

CYNON VALLEY HISTORY SOCIETY

CYMDEITHAS HANES CWM CYNON

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HANES

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CYLCHLYTHYR CYMDEITHAS HANES CWM CYNON

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A HAPPY NEW YEAR TO YOU ALL!

To take your minds off Brexit we look at several anniversaries of the past: The 80th Anniversary of the end of the Spanish Civil War, in which many Welshmen fought; the 100th Anniversary of the Aberdare General Election in December 1918, and the 150th Anniversary of the Opening of Aberdare Public Park. We also look at the rise and fall of the Aberdare Cinema. Happy Reading!

The Spanish Civil War



Edwin Greening standing top right and Tom Howell Jones standing second left



William Lloyd, left, and Edwin Greening, right, beside the International Brigade memorial in London

This year marks the 80th Anniversary of the end of the Spanish Civil War. In 1936 Spain a new socialist democratic government came to power. It started to make provision in education and health care. But General Franco, the Fascist dictator launched a military coup against it. Hitler and Mussolini sent tanks and planes to help his forces. Britain, to its shame, stood back and did nothing to help the Spanish government. They pleaded to the world for help. Men and women from around 50 countries were inspired to volunteer and risk their lives to fight or nurse for the Republicans; the men formed the International Brigade.

From Britain 2300 men went to Spain to fight: Scotland sent 550 men, 320 Irishmen went, and Wales sent about 200 mainly from the South Wales valleys. From the Cynon valley seven brave men went to fight fascism in Spain: Ronald Brown, Robert Condon, Edwin Greening, William Lloyd, Morien Morgan, William Durston and Thomas Howell Jones. The last two men were sadly killed in the fighting. There is a plaque in Aberdare library in memory of them all.

Edwin Greening in his autobiography *From Aberdare to Albacete* vividly describes the war. This year I want to look at some of these men who fought in the war but first I want to look at a great meeting held in December 1938 at Mountain Ash.

Huge "Aid Spain" Meeting at Mountain Ash with Paul Robeson

The Mountain Ash Pavilion was the scene of a great event on 7th December 1938: the Welsh National Memorial Meeting.

FEBRUARY 4, 1939. THE

FOOD FOR SPAIN

The Aberdare Trades and Labour Council are organising a house-to-house collection of non-perishable goods, commencing on Monday, February 13th. All persons desirous of assisting are requested to give their names and addresses to the Labour Ward secretaries in their areas. A cheque for £60 is being sent to the Spanish Fund, collected as a result of our last effort. This fund is still open to receive donations from organisations and individuals.

Please help starving Spain and assist Democracy in the fight against Fascism.

TOM MEREDITH, chairman
D. R. JONES, secretary.

Secretaries of Wards—

No. 1 Ward—Coun. E. S. COX, Hirwaun, Llywydeoed—NORAH HOWELLS, Greys Pee, Trecynon—S. JONES, 23 Cemetery Road, No. 2 Ward—D. W. GRIFFITHS, 77 Gadlys St., Gadlys	No. 3 Ward—J. J. PARRY, 20 Phillip St., Robertstown, No. 4 Ward—T. B. HITCHINGS, Llanthewy Street, Cwmbach—L. J. DAVIES, 16 Tre Telynog, No. 5 Ward—MORGAN THOMAS, 19 Byron St. Cwmaman Abercwmboi—Mr. L. SCOURFIELD, 7 Maple Terrace
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“Here thirty veterans of the International Brigade, some of them still mere boys whose eyes have seen all the blood and horror of modern warfare marched two by two, in mundane every-day clothes, up to the great platform, behind the flags of Wales and the Republic of Spain and 5,000 people saluted them. Among the people were Jews, Italians and some olive-skinned smiling Basque children, quick to salute with the clenched fist. Behind them were a choir of sweet voiced Welsh children from Cymmer, National Eisteddfod winners.

Will Paynter read the solemn pledge: We the people of South Wales pledge ourselves to work with all our might for the principles for which these men of South Wales died in Spain.

We will spare no effort to assist the Spanish people in their struggle — and ours — for freedom, democracy and peace.

We solemnly promise that our labours shall not cease until the Spanish people have gained victory.”

Roars of welcome sounded as Arthur Horner greeted a smiling Paul Robeson, the black American singer, who was to make his film *Proud Valley* in the Rhondda the following year. Robeson sang, recited and said: “I have waited a long time to come down to Wales because I know there are friends here. I am here tonight because as I have said many times before, I feel that in the struggle we are waging for a better life, an artist must do his part. I am here because I know that these fellows fought not only for Spain but for me and the whole world.”



