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Air mail: by balloon in 1870

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### OUR NEXT MEETING

We will meet on Thursday, November 11th at 7.30pm in the Pagan Room of the Duke of Wellington. Jeff Alden will give a talk on *'The FW Edmond's Diaries: Cowbridge 1861 - 1918'*. This will be followed as usual by light refreshments and the chance to chat!

Admission for members is free; guests are invited to pay £3, which will grant membership for the next year. Could you please let Jeff Alden (773373) or Jose Rawlins (772750) know if you mean to attend?

### FAMILY BIBLES

At the AGM, Sue Cox raised the possibility of obtaining local family history information from family bibles. So, if members have access to bibles of families who have lived in Cowbridge and district (and not elsewhere), could you please copy out the details and send them to the editor at 1 Mill Park, Cowbridge? Many thanks.

### CGS WAR MEMORIAL

Many thanks to Jenny Kennedy for passing on the details of her researches into the men named on the memorial to those who died in the 1939-45 War. I will continue to investigate other records relating to these men.

### ACQUISITIONS

During the year we have received a number of donations, some of which we have passed on to the relevant County Record Offices. These include:

1. The Meyrick-Wynn marriage settlement of 1729 (to Denbigh RO)
2. Deeds relating to Cowbridge from a local solicitors' office: to Glamorgan RO, after making notes.
3. Photographs of Old Hall in the early 1970s.
4. Copies of other local deeds
5. Facsimiles of cartoons on South Wales towns, by Geoff Evans, for the Western Mail
6. A copy of the centenary *Bovian*

### CENTENARY BOVIAN

Neil Workman, secretary of the Grammar School Old Boys association, has produced a most interesting commemorative magazine reflecting on the 100 years since the official formation of the Old Boys Association. Anyone concerned with the history of the school would find it a good read. Copies, at £5, are available from me or from Neil Workman. Postal enquiries only to him, please, at 8 Hopyard Meadow, Cowbridge

## THE HANGINGS ON THE STALLING DOWN

*Brian James spoke on this subject at the AGM, and I am pleased that he has allowed me to include his article in this newsletter.*

In 1768 the judges decided to transfer the Great Sessions for Glamorgan from their traditional meeting place in Cardiff to the town hall in Cowbridge. (That is, the old guildhall which stood in the middle of the High Street near its junction with Church Street). According to the diarist, William Thomas, the judges had been affronted in some way in Cardiff. Over the next 15 years or so the town council in Cowbridge spent substantial sums of money in repairing and enlarging the building to accommodate the court: it was a big thing for Cowbridge to play host to the Sessions because they brought large numbers of people and their money into the town. The Sessions were held twice a year, in April and August.

But the bonanza only lasted twenty years. From 1788 the Sessions were back in Cardiff - I don't know why, though there was clearly much debate at the time about which town was most convenient.

The point is that it was the judges in the Great Sessions (later called the Assizes) who had the power to pass a sentence of death. And the sentences were carried out on the nearest open space - the Stalling Down. So the first point I want to make is that hangings took place only during this period of twenty years - 1768 to 1788 - when the Great Sessions were held in Cowbridge guildhall.

As is well known, laws in the 18th century were very severe; many crimes that would today seem relatively trivial carried the death penalty. Apart from murder and treason, many forms of housebreaking, burglary and common theft were capital offences if the property stolen was worth more than five shillings. Highway robbery, wrecking (a favourite pastime along the coast of the Vale), counterfeiting and forgery, and rioting were also crimes for which a person might be hanged. In practice, however, the courts were surprisingly sympathetic towards petty criminals; juries might refuse to find someone guilty if the likely punishment seemed disproportionate to the offence - or goods might be valued at 4s 11d to avoid the capital charge of grand larceny. And even when the jury convicted and the judge passed sentence, in a majority of cases the penalty was commuted from hanging to transportation to the colonies. It was only convicted murderers who could expect no mercy. And following death on the gallows, the bodies of murderers would be displayed in public places suspended from a gibbet, enclosed within an iron frame. The judge also had the power to allow surgeons to take the corpses of murderers for dissection, but I don't know if that ever happened in Glamorgan.

