

NEWSLETTER

of Cowbridge History Society

Something to look forward to

A book launch - a film show - a new season of talks



Autumn 2016

Welcome to a new season

We trust you all had an enjoyable summer. It seems to have gone very quickly, but one thing we've all missed is the monthly meeting of Cowbridge History Society. The programme for our next "term" can be viewed at the back of this newsletter, and holds many delights in store.

In addition to our monthly talks, we will be hosting a book launch (see below) and another film show. The film selected is *Paths of Glory*, the 1957 First World War classic starring Kirk Douglas. In addition to the centenary of the events depicted in the film, it will be Douglas's own 100th birthday in December.

Based on a novel by Humphrey Cobb - itself loosely based on a true historical incident - the film was one of Stanley Kubrick's earliest and greatest directorial successes. The film will be shown at Cowbridge Town Hall on **Thursday 10th November at 7pm**, and tickets are available at £4 each. The usual ice cream trolley will also be wheeled out at the interval!

Publications and research

In recent weeks, I've spent some of my time formatting David Francis's lively and fascinating memoir of Llanharry and Llansannor, in preparation for publication as a separate booklet. David has a great reputation as a local historian; his previous published works include *The Border Vale of Glamorgan* (1976). The committee has been discussing the possibility of making this the first in a series of booklets about villages in the rural Vale. Long-standing member Jean Silvan Evans has kindly given us access to the articles written by her late husband Dennis, who did a great deal of research into the history of Peterston-super-Ely, and future publication of these in booklet form is a distinct possibility.

Our President Brian James, meanwhile, has been putting the finishing touches to *Cowbridge and Llanblethian: an Historical Medley*, which will be out in good time for Christmas. It will contain articles by many members and former members of Cowbridge History Society, some of which were previously published in the newsletters created over the years for both the Local History Society and Cowbridge Record Society by Jeff Alden and have been updated for the purposes of the book. Others will be new to our readership. Professor Chris Williams has kindly agreed to launch the book, in the **Lesser Hall at Cowbridge Town Hall, on Friday 4th November at 6.30pm**, ie. immediately prior to our monthly meeting (doors open around 6pm). As is usual for a book launch, refreshments will be provided, and members will have the



opportunity to purchase the book for £7.50 per copy, a 25% saving on the cover price of £10. This will be the first book published in the name of Cowbridge History Society rather than Cowbridge Record Society.

Media Watch

We have taken the first steps to advertise the grants now available to individuals involved in independent research into the local history of the Vale, which have replaced the Jeff Alden Prize formerly offered through the Welsh Heritage Schools Initiative. You may have seen information about these in the *Cowbridge Gem*, and posters have now been put up at other suitable locations.

Also in the *Gem* you may have come across a letter asking for details of the Llanblethian “Faith Healer” referenced in Brian Friel’s play of the same name. A local newspaper was reputedly Friel’s source for the incident, but as yet we have not managed to unearth a copy of the report. In the play, the faith healer is called Frank (or Francis) Hardy. At that time, as far as I can ascertain, there was no such paper as the *West Glamorgan Chronicle* mentioned in the play. Even if there had been, it seems unlikely that an event in the Vale would have been covered. The online archive of Welsh newspapers available from the National Library of Wales only goes up to 1919 at present, and this particular incident appears to have taken place somewhat later than that. That there was such an incident seems certain, as Brian James recalls:

“There is something at the back of my memory that I have heard talked about when I was in school. The chapel hall in Piccadilly, Llanblethian, now a private house, had been built in the 1880s as a branch of Ramoth, mainly as a Sunday School. But I think by the 1940s it may have been taken over by one of the Pentecostal churches. Memory suggests that the preacher/faith healer was called Fred Baggs - I could hardly have made up a name like that!”

There may well have been reports in the local, and even the London, press, but it would be difficult to find them without something less vague to go on. (Before anyone else suggests asking the playwright, I should mention that Brian Friel died last year and is thus not available for consultation!)