Paul Robeson

In 1938, Paul Robeson accompanied by his wife Eslanda visited International Brigaders in hospitals and in their barracks often singing in their own languages. At the front, loudspeakers would broadcast his songs to the Fascists as well as to the Loyalist soldiers. Lance Rogers a Merthyr International Brigadier said: “There he (Robeson) was in the midst of destruction and war, singing to us and the moment he stopped singing, the bullets, the bombs and the shells would start again.”

Sadly two International Brigaders: Edwin Greening and Ronald Brown missed this great meeting by 48 hours. A great welcome was given at Aberaman railway station to them on the following Friday evening. The chairmen of Aberdare Council and the Trades and Labour Council made speeches of welcome and the two Brigaders briefly responded.

Source: *Aberdare Leader* 17th December 1938, page 7.

There is an excellent exhibition about Paul Robeson at the Cynon Valley Museum until 16th February.

I want to look now at some of our men who fought in the International Brigade:

William D. Lloyd (1914–1986)

He was one of six children whose father had died in 1923 of malaria contracted at Salonika in the First World War.

Will's proudest claim was that he had been in the Communist movement, (as a Young Pioneer), longer than Arthur Horner.

The Lloyds were *the* Communist family. Edwin Greening considered that they had an impeccable revolutionary pedigree. In his inimitable way he considered that: "The Lloyds of Aberaman were in the Communist Party before the Paris Commune!"

Lloyd said, "I was practically born into the Communist Party; my mother: Hannah Mary became a member through the Labour Party in the days before Communists were barred. Our house was the headquarters for all the local activities during the General Strike. I took part in the Party's activities in 1926 as a child. I think the first illegal act I took part in was selling photos of the twelve Communist leaders imprisoned for sedition."

Will started work at a Cwmaman pit at 14. His experiences there made him say "Powell Duffryn is Fascism". (It was the most notorious coal company in South Wales. It was known throughout the valleys as "P.D."— "Poverty and Dole" or "Poverty and Death").

Aged 24, when he heard of The Spanish fascists fighting the socialist government there, he went down to London to volunteer for the International Brigade but he was rejected, as he was unknown outside the Aberdare Communist Party. Early in November 1936 he returned to Aberdare, persuaded three other members of the local Communist Party, (Glyn Thomas, Bob Condon and Charlie Costello), to volunteer with him. They cycled down to Cardiff. He now recounts the story, "We went up to London by train and I had to carry a big tin of corned beef. We had to look out for a man carrying a Left Book Club book under his arm. Our password was supposed to be 'Corned beef for Spain' and he'd direct us."

"In Spain, I joined an Irish section under a commander called De la Salle. He was a spy and was shot later. Then I joined the British Brigade, and I went into action for the first time on Christmas Day, 1936".

In February 1937, at the battle of Jarama, the British Battalion played a decisive part in holding the Madrid-Valencia road for three weeks. There he was a runner for the battalion Commander.

In March, he was sent back to Britain to raise funds and recruit for the battalion.

His story and the stories of the other men will be continued in the next issue of Hanes.

Sources: Miners against Fascism by Hywel Francis.

South Wales Echo 14th & 15th July 1976.

Aberdare Public Park



The Lower Entrance of Aberdare Park

Spend £5000 on a park in Aberdare, what a waste of money thought many people in the 1860s!!

There was so much opposition that there was an official enquiry held at the Old Town Hall in 1866 where Mr Arnold Taylor, a Commissioner from the Local Government Offices in London came down to chair the inquiry, (*Aberdare Times*, 18th August). The people of Aberaman, Cwmbach and Hirwaun were opposing having to pay a portion of the £5000 that it would cost them through an increase in the rates. At the end it was agreed that Hirwaun should not pay towards the cost of the park.

There were many letters to the press against the public park: A ratepayer from Llandore stated, "public funds have never been more injudiciously expended than in the formation of this park. It appears that £5000 has already been exhausted and comparatively very little is seen for the money". He adds, "It is a step that will cripple the parish for a long time hence. It is too early a day for us to have a pleasure park; the sanitary condition of the town and neighbourhood ought to be first materially improved". With a coup de grace, he ends: "the destination of many of us through the oppressiveness of our local burdens will soon be the Bankruptcy Court!"

Merthyr Telegraph 14th March, 1868 page 3

Yet the park was a great asset to the valley. It is amazing that the man who fought the hardest to secure the park was blind Rees Hopkin Rhys who was the chairman of the Local Board of Health. He would sadly never see the beautiful result of his endeavours.

