

CYNON VALLEY HISTORY SOCIETY
PRESIDENT: THE LORD ABERDARE

HANES



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

ISSUE NUMBER 39.

SUMMER 2007

THE TEN GREATEST CYNON-ITES.

The very first edition of Hanes contained a quiz entitled "How well do you know this Valley?" (Hanes No.1, 1984).

We may well task you again on this subject in a future issue, but meanwhile we are conducting a poll to establish the names of the TEN GREATEST MEN (OR WOMEN) OF THE CYNON VALLEY.

We are firstly publishing our own list, and would ask you to complete yours and then drop it into a ballot box that will be placed at the back of the Parish Hall. Alternatively your selection may be handed to any of our Officers, or submitted to the Editor through the post, or by E-Mail. You need not sign your entry if you so wish.

Do not worry if the names you wish to nominate are already on our list. It will be both interesting and valuable to receive your choice, and to draw up a consensual list.

A top name will be chosen according to the number of votes cast.

The Editor's list is set out in alphabetical order, and not on a merit basis.

- **LORD JUSTICE EDMUND-DAVIES. [BARON EDMUND-DAVIES OF ABERPENNAR], (LAW LORD).***
- **THOMAS EVANS [TELYNOG], (POET).**
- **HENRY AUSTIN BRUCE. [BARON ABERDARE], (POLITICIAN).**
- **THE REVD.JOHN GRIFFITH. (CLERIC AND CHURCH BUILDER).**
- **GRIFFITH RHYS JONES [CARADOG], (MUSICIAN).**
- **ALUN LEWIS. (POET).**
- **THE REVD.THOMAS PRICE. (MINISTER AND POLITICIAN).**
- **W.W.PRICE. (Historian).**
- **DAVID WILLIAMS [ALAW GOCH] (COLLIERY OWNER AND EISTEDDFODWR).**
- **EVAN THOMAS. (INVENTOR – MINERS' SAFETY LAMP).**

***Born at Mountain Ash. Chairman of the Aberfan Tip Disaster Tribunal**

THE BRITISH INQUISITION

Some of the things I remember from my childhood in the valleys seem to belong to an earlier period of history. For example, I remember writing on slates in school. The slates were in wooden frames like pictures, and the pencils we used for writing on them were also made of slate. I remember the juddering sensation of riding to Pontypridd on a tramcar with iron wheels and wooden seats, and I remember how in Market Street on winter evenings the naphtha flares would be lit to illuminate the market stalls and the jostling crowds that milled around them. The smell and the smoke they emitted was at least as noticeable as the light they shed, and the stalls, beside selling vegetables and fish and trinkets, also sold patent medicines to cure all diseases, and bolts of cloth by the yard, and there were psychics who foretold your future, and crippled beggars holding out their caps for your spare halfpennies.

I was born in Hopkinstown. The different valleys were more self-contained then, and to some extent had their own characteristics. To us the Cynon Valley was thought of as being somewhat more prosperous and respectable than ours. Gwyn Thomas* shared that feeling and would describe dressing with care on his occasional visits to an aunt in Mountain Ash. Hopkinstown had the opposite reputation. When a young policeman and his wife moved to the house next door to us, she said she'd been warned to expect the worst, because it was said that "All the scum of the Rhondda end up in Hopkinstown"!

But in many ways life was very similar throughout the valleys, and I'd like to write about one aspect of it that affected them all – not in the twenties but in the thirties. That was the Means Test**. Some people find it hard to understand the great and lasting bitterness that those two words evoked in this area during the last century. After all, if resources are scarce, it is only fair to ensure that money is not being given to people who are not really in need. The bitterness arose not from the principle of means testing, but firstly from the way it was administered, and secondly from a turn of the screw which was introduced as the Depression grew deeper.

Means testing in those days was not carried out by the applicant turning up at the Labour Exchange and answering questions over the counter. It was enforced by an army of inquisitors known as the Means Test Men, who could knock on any door at any time and conduct an inspection on the spot. He would want to know, for instance, since the head of the household claimed to be out of work, why he was not in the house – a question less reasonable than it sounds today, because at that time it was practically unknown for any adult male to turn into a couch potato. The Means Test Man would be on the alert for any signs of unwarrantable affluence – an apparently new garment hanging in the passage, or a smell of roast beef. Occasionally he would look into other rooms or upstairs, and there was no question of asking whether he had a search warrant.