Only six people (all of them men) were executed by hanging during those twenty years that the Great Sessions for Glamorgan were held here in Cowbridge. At least ten others were condemned and then reprieved. More than thirty prisoners left Cowbridge on their way to exile and hard labour in the colonies, in North America or the West Indies. For minor offences (called misdemeanours) the common punishments were physical, either burning in the hand or whipping.

The courts were usually kept quite busy, even though Glamorgan was then a mainly rural county with a population of no more than about 60,000. There were frequent cases of murder,

manslaughter and infanticide. Time and again young women were brought before the court charged with killing their illegitimate babies; but in all the cases mentioned by William Thomas's diary the women were acquitted. Such cases were difficult to prove, perhaps, and perhaps sympathetic juries were anxious to give the unfortunate young women the benefit of the doubt. There was only one really local murder, that of Elizabeth William at Aberthin in January 1779. Her burial is recorded in the Llanblethian parish register; William John of Aberthin was tried at the April Sessions for her murder, and was acquitted.

But let us concentrate on the six prisoners who were hanged. There are scraps of information about each of them, but first of all, the way in which they met their end.

A lot of people seem to believe that the gallows stood on the highest point of the Stalling Down, where the clump of trees is. Sometimes it is even suggested that prisoners were hanged from a branch of one of the trees. None of this is true; it is not even certain if there were any trees there in the 18th century. (The famous clump seems to have been planted by the Revd JM Traherne at some date after 1815 to commemorate the Battle of Waterloo.) The actual site of the gallows was on lower ground close to Hollybush Farm, so the crowds that came to see an execution gathered on the rising ground to the north and the south of the track which runs across to Hollybush. Hopkin-James, in his *Old Cowbridge* (p.58) said that "felons were hanged, according to tradition, on the Aberthin (Hollybush) side on a spot where the fern never grows". George Yates's map of Glamorgan, published in 1799, marks the gallows roughly there, though no one can say exactly where it was. It was a permanent structure of two upright posts and a crosspiece, something like modern soccer goalposts; the crosspiece would have been a bit higher off the ground, I imagine.

The prisoner - his arms and legs already tied and with a noose around his neck - was conveyed up from Cowbridge to the place of execution in a cart or tumbril. At some point in the proceedings the sheriff's chaplain had the opportunity of trying to obtain the man's confession and of reading prayers and part of the burial service over him. It seems likely, therefore, that the chaplain actually accompanied the prisoner in the cart. (Whether there were guards, such as the sheriff's javelinmen, I'm not sure.) At the end of its slow, lumbering journey, the cart would come to a halt under the gallows; the rope would be tied to the crosspiece and, at the command of the sheriff (who was the master of ceremonies) horse and cart would move forward leaving the prisoner suspended. Since there would not have been much of a "drop", death would result from strangulation and not from the breaking of the neck. It would not therefore be instantaneous - far from it. The gradually weakening struggles and writhings of the body and the facial contortions of the victim were, of course, very much part of the spectacle that the crowd had assembled to watch. I have no evidence for this, but I suspect that many of the spectators would be wagering money on how long it took the prisoner to die.

It must seem particularly horrible to us that executions took place in public for the gratification of a crowd of onlookers. I don't suggest that any of your forebears stood on the Stalling Down more than 200 years ago to view these gruesome events, but I feel fairly certain that my own ancestors would have been there. Perhaps we should not be too judgemental.

Now for something about each of the six men who were executed on the Stalling Down between 1768 and 1788. The information that exists is far short of providing complete biographies; the facts come from the official record of the Court of Great Sessions and from the ever-useful diary of William Thomas.

1. Henry Thomas of Ystradgynlais in Breconshire was hanged in April 1770 for the murder of Watkin Thomas of Boverton, who was travelling near Pontardawe in the Swansea Valley. He was murdered for a sum of money (50s) he was carrying. Henry Thomas is described in the official record as a labourer, but the diary makes it clear that he had been until recently a servant of the squire of Ynyscedwyn; possibly he had no regular work after leaving service. He was 21 or 22 years old. The judge ordered that his corpse should be hung in chains, that is, be hung on a gibbet, presumably somewhere in the west of the county, near the scene of the crime.