There were also letters of praise about the park, of Rees Hopkin Rhys and criticisms of the moaners:

A correspondent criticised the "Ratepayer a scribbler" who had been writing to the local papers for the last 18 months criticising the cost of Aberdare Public Park until, "everybody has become thoroughly nauseated with his productions." "This splendid (!) writer, under the pretence of serving the working classes, aims to fasten odium on the members of the Board of Health, who have had the good sense to treat his impertinences with the contempt they deserve. The people of Aberdare are under a lasting obligation to the Board of Health, and especially to Mr R. H. Rhys, its able and indefatigable chairman. Aberdare is an exception to every town on 'The Hills', for its cleanliness and public spirit."

Western Mail 13th July 1869, p 4

The park was officially opened on the 29th July 1869 by Richard Fothergill, one of our M.Ps. "After all the speeches the rain almost immediately set in, which put an end to all the outdoor amusements and those present reluctantly ended their way homewards."

But there are always grumblers:

Thomas Pugh, in the *Merthyr Telegraph* 7th August, page 2, complained that, "the Friendly Societies refused to form a procession on the day as some of them had been refused permission to walk through the grounds before the official opening. It is very much lamented that the Board did not condescend to call a few of our intelligent working men to council(?) on this occasion. The whole affair was a complete failure."

At 6pm, a dinner took place at the Boot Hotel. It was supposed to be a public dinner but it was very difficult to obtain a ticket and even the press did not receive any tickets, which displeased them.

Despite these moaners and groaners, the park was and has been a great success!

[I for one have enjoyed walking around it, enjoying its beauty in all the seasons for the last 40 years! Ed.]

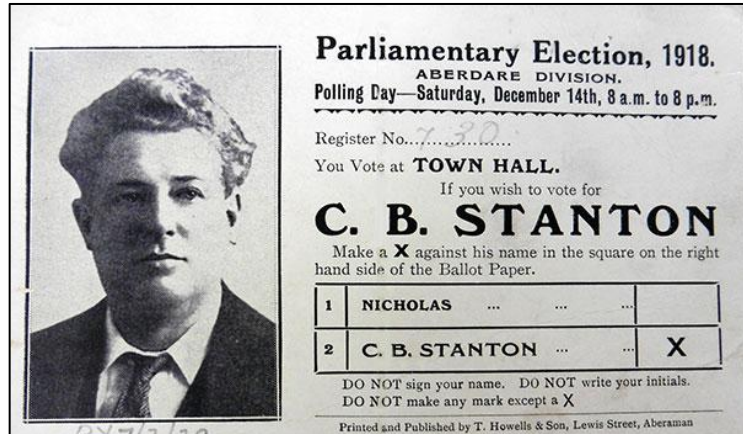
There will be more articles about the park in future issues.

I acknowledge information about the park received from Geoffrey Evans. His excellent book about the park, which costs £5.00, is available from the Cynon Valley Museum.

The Aberdare General Election of 1918



T.E. Nicholas



Charles Butt Stanton

Just as the Republicans had no real chance of beating Franco's troops in the Spanish Civil War so Rev T.E. Nicholas, "Niclas Glais," the ILP candidate had no real chance of winning this election and beating Charles Stanton. Jingoism and joy over winning the war was at fever pitch in the valley and for the ILP to put forward a pacifist and a Communist as an ILP candidate was in my eyes, a sure fire loser!

Glais was also an outsider; he lived in Llangybi in Cardiganshire so he was fairly unknown in Aberdare, which was another black mark against him.

On 21st September 1918, the *Aberdare Leader* printed a letter that Stanton had written to Admiral Beatty and General Haig congratulating them for their services in helping to win the war. Their reply to Stanton, from Haig, was published in the same edition of the paper. So here was Stanton popularly associated with the two men who had helped to win the war while Nicholas as a pacifist was made to look even more unpopular.

Clearly, Nicholas's chances of success were looking bad but worse was to follow showing his political naivety, when at his first election meeting he was asked if he would shake hands with a German. He replied in the affirmative and consequently pandemonium ensued. In his memoirs Nicholas's agent Edmund Stonelake criticised him for not explaining what sort of German he would shake hands with, and more ominously, admitted that he Stonelake did not spend much money on the campaign, for he saw that, "Our candidate had no earthly chance!"

It is interesting to note the contrast of two meetings of the candidates: Mr C.B. Stanton received an ovation when he entered the Market Hall, Aberdare. At least 5,000 voices cheered him lustily, and broke out into: "For he's a jolly good fellow".