RCAHMW and Open Doors

Our President, Brian James, reports that he has recently visited the new premises of the Royal Commission of Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales, which is now located within the National Library of Wales at Aberystwyth. Brian was very impressed. I also see that they are having an “Open Doors” event on 8th September, though it will probably be too late by the time you receive this much-amended and delayed issue of the newsletter. However, other organisations are also holding “Open Doors” events during the month, including:

Porthcawl Museum (17th September)
Tabernacle Independent Chapel, Pontycymmer (17th September)
Tondur Methodist Church (23rd & 24th September)
Hetty Colliery Engine House (24th & 25th September)
St John’s House, Newcastle Hill (24th & 25th September)
Nantgarw China Works Museum (15th, 22nd & 29th September)

Details of these and many others are listed on the Cadw website here:

<http://cadw.gov.wales/opendoors/events-2014>

[Yes, I know it says 2014 but it’s correct.]

Glamorgan Family History Society

Another forthcoming event that may interest members is the Glamorgan Family History Society Family History Fair, which takes place on 8th October at Merthyr Tydfil Leisure Centre. Someone will be on hand all day to answer questions and to demonstrate Coflein, the online database and catalogue. Admission is free, parking is available, and the event will run between 10am and 3.30pm.

United Reformed Church History Society

Jean Silvan Evans of Peterston kindly notified me of the annual conference of the URC History Society, which met in July. Although I am not a member of the society, I was warmly welcomed to their gathering at the United Reformed Church, Cardiff, and listened to a fascinating lecture by Rev Dr Robert Pope on the subject of "Conscription, Conscience and Building God's Kingdom: Welsh Nonconformists and the Great War". I know that many of you would have enjoyed it. For more information about the society, take a look at the Westminster College website: <http://www.westminster.cam.ac.uk/rcl/about/urc-history-society> Or indeed, ask Jean!

Deb Fisher

News from the Local History Studies Room

As our digitisation programme gallops along, more and more of the files are labelled with threatening notices – 'nothing to be added or removed without consultation'. These files contain scanned photographs and documents, each labelled with its individual CHS accession number. We now hold just under 4000 such items. The team of Dick Tonkin, Frank Hartles, Malcolm Francis and me (under John Sherwood's watchful eye) are battling on with the digitisation programme - I am amazed that for much of the time I can now manage on my own. The work involves a fair bit of transcribing and typing up/deciphering research notes, which help keep brain cells active. The next step, now that we have purchased a computer monitor, will be to set up a trial in the History Room and put it to the test of retrieving and displaying scanned items to visitors. This plan should take off in September.

There have been a number of recent accessions to the archive. Alf Charles, known to so many in Cowbridge, was clerk to Ystradowen parish council for many years until it ceased in 1974, and has donated the minute books which date from 1895. Once notes have been made of particular relevance and interest, these will go to Glamorgan Archives for safe keeping, along with the account books for Ystradowen parish from 1938, and also the minute book for the Cowbridge Welsh Society, which started in 1946 and ended about 1961, given to us by Val Charles.

Billy James, caretaker of the Town Hall, brought in many photographs of chairmen of the Rural District Council from 1923 to 1955. Again, we have scanned these, listed all the relevant details and are passing them on to the GRO. Other items passed on include a 1950s scrapbook of Cowbridge Youth Club's trip to Sorrento and failed attempt to meet with Gracie Fields (since we first acquired this, we have been given detailed information about the holiday and everyone concerned has been identified). Items of Grammar School and High School interest in the 1930s (scanned and recorded) have also gone to the GRO, as have some 19th century property deeds and a letter to Hensol Castle by an unknown writer in the late 1800s. I have been loaned the diary of a nurse who worked at Crossways hospital during World War II, and am in the process of recording and scanning points of particular interest.

Reg Whittle, former woodwork master at Cowbridge Grammar School, has sent a pile of black and white photographs of events, staff and pupils at the school during the 1950s and '60s, and has been reunited with ex-pupil Dr Rick Caldicott via the internet.

