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HANES

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

ISSUE NUMBER 65

WINTER 2013

THE WAY WE WERE

MORE VICTORIAN AND EDWARDIAN CHRISTMASSES

In this bumper Winter Edition of *Hanes* we take another look at different aspects of Christmas in Aberdare during the Victorian and Edwardian eras recording some old customs, industrial relations, chapel and institutional celebrations, seasonal trade, and the consequences of a tragic mining accident.

CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS IN THE ABERDARE VALLEY

Old Welsh Christmas customs have died, or are slowly dying, in the Aberdare Valley. Many of the older inhabitants of Aberdare, Aberaman and Trecynon remember the holding of the *Plygain* or early service at some of the churches in the district. But the beautiful custom is dead now. The *Plygain* was held on Christmas morning between 4 and 5 o'clock. The churches were lighted up, short religious services were held, and carols sung.

According to an ancient superstition prevalent in Wales, it was thought that on Christmas Eve the oxen fell on their knees to adore the Infant Saviour. With many ceremonies, the Wassail bowl was placed before the favourite ox or oxen. A homely round cake of flour, with currents and sugar, was placed on the horn of the ox, and the animal was then incited to toss it off. If it fell to the right, it was a token of a fruitful year, if it fell to the left, a year of adversity or untoward circumstances might be expected.

The beautiful custom of carol singing is also practically extinct. In years gone by bands of excellent Waits perambulated the streets of Aberdare and Aberaman for several weeks prior to Christmas, singing sweet carols. But we do not see or hear them now. The only Waits (?) we have at present are bands of noisy youngsters singing snatches of comic songs and Music Hall ditties!

Aberdare Times, December, 26th, 1896

The tradition of the adoration of the oxen persisted in other areas of the British Isles, see for example Thomas Hardy's poem, *The Oxen* (1915). There is testimony of an actual occurrence of this event in *Kilvert's Diary*; the entry is dated January 5th 1878.

As for the Waits, was the 1896 writer merely indulging in nostalgia?

The Waits

These nocturnal visitors have commenced their 'round', and the good people of our town and neighbourhood have already been reminded the hospitable sign of plum puddings and the 'Roast beef of Old England' is near at hand. Crusty old bachelors and peevish paterfamilias are no doubt anything but pleased with the musical manner in which the approach of Father Christmas is announced by 'the Waits', but those whose notions of welcome are of a more jubilant nature enjoy the periodical serenading to which these indefatigable musicians treat the least somnolent of their neighbours.

Aberdare Times, December, 14th, 1861.

The old Christmas custom of 'Waits' is slowly but surely disappearing. Will we miss 'em when they're gone? Not much!

Merthyr Telegraph, January 2nd, 1896.

CHRISTMAS WITH THE REV. REES JENKIN JONES

The Old Meeting House – Christmas Day, 1882 will be a red-letter day in the history of the Sunday School of the Old Meeting House [Hen Dŷ Cwrdd], Trecynon.

About 10.30 am the scholars with their parents, teachers, and friends, assembled at the chapel under the presidency of the pastor, the Rev. R. J. Jones, MA, and a most delightful couple of hours was spent in listening to some well rendered music and recitations by the teachers and their pupils. In the afternoon a beautiful and well-stocked Christmas tree was exhibited at the school room to the admiring gaze of the children, and each one was presented with some pretty and useful article from off the tree, special prizes being given to those who had taken part in the morning meeting according to merit. Great praise is due to Mr. Evan Griffith and the Misses Griffith, the Poplars, and other ladies of the congregation for the care and labour bestowed by them upon the tree. It was certainly a grand success, for innumerable and coloured candles upon it were all lit; the effect was fine and was a real treat to all that witnessed it. In the evening a very successful eisteddfod was held in the chapel, the conductor being Mr. Griffith Thomas, *Gwilym Hydref*, and the adjudicator Mr Jenkin Howell, printer, and the Rev. William Davies, Dowlais, the indefatigable secretary of the congregation, Mr. Joseph Jenkins, Gadlys office, performing the duties of secretary to the meeting. This again passed off excellently well, and a general wish was expressed that a similar meeting should be held annually.

Aberdare Times, December, 30th, 1882

Notes: Evan Griffith was an architect who designed many of Aberdare's well-known buildings including the Park Schools, the Temperance Hall and the new Hen Dŷ Cwrdd [1862]. Jenkin Howell, printer and publisher of *Hanes Morganwg*, the Unitarian *Yr Ymofynydd*, *Y Gweithiwr Cymraeg* [The Welsh Workman], *Seren Gomer* (1880-1896), etc.

AND AT THE INDUSTRIAL SCHOOL

The children of the Industrial School were regaled as usual on Christmas day with a bountiful supply of roast meat and plum pudding. A large box of oranges was kindly sent by Mr. Wiltshire, fruiterer, Aberdare, a bushel of nuts from Mr. L Hiley, and a large bun for each child from the Rev. Arm. Hamelin. The Christmas Letter Mission also sent their annual supply of Christmas letters and cards. Rounds of hearty cheers were given during the day for the Guardians and the donors above mentioned.

Ibid, December 30th, 1882.

BELOW STAIRS AT DYFFRYN HOUSE, CHRISTMAS 1895.

Servants Annual Ball at Dyffryn House – On Tuesday evening at Dyffryn House, the residence of the Rt. Hon. Lord Aberdare, the servants' annual ball took place. The servants' hail, where the dance took place, had been most gaily and artistically decorated. The ball, as in past years, opened about 9.45 pm, with the good old-fashioned county dance, Sir Roger de Coverley, in which several members of the Dyffryn family took part. The music was admirably rendered by Messrs. W.H. Whitcombe and Stephen Coslett, and