Meanwhile at Miskin, Mountain Ash it was evident from the beginning that a large portion of the audience were from Stanton's camp and Nicholas was received with considerable boing when he arrived. The Chairman, Mr E. Morris, uttered a warning that if the candidate did not receive a fair

hearing he would not hesitate to bring the meeting to an abrupt conclusion.

The tumult got worse so that Nicholas could hardly make any more remarks, an appeal from the chairman proved futile, and the meeting was thereupon discontinued.

As the candidate's car, (which, however, did not contain Mr Nicholas, as he had gone out by the back passage), was making off it was attacked by the crowd and the hood smashed. Later on, some of the crowd who had followed the car pelted it with missiles. No personal injury was suffered.

Western Mail 13th December 1918.

Speaking just before the election, Stanton said about his opponent he is a member of the I.L.P.: "I Love Prussia" sort. This jingoism added fuel to Nicholas's downfall.

It is not surprising that on the election day of 14th December he, Nicholas received 6,229 votes while Stanton received 22,824 votes.

Although Nicholas lost to Stanton in politics, in the realm of poetry he was far, far superior to him as Nicholas, it is estimated won 50 eisteddfod chairs while Stanton won none!

Sources: *The 1918 General Election in the Constituency of Aberdare* by Christopher Rees In *Old Aberdare* volume 5 and *The Parliamentary History of Glamorgan 1542-1976* by Raymond Grant.

Mountain Ash Cooperative Branch Burnt Down

Miracle how Town Hall Escaped Damage 80 years ago

18 feet was all that separated the Town Hall from the burning Mountain Ash Bridge Cooperative Building yet the Town Hall escaped. The fire started about 11.15 on Saturday night.

As the Town Hall clock struck midnight, the whole of the Coop roof fell in with a mighty crash. The flames shot upwards into the wintry sky, lighting up the valley from Aberdare to Abercynon. The big blaze went on relentlessly, and as the ground floor was caught in the maelstrom of whirling flames, the last hope of salvaging anything from the Stores was gone.

In one house occupied by Mr & Mrs Scarle and their three children all were saved without a single singe. Kindhearted neighbours took charge of them all.

By 2.30 on Sunday morning, nothing was left but a molten mass, raging, bubbling and surging like so much white hot metal.

The origin of the fire is unknown, and the damage cannot be computed at anything less than £12,000 to £15,000.

The building was erected about 30 years ago.

Aberdare Leader 4th February 1939, page 6.

The Aberdare Cinema



The Aberdare Cinema, Cardiff Street, after closure

The Aberdare Cinema opened in 1912. It was built between the Conway Arms and Mr Michael Thomas's house in Cardiff Street. Sadly, it closed on 31st May 1958.

Here are the reactions on the staff who worked there:

"I think its terrible said 18-year-old Brenda Davies of Brynawelon, Cwmbach." She had been working there for 10 weeks. She had been quite attached to the antiquely exterioried building. "I don't know what I am going to do now."

The cashier Mair Jones, of Bwllfa Road, Cwmdare aged 20 had been in the cubbyhole for 11 years handing out tickets. She was going to Butlins to be a waitress.

Esther Gillett, Incline Row, Godreaman, aged 19 had worked as an usherette for nearly three and a half years. She felt very sad about it closing down, she liked it very much.

The manager Mr Charles Romney had been the projectionist and present manager there for 31 years. He said, "I am very sorry to see it go because it is the oldest cinema in the town".

On that last Saturday night, he pulled the grilled gate, closed and locked the cinema for the last time.

He still goes there every day ... but already it's a ghost building - a cinema without staff, without films and without an audience.

Aberdare Leader, 7th June 1958.

When an eisteddfod prize — was groceries

During the big coal strikes just before and after 1900 when money and food were in short supply, groceries were the prizes at some eisteddfodau.

The winners — poets, elocutionists and singers — as they walked home to their wives and mothers with their pats of butter, pots of jam, loaves of bread, bags of sugar, rounds of cheese and packets of tea, were as pleased as any winner of the most coveted of our national prizes for literary work!

Mr William John Harries of Henry Street, Aberaman, now in his seventies has in a long eisteddfodic career, won 600 prizes for poetry and elocution!

One of the most cherished prizes he took home was a parcel of groceries that he won when he was a young man for a poem of three verses written in praise of Tom Roberts' tea!