2. Thomas Arthur of Lisvane, a labourer, was hanged in August 1778 for the murder of Joan Watkin of Cyncoed, near Cardiff, a widow. She was 75, he was 20. From William Thomas's account, it seems that the murder was committed in the course of a burglary, and we are told that Thomas Arthur stole "but a trifle from her, two yards of swanskin (which is a kind of flannel), a bottle of liquor etc." His body was subsequently hung on a gibbet set up on the Great Heath, north of Cardiff.

3. John Thomas Harry of Eglwysilan, a cobbler, was hanged in May 1786. There were three indictments against him:

- for stealing a beaver coat the property of Richard Thomas,
- for stealing a silver watch the property of William David,
- for a burglary (unspecified in the record). With so many charges proved against him, the judge doubtless decided that an example had to be made. This is what William Thomas wrote in his diary:

Was hanged on Stalling Down John Thomas Harry, about 45 years old, that dreadful thief, and his corpse was set in a coffin and carried to be buried to Eglwys Ilan, and great was the crowd that came to see his death.

4. Hopkin Thomas alias Bowen, a labourer of Llangyfelach, was found guilty on two indictments, of stealing a gelding belonging to William Rees and of stealing a mare belonging to William Jenkin. The theft of horses and livestock was common in the county, so perhaps for that reason the judge did not reprieve this man and he was hanged. He was 22. According to William Thomas his body was buried at St Hilary, but there is no record of this in the parish register.

5 & 6. Two men were hanged on 20 April 1787.

William Owen of Merthyr Tydfil, labourer, was found guilty of murdering his lover, Mary Harris, a servant in the household of Mr Bacon of Merthyr, by stabbing her with a penknife. He was about 23.

Cornelius Gordon of Llanrhidian, yeoman, was found guilty of murdering his wife Mary by striking her with a spade. He was 37.

William Thomas the diarist was struck by the swiftness of justice in these two cases; Mary Harris was killed on 1 April and Mary Gordon a few days later. Their murderers were tried on 14 April and executed on 20 April. "A dismal tragedy", wrote William Thomas.

The execution of Cornelius Gordon was still remembered in the Cowbridge neighbourhood more than a hundred years later. Hopkin-James wrote in *Old Cowbridge* (p.59) that "according to local tradition, the last person to be hanged [on the Stalling Down] was a yeoman from Gower of the name of Gordon". But no details of the event could be recalled by that time (1922). However, around 1860, David Jones of Wallington talked to a very old lady at St Mary Church, Mrs Ann Howe, who had been present on the Stalling Down on that terrible day in 1787. She was then a young girl of ten or eleven. The occasion and the man's name remained in her mind throughout her long life; but nothing else that she remembered seems right. The reality had faded, to be replaced by myth or a figment of the imagination. "The whole Down trembled at the instant he was hanged as with an earthquake", she told David Jones. She also said that she had stood by Cornelius's mother who, with other members of his family, had brought a coffin to

take the body back to Gower for burial. I'm not at all sure about that; the record is unfortunately not specific in this case, but the law was clear that a murderer could not be buried but had to be hung in chains on a gibbet. Yet, could the Gordon family have had sufficient influence to obtain this favour? For everyone at that time regarded the denial of burial as abhorrent, and perhaps even more shameful than execution itself. This is the point that I'm coming to: Cornelius Gordon was different from the other victims of the law - he had social status. He belonged to one of the most prominent families in Gower; a relative, Richard Gordon of Burry Green, had even been High Sheriff of Glamorgan, in 1770. This is almost certainly the reason why his name was remembered for so long, and why the young labourer from Merthyr, William Owen, who was hanged alongside him, was forgotten. Mrs Howe remembered her social equal, but not the labourer.

Public executions were not abolished until 1868. After 1788 in Glamorgan they took place on the Little Heath, between Cardiff and Roath; and after about 1830 on a platform in front of the county gaol in St Mary Street, Cardiff, where the famous Dic Penderyn was hanged in 1831 for his part in the Merthyr Rising. (The covered market was built on the site after the county gaol was moved to its present location.)