The *Cowbridge Railway Book*, kindly given to the History Society by David Jones, sold immediately, the proceeds going to the society. We have been promised further local history books (including a copy of *Old Cowbridge* by Hopkin James) from Nigel Stokes, whose late father, Douglas Stokes, restored and lived in

Greystones, Factory Lane, Llanblethian, until the 1950s – Nigel has photographs to give us of the restoration of the derelict building when the family took it over. Douglas Stokes was a Grammar School pupil in the 1930s, and later worked for the Midland Bank.

From our digital collection, we have been able to supply our printers with photos for use in *Cowbridge and Llanblethian: an Historical Medley*. During the Queen's birthday celebrations in May we loaned a number of photographs to the Cowbridge Co-op for their exhibition throughout that month (they acknowledged the society as promised, but no donation came our way).

As usual, we are extremely grateful for the continuing help and interest of Old Hall administrative staff. At the Cowbridge Food Festival, they offered us the chance to mount an exhibition, sell refreshments and publicise the society in the hope of boosting our funds, but this would have required more time to organise than we could cope with – perhaps another year!

The James Family of Cowbridge

In a previous CHS newsletter, there was a note on William Aaron James, the builder of Stafford House on Westgate, The Shield, Graig House (the 'Gem' office) and St. Crispins on Eastgate, and The Cairns below St Quentin's castle. William's family in this area was extensive and colourful, and the following is extracted from information sent in 2000 by a Canadian descendant, Mrs Ceridwen Harris –

William James, the son of William and Mary James of The Herberts, St Mary Church, was born in 1771, married Mary Gwatkin and became a successful builder - their sons Matthias, born 1796, and William, born 1798, continued the family business. Matthias was a skilful stone mason, working and living around 7-11 High St. Cowbridge in the 1860s/'70s (hence 'Mason's Yard').

William, his brother, concentrated on the cabinet making and undertaking side of the business. He is believed to have lived in East Villa, 48 Eastgate, in the 1830s and '40s, and he married three times. His first wife, Ann, from Welsh St Donats, died young. With his second wife, Margaret Reynolds of Cowbridge, William produced seven daughters, and with his third, Harriet Strange Fry of Bath, had three girls and two boys. One daughter by wife Margaret, also called Margaret and born in Cowbridge in 1825, married an army sergeant, lived out in Ceylon and Cawnpore, India, was widowed young, narrowly escaped death in the Indian Mutiny, and brought her children and pet mongoose back here on visits, their coarse sea shanties shocking the townsfolk. Her sister Anne, born in 1828 in Cowbridge, also married into the army, and established a large chemist's shop in Shanghai.

William James's third wife, Harriet, was the daughter of a Bath stonemason, Aaron Fry, a relation of the Fry's chocolate family but unable to inherit their fortune because of his religion. One of their sons was the William Aaron James referred to above, who married Selina Booth of Staffordshire and built and settled in Stafford House (developing the adjoining row of terraced cottages there on Westgate).

The other son was Alfred George James, born 1853, who married Elizabeth Webber of Bridgend and became a master cabinet maker, also making coffins. Elizabeth was said to have been unhappy in Cowbridge, and her need for heavy drinking caused rather a scandal in the town. Alfred lost money in an unsuccessful lawsuit over a Cowbridge right of way, and to boost his income taught woodwork in the Grammar School. He kept a shop at 47 High St. (Manchester House, now Arthur John's clothes shop) selling china and furniture, and in the 1860s was one of the 18th Glamorgan Rifle Volunteers. A photograph of the shop appears on our front cover. Alfred visited Russia several times to visit his sister Harriet.

This sister, Harriet Annette James, born in Cowbridge in 1843, was well educated and became governess to the Russian Nabokov family (relations of the author of *Lolita*). She had her own estates in the Caucasus mountains, and paid visits to Cowbridge, but in 1917 had to escape the Russian Revolution with what few possessions she could carry and ended up being looked after ('a difficult old lady') by her nephew in Newcastle.