When he wrote the verses he was really striving after two prizes — for his mother had told him that if he won the food prize she would give him five shillings to buy some tobacco. He got his tobacco all right — here is the first verse:

“Down, down below in the bowels of the earth,
Where many a gallant deed has had its birth,
To the poor white slave, so refreshing and free,
Is the can that contains Tom Robert's tea.”

He worked in the pits for 40 years starting at the age of 12.

Siop-y-Parc, Gadlys

Ann Walters and her husband own the only shop in Aberdare which bears a Welsh name.

This shop has been occupied by the members of the Walters family for the past 60 years and in her father's younger days, (when it was a hairdressing saloon), debates on politics and religion went on there till the early hours.

“No wonder one of my brothers became a barrister,” she said, “Although he went to Oxford University, he always said that our shop was the best college he had ever known.”

At Siop-y-Parc, where any Welsh book or magazine can be bought, posters are prominently displayed for all the Welsh events held in the locality — including the preaching services held at the Welsh nonconformist chapels of the neighbourhood.

“We never show posters for cinema shows or football matches in our windows,” said Mrs Walters. “My father was staunch about that, and I suppose it behoves us to maintain the dignity of the shop.”

Articles by Glyn Griffiths from the *Aberdare Leader*, 17th March, 1956, page 3

Society News

In Memoriam

Mike Richards, 1943–2018

Michael Richards was born in British India into a military family and came to the UK when he was 10, settling in London.

In 1966 he started work in an outer London High School.

It was at this school that he met the love of his life Beryl Rees — ‘the girl from the valleys’. They were married for 39 years until 2009, when she died.

In 1984, he retired from teaching and the family moved to Wales, to be near his wife’s parents. After leaving teaching, he worked in the Civil Service until his retirement.

In Aberdare, he was an active member of St Elvan’s church and was also a Governor of several local schools. As well as being a committed Anglican, he was a totally committed Labour Party activist, and in Aberdare he was the Secretary of his local ward, Aberdare East. His enthusiasm, dedication and commitment as Secretary was unrivalled. Three years ago, he became the Treasurer of the Cynon Valley Constituency Labour Party, a role that he loved.

As he had once been a history teacher, he joined the Cynon Valley History Society in 2010.

He also had many other interests. He was a keen gardener and loved his roses. He was also a devoted dog owner and always had spaniels, and they were considered a central part of the family. In Aberdare, his two cocker spaniels, Leo and Josh, are almost as well known as he was.

We send our deepest sympathy to his daughter Victoria and her husband Jonathan.

Cynon Valley Museum Exhibitions and Talks

Paul Robeson until 16th February

Ann Clwyd Photographic Exhibition, 29th March–27th April.

Welsh Photographic Society Annual Salon, 3rd May to 1st June.

Coleg y Cymoedd Annual Art exhibition, 7th June to 29th June.

Talks programme

6th February: Fauna and Flora of The Dare Valley Country Park, by Tim Rich.

6th March: Historic Place Names of the Cynon Valley by James Mc Cann.

3rd April: Women of Llanhilleth Institute by Meg Guerney.

1st May: The Religious Revival of 1904 by Martin Barclay.
All at 7pm, price £3.00

New Local Historical Books

Labour Country: political radicalism and social democracy in South Wales 1831–1985, by Daryl Leeworthy, Price £20.00.

Professor Keith Laybourn praises the book as, “a much needed, ground-breaking and fascinating assessment (of the subject), it offers a rich feast of knowledge written in a most accessible enthusiastic, engaging and lyrical style. Truly impressive.”

David Dower by Gary Marsh. A biography of Dai Dower, the Abercynon-born boxer written by the ex-editor of the Cynon Valley Leader.
Price £10.00 available from Aberdare Library.

The Aberdare Valley Colliery Disasters, 1845–1861, by Gareth Harris, Coalopolis Press, 300 pp, price £12.99.

Historical Television Programmes

The Story of Wales presented by Huw Edwards, BBC4, 6 episodes.

Royal Cousins at War, BBC4, two episodes. This is about Tsar Nicholas, Kaiser Wilhelm and King George V.

The Real Versailles presented by Lucy Worsley, BBC4

Portillo’s Hidden History of Britain, Channel 5. 5 episodes.
There is an accompanying book to this series.

The Rise of the Clans, presented by Neil Oliver. A bloodthirsty look at Scottish history from Robert the Bruce to Mary Queen of Scots. BBC1, 3 parts.

American History’s Biggest Fibs with Lucy Worsley BBC4, 3 parts.

Some of these are available on BBC iPlayer and TV Catchup.

Dan Snow has a new online history channel: History Hit TV.

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.

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