*Brian James*

### AIR MAIL : BY BALLOON IN 1870

*I am grateful to John Edmondes for permission to print these two letters, sent from Paris during the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71. They were written on the flimsiest of paper (as they were sent by balloon) and sent to Emma Edmondes in Cowbridge by Harriet Charlton. Harriet was the youngest daughter of Sir Jeremiah Homfray, of Llandaff Court; Emma was her niece, and through the Homfrays was related to Richard Bassett of Bonvilston House.*

1. Par ballon monte; Postmark Paris Passy, 7 November 1870

8 rue du Marche, Passy

My Dearest Emma,

I wonder whether you now get my letters sent by the balloons? This is my second letter to you and I sent one to Bonvilston some days ago. I don't much think you receive them but I shall go on from time to time first to let you know that I am still alive but not getting very fat. I fancy we shall not give in until we shall have swallowed our old shoes. We are pretty used to horsemeat which is not very bad. Beef is now allowed us 25 grammes a day each person, to make a pound it requires 500 grammes, just about two mouths full and one has to stand ones turn nearly 2 hours in the rain generally every day, no butter, no eggs, no fritter (?) no milk and very few vegetables worth their weight in gold; no charcoal, coals and wood quite a luxury, in fact. Just enough to keep us alive. We shall know tomorrow what we are going to do. Armistice has failed I believe we are to try a great battle which we have no chance of winning without canons of which they have hundreds. I suppose our poor gardes nationaux will be butchered after which of course they will enter Paris. What can we hope against 500,000 real soldiers? I was in the Bois yesterday, I believe for the last time, it is completely cut down up to the lake all round and looks so wretched and desolate. We have only provisions now for ten days after which we must either starve, fight or capitulate which I wish they would and finish at once as there is no other end possible. If the provinces had come to our rescue we should certainly have conquered. With an army behind and before they must have been surrounded but the provinces are decided to stay and defend their own towns and will do nothing to save Paris who they say has got them

into the mess and must do for for herself. It is a stupid idea because when they have finished Paris, they will take the towns one after the other which will not be difficult separately whereas if they had all risen en masse even without artillery we could have opposed at least a million and have driven them out. It is expected they will begin to bombard us this week and we shall go into the Blots while it lasts, as we are not enough in the centre here and shou!d be much exposed, some days when our forts fire you have no idea how our house trembles and what will it be presently? Please give news of me to D1 and Aemilius and perhaps you could let them know at Bonvilston in case they have not had my letters.

God bless you, H.C.

A ballon will start tomorrow, weather permitting

2. Par ballon monte; Postmark: Paris illegible, Cowbridge 18 January 1871

My Dearest Emma,

I suppose you are wondering whether I am alive, so I will make another attempt though I don't much fancy you have got my letters. However I am very happy to say that I am well and bearing all our troubles wonderfully. For the last few days we are being bombarded nearly all day and without as . . . . peace during the night and goes to sleep and a great many people sit up all night in their cellar which I have never tried as I am more afraid of the rats than of the obus's. Three days ago, the enemy opened new batteries at Montretout (?) just opposite my windows intended specially to destroy Passy so I thought it was high time to come into the centre of Paris so I came with Alice here rue de Lille 33 at the Elots and intend remaining a few days until they finish Passy which is not yet began.

They direct their fire with fury on all the hospitals and we have just adopted a good plan of putting all the Prussians wounded in Paris into our hospitals and sent to tell Bismark to fire on his own men if he likes. They began to bombard us without giving the usual notice and in fact they seem to despise all rules of war. Poor Grenelle is being much the worse we hear, but I don't know whether your old school has received any harm. As to our food thanks to our horses we shall not die of hunger, and we are quite used to it, but the rations are diminished every week and are now reduced to half a pound of horseflesh for three days and for three people. The worst is the want of . . . . and the cold has been so great but the weather is much milder the last three days. We make hard work to get rid of these savages, but we shall soon . . . . better if we can only hold out a little longer. This paper is so disagreeable that I don't know if you will be able to read this.

Your affectionate aunt, H C

Our street has not yet received an obus but all around here has had plenty and some people killed but no very serious harm, and more noise than worth.

(Paris was to fall on January 28th)

## CORRESPONDENCE

Brian James has commented on David Jones's note on Philip Walton, mentioned in the *Vale Clocks and Clockmakers* article in the last newsletter.

“David Jones rarely gets things muddled, but here he does. Surely his father could not have

known someone who died in 1769! He confuses Philip Walton the clockmaker with his son Dr John Walton who died in 1790. Was it the Doctor who was the great drunkard, I wonder?”