One of Alfred James's sons was Stuart Ellery James, born 1891 and pictured on the next page. His bright red hair made him stand out in the small town of Cowbridge, and he was noted for getting into scrapes (one of his relatives was in the police force here and another was a local magistrate, so he was forever being reported). One instance was when he rode a penny farthing down Primrose Hill at great speed into a whole flock of sheep that was crossing the river bridge; he and his brother would hurl tomatoes at the drunks leaving the Vale of Glamorgan pub from their upstairs bay window of 47 High St. He attended the Grammar School, and then in WWI joined the London Scottish Regiment (claiming a fictitious Scottish grandmother because he wanted to wear a kilt). He was seriously wounded in this war, and tragically in World War II his wife was killed when their home in Kent was bombed. He is remembered by the family for being a talented artist (sketching comrades in the trenches, painting delicate watercolours and judging art competitions), for having a keen sense of humour and for being an excellent raconteur. Many of the family tales have come from him.

All the James family details, including photographs, are in a file in the Jeff Alden Local History Studies Room. There is also a second file, about the Llandough branch of the family, just as entertaining, and that could be another story.

Betty Alden



The Somme - and a War Poet with Local Connections!

For once, I am not talking about Alun Lewis. As I was reading Betty's article on the James family and their wartime experiences, it struck me as very appropriate to mention this year's widespread commemorations of the 1916 Battle of the Somme. A vigil took place in Cardiff, at the Welsh National War Memorial (right), on the 30th June, and many other places in Wales paid public tribute to their war dead. The commemorations are not yet over, since the battle continued, on and off, until 18th November. This date will be marked by a special service of thanksgiving at the Thiepval Memorial where the names of the missing are recorded.



At the same time, recognition has been given to the author of one of the most popular poems of all time - "High Flight", written by an Anglo-American Spitfire pilot, John Gillespie Magee, Jr (left), who was serving in the UK with the Royal Canadian Air Force. Magee was killed in a mid-air collision in 1941 (aged only 19!) He had written his famous poem just a few months earlier while stationed at Llandow air base. As 2016 is the 75th anniversary of the composition of this well-loved poem, a special service was held at St Athan on 16th August; it was attended by Magee's younger brother, now in his nineties, and the poem was read out during the ceremony.

*Deb Fisher
Publications Officer*

MONTHLY PROGRAMME FOR 2016-17

Cowbridge History Society meetings take place in the Lesser Hall, Town Hall, Cowbridge
Talks start at 7.30pm on the first Friday of each month unless shown otherwise.

2016

7th October *The Welsh paintings of Julius Ibbetson*
Brian Davies

4th November *Soldier-writers on the Western Front during the First World War*
Anne Powell
(Maud Gunter Memorial Lecture)

NOTE: This meeting will be preceded by the launch of *Cowbridge and Llanblethian: an Historical Medley* at **6.30pm**. You are all invited; refreshments provided.

2nd December *From Canton to Kensington: William Goscombe John, sculptor*
Gwerfyl Gardner

2017

6th January *The Dissenters, part II: Civil War and Restoration; toleration, science, and education*
Don Gerrard

3rd February *Religious life in Cowbridge and district in the mid-19th century*
Chris Turner

3rd March *Three Cardiff communities: Roath, Splott and Adamsdown from pre-Norman times*
Jeff Childs

13th March **CHARTER DAY TRIP: Tretower Court and Bedwelty House**
Please note that this is a Monday

7th April *The Blue Pilgrims*
Graham Phillimore

5th May **AGM at 7pm**, followed by:
History like Teacher never taught it
Phil Carradice

This newsletter is issued approximately three times a year. Local history news items can be sent to dicktonkin@btinternet.com for potential publication in the next newsletter, or brought along to the next monthly meeting.