Sometimes of course his suspicions were warranted. The Household Means Test meant that any earner was expected to contribute to the support of any non-earner living on the same premises. Beatrice Wood in her autobiography "Wednesday's Child" recalls how her mother, single-handedly bringing up a family of children in Merthyr, tried to get around the system by claiming that her young son, now working in the pit, no longer lived with her but was lodging with a relative nearer to the colliery. When a young child ran in warning of the approach of a Means Test Man, quick think was called for. When he entered, he found the woman washing the family dog in a large tin bath in front of the fire; while upstairs a naked pit boy was cowering and shivering under the bed.

The rate of unemployment rose to 20% nationwide, and was far higher in places like South Wales, heavily dependent on a single industry. The Treasury became desperate to reduce the drain on the budget, and this was done by replacing the Household Means Test by a Family Means Test. As recorded in the history books, this sounds like a minor administrative adjustment, but there is no way of measuring the difference it made to the daily lives of many people, Beattie's mother's little scam would no longer have worked. All employed members of the family were still expected to contribute to the income of unemployed relatives although they lived in different houses, or even in different valleys. A young working man would be suddenly informed that he was deemed able to pay a fixed weekly sum to his parents and that their dole was therefore being reduced by the said amount

The measure was divisive and deeply resented. It had been unpleasant to depend on public money, but it was far more unpleasant and guilt-inducing to depend in part on, say, a working son with a young family and problems of his own, and an aggrieved daughter-in-law whose resentment was sometimes directed not at the government which demanded the subsidy but at its recipients. The new system could rip families apart, and for the first time introduce a degree of estrangement between those who had succeeded in finding work and those who had failed.

It took around fifty years for the scars of that experience to fade. For those with the longest memories, it still seems faintly surprising that a Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer can calmly use the phrase "means-tested benefits" without arousing a knee-jerk reaction of protest among his own back-benchers.

Elaine Morgan.

* Gwyn Thomas (1913-1981) novelist, short- story writer and playwright.

** Introduced by the National Government of 1931 (Editor).

The Editor of **HANES** is most grateful to Mrs.Elaine Morgan for having found time to write this evocative article especially for the Society. Her contribution is most welcome.

Mrs.Morgan television playwright and author, was born at Pontypridd, Glam., the daughter of a colliery pumpsman. She was educated at Oxford (Lady Margaret Hall) where she read English. She was a lecturer for the Workers' Education Association until her marriage in 1945 and became a fee-lance writer in the early 1950's. As a writer for television she has specialized in serials documentaries and adaptations. Among her most memorable successes were Richard Llewellyn's *How Green Was My Valley* (1976), Jack Jones's *Off to Philadelphia in the Morning* (1978) and *The Life and Times of Lloyd George* (1980), all made for BBC Wales. She has also published *The Descent of Women* (1972), a feminist view of evolution which was an international best-seller, *Falling Apart: The Rise and Decline of Urban Civilisation* (1976) and *the Aquatic Ape* (1982), a theory of human evolution. Elaine currently writes for the *Western Mail* (and *Hanes!*) *With acknowledgement to The Oxford Companion to the Literature of Wales (Oxford U.P. 1986).*

VICTORIAN DELIGHTS

GOLD.....

In 1837, King William IV died, and his niece, Victoria ascended the throne in his place.

A detailed description of Aberdare, as it was that year, appears in Volume One, *Old Aberdare*. This article by D.M.Richards was actually written in 1897, on the occasion of her 60th year as monarch.

Ten years earlier, on the 22nd.June 1887, the whole of the British Empire had celebrated the Golden Jubilee of the Queen's reign. Some of the festivities were lavish, particularly those held in London. Here events were of the middling sort. True there was a general Jubilee holiday, and the usual flag waving, high teas and dinners for the poor. *The Aberdare Times* however commented that they feared that "*the great day would pass off very quietly here - with nothing of lasting benefit to the town*"

Perhaps it had in mind the fact that. Sir W.T.Lewis, The Maerdy, had offered the town the plot of ground upon which the Conservative Club now stands for the purpose of a free library, and also promised on behalf of the Marquess of Bute the sum of £1000 towards the building of the premises. This generous gift was however rejected. "*To the lasting disgrace of Aberdare (wrote the Journalist D.M.Richards, in 1894) the offer was not accepted*".

There were of course celebrations here to mark the event. There was a public holiday, the usual displays of flags and banners, and merry peals of bells were rung at St.Elvan's.

At Ysguborwen House and grounds, the liberal and philanthropic Mrs.Thomas, gave the bulk, if not all, of the secular school children a Monster Tea Party that lasted from 2-30 to 8.00 p.m. The children were entertained by the Ysguborwen Band, and Mrs.Thomas later presented the 2,500 children present with Jubilee mugs. The evening ended with the spectacle of the burning of a very large bonfire on Ysguborwen Mountain.

The town provided a hot dinner for the aged poor of the district; some 300 people participated and enjoyed the treat The Menu consisted of Roast Beef, Plumb Pudding, Cwrw da (the provision of which had to be justified to local Temperance groups), and ginger beer. The Aberdare Volunteer Band entertained the diners. At the end of the proceedings the health of the Queen was drunk in a bumper. a local chemist, Tudor Williams, handed out tobacco and snuff to the guests and *three cheers for the Queen were called for*.

In the afternoon a "Monster Procession" assembled in Commercial Place and led by the Volunteers and their band, the Clergy, and school children perambulated the streets of the town, returning to Commercial Place where the Volunteers formed a square around the assembly, and fired a volley of 21 blank cartridges, and frequent Feu de joie.

At dusk, crowds climbed the hillsides to view the lighting up of the celebratory bonfires, and town illuminations. These were lit at precisely 10. o'clock. The main attraction was the burning of the 30-40 foot pile erected by the Gadlys Company. Fires could be seen burning on the Brecon Beacons. In all 9 immense fires could be seen from that vantage point.

Below, in the valley, Maerdy House and Bryn- Awel were brilliantly illuminated as was the whole of the town, with the Constitutional Club lit with a "pretty device of gas jets".

In London there were formal celebrations at Westminster Abbey. Amongst those present was that year's High Constable of Miskin Higher, David Davies, Grocer, Canon Street, Aberdare. .

In London, Davies may have witnessed the Queen riding in an open landau drawn by her six famous creams with an escort of Indian Cavalry, or seen the Crown Prince of Germany in the Abbey, clothed in white and silver with the German Eagle on his helmet. "*Dear Fritz*", recorded the Queen, "*Outshone all the rest*"

During the Service at the Abbey our high constable sat between the Mayors of Brighton and Hastings, both wore chains of office. On his return *The Aberdare Times* commented that it was a shame that our High Constable had no "chain to reflect his dignity". This remark led, in 1892, to a public subscription being got up to purchase the Office a Chain. This cost £37.7.6d. and is now to be seen at The Museum of Welsh Folk Life, St.Fagan.

.....AND DIAMOND

"Hither her subjects wend to hall her long Resplendent Reign" (Alfred Austin, Poet Laureate)

"All classes drunk with sight- seeing and hysterical loyalty" (Beatrice Webb)

On the 22nd.June 1897 Aberdare awoke to an exceedingly fine day, a general holiday, and a town that had throughout the night, and during the previous few days, been lovingly and lavishly decorated. In fact *The Aberdare Times* ventured to say, "That there was not a town in Wales better decorated and illuminated for that special day". That special day was of course the 60th Anniversary of the Queen's Accession to the throne - Her Diamond Jubilee.

The Queen in London commenced the day by pressing an electric button that sent, by telegraph, her Jubilee Message to every corner of her Empire, **"From my heart, I thank my people. May God bless them"**

In Aberdare her people thanked her and rejoiced in a variety of ways. Special Services were held in Churches and Chapels throughout the valley. the Te Deum was sung at the Catholic Church, and the bells of St.Elvan's rang joyous peals throughout the day.

The streets of the town were full of flags, bunting, flowers, evergreen arches, Chinese lanterns and fairy lights. (street by street accounts are recorded in the newspaper). Railway bridges were festooned with foliage, the Police Station displayed a crown of real flowers, and Bryn-Awel House was adorned with the motto **"Sixty Years of Glory"**

In such a short account as ours we can only highlight the more important events such as the procession, led by the Volunteer's Band, to the formal opening of Dumfries Park, the 27 acre site at the foot of the Graig that had been presented to the town by The Marquess of Bute. This passed under arches carrying the words **"Success to Sir W.T.Lewis, and Dumfries Park"**

On its return the assembly proceeded to the Square to view the spot where a new drinking fountain, a gift of Sir W.T.Lewis would have been unveiled had it arrived in time.

