla, now spread rapidly....sick casualties rose to appalling numbers. The period of open fighting was over, and units settled down to a spell of trench warfare, with the wearisome routine, heat and flies.*



Morgan, my maternal great-grandfather, was one of the casualties of dysentery (which, it appears, he contracted before the landing) and was invalided home shortly after the 10<sup>th</sup> August. The Gallipoli Peninsula was evacuated in December 1915, the campaign becoming a byword for incompetence and futility, notwithstanding the extreme bravery of the Allied troops.

There is another contemporary source (perhaps somewhat hyperbolic) of Morgan's conduct at Gallipoli. In the *Aberdare Leader* of the 25<sup>th</sup> December 1915, in a piece headed 'How the Gallant Colonel Led his Men', Cpl W. Williams, 5<sup>th</sup> Welsh Regiment, 125 Pentwyn Ave, Penrhiwceiber wrote:

*....Our gallant C.O. had orders to advance....He was right in front of the leading Company and gave his orders....in sharp clear tones without any hesitation. It did us good to hear a man well over 60 give orders in a calm unperturbed voice....Our Col. led his men to victory, but with long odds against us and at a terrible loss of life. He set a fine example to officers and men by the unflinching bravery he showed in the face of a foe five times our strength. [This can be compared with Private Glyn Jones's account of his experiences of Gallipoli in *Hanes* issue 73 page 5. Ed.]*

On his return to Mountain Ash, Morgan re-assumed his civic duties, of which there were many. He died in 1930 and his military career and strong religious belief are commemorated in a stained glass window in St Margaret's Church in which he is depicted as a kneeling soldier in armour.

### **Did you know that?**

*Hedd Wyn* also known as Ellis Humphrey Evans, the shepherd poet from North Wales, worked at Abercynon colliery in 1909 while living at 46, Abercynon Terrace. The hours were long, the work was hard and the *hiraeth* (homesickness) was unbearable. He only stayed there for three months. He died at the battle of Pilckem Ridge on 31<sup>st</sup> July 1917. Two weeks later, his ode *The Hero* won the Chair at the National Eisteddfod at Birkenhead. His Chair was draped in black cloth. This black, empty chair became a symbol of Wales' tragic losses during the war and it was symbolic of empty chairs throughout Wales.

Source: *The Shepherd War Poet* edited by Gruffudd Antur.

## Society News

David Leslie Davies has suffered a serious heart condition, and following a period in hospital is slowly recuperating.

Elfed Davies broke his hip and he is now slowly recovering. This 88-year-old has just finished a book on the Aberaman Bowls Club, 1913–2013.

He has been researching The Cooperative Societies of Cwmbach, Aberdare and Ynysybwl; and, the Schoolboy International football matches held at The Ynys, Aberdare, 1908–1956.

## Book Review: England's magnum opus on Merthyr

Young Joe England listened to the stories of Merthyr's history from the lips of his grandfather who was in the Cyfarthfa Band. This experience invoked a desire to research and write the authoritative book about the history of his hometown. Now, aged 84, Joe has accomplished his life's work and ambition. On 23<sup>rd</sup> September in Merthyr's Old Town Hall, his book was launched: "Merthyr: The crucible of modern Wales". It is a 400-page magisterial account of Wales' most industrialised town, during the period 1760-1912. It has a lucid, easily readable style, which includes much original research. Although about "our big brother" Merthyr, Lord Aberdare and Keir Hardie feature in the book. To spend £20 seems a paltry sum to pay for a man's work of a lifetime!

## Historical Television Programmes

Indian Independence and Partition programmes:

My Family, Partition and Me: India 1947. BBC2. 2 parts

Seven Days in Summer: Countdown to Partition. BBC2

India's Partition: The Forgotten Story. BBC 2

The Vietnam War. BBC4. 10 parts.

Andrew Marr's The making of Modern Britain. BBC4, 6 episodes.

Henry VII: The Winter King. BBC4.

Victoria, Series 2. ITV 8 parts. Episode 6 is about the Irish potato famine, and is very moving. (This series combines fact and fiction, I believe, and there is a book *The Victoria Letters* that is the Official Companion to the series.)

There will also be programmes to commemorate the Centenary of the Russian Revolution. One such programme, on BBC2, is Russia 1917: Countdown to Revolution.

## Feedback

I am always happy to receive feedback about articles in this issue. I will be continuing the History of The Little Theatre. If anyone has any stories to tell about it and information about its characters, including Kalman Jones, I will be very interested to receive them.

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[www.cvhs.org.uk](http://www.cvhs.org.uk)

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

Tel: 07779 863611

E-mail: [sgraham10@hotmail.com](mailto:sgraham10@hotmail.com)

Epost: [sgraham10@hotmail.com](mailto:sgraham10@hotmail.com)

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