A dinner was given to all those over 60 who were receiving outdoor relief, and a tea party to all the elementary school children. Gifts of one shilling pieces were given to each adult pauper and six pence to every child pauper.(What one wonders would they have thought of the theft of a £300,000 diamond ring, an intended gift to Victoria from the Nizam of Hyderabad).

Sights singled out by the paper were the decorations on the balcony of one of the premises in Victoria Square, and the façade of the Black Lion Hotel that was illuminated with a novel display of hundreds of flickering miner's lamps.

The Powell Duffryn held a Field Day and Grand Fete on the Aberaman Estate, with athletic sports, buns and fireworks. There the Aberaman Silver and Cwmaman Bands played throughout the day.

This memorable day ended with bonfires, firework displays and strolls around the town to view the illuminations provided by the Chinese lanterns, fairy-lights on the Council Offices and elsewhere, and particularly the dome (Crown) of the Constitutional Club.

SOCIETY NEWS AND VIEWS. NOTES AND QUERIES

- PLAS-DRAW, ABERDARE (SO 01 10 0277)

A watching brief monitoring the groundworks connected with the laying of a woodland path close to the new housing development at The Glades, Plas-Draw, Aberdare, was undertaken for W.D.L.Homes Ltd.

The substantial structural remains surviving in the wooded part of the site are traditionally said to be those of St.Elvan's Church although there is virtually no known history of the buildings. Also, there is little information on St.Elvan whose very existence has been questioned by some authors.

A few small fragments of medieval cooking pottery were found close to the remains during the construction of the path through the copse. Although not closely dateable, the sherds suggest that there was activity on the site sometime between the 12th and 14th centuries.

Stephen Clarke & Jane Bray, Monmouth Archaeology. (From **Morgannwg Volume L 2006.**)

- LOCK STREET, ABERCYNON (ST 0845 9516)

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken during works to relay a gas main near Lock Street. The site lay between Lock Cottage, adjacent to Alexander Road, and Lock y Waun Cottage, adjacent to an *in situ* section of lock. The works revealed structural features relating to the Glamorganshire Canal, built in 1798, including a largely intact canal tunnel over which a narrow road was identified. The tunnel had a curved roof constructed using local sandstone blocks set on edge, and held in place by lime mortar. Elsewhere, evidence relating to the closure of the canal demonstrated that it had been in filled using deposits of coal during the 20th century. - Kevin Blockley, Cambrian Archaeological Projects. (From **Morgannwg Vol.L 2006**)

- HANES is still adding to its list of local Jazz Bands. The latest contribution to the data base is that of "The Golden Lion Jazz Band". They were possibly founded on the 16th.October 1926. The Golden Lion was a Public House that stood in Cynon Place (at the foot of Mill Street) Trecynon. (Recorded by Mr. Gareth Thomas). Do you have any names to submit?
- In HANES Number 36 we published an article on "Aberdare's Boy Soldier" who was killed in 1916. We now record the story of an even younger combatant.

"Private Ivor Hill is the son of Mr. George Hill, Fruiterer, Mountain Ash. We venture to think it would be hard to break his record. On October 1st 1914, he was only 14 years and 9 months old when he enlisted in the 6th Dragoon Guards, and afterwards transferred to the 3rd South Wales Borderers. He spent four months in the Dardanelles, having landed at Cape Helles, Y Beach, and was in the memorable charge on August 21st 1915 when the 3rd South Wales Borders were so badly cut up. This engagement lasted the whole of August 21st and to the evening of the 22nd. His rifle was broken in two, and the bullet which did the damage took part of his knuckle off. Before reaching the age of 16 his parents drew the military authorities' attention to his age, and he received his discharge on November 11th 1915, having served 1 year and 42 days with the colours. His discharge papers give his age as 15 years and 11 months. Private Hill is an exceedingly smart youth, and a splendid horseman. It would be interesting to know if this record can be broken from a point of age. (The Aberdare Leader May 13th.1916).

Our thanks to Mr.David Evans of Kew, London for drawing our attention to this article, and providing us with his research notes on Pte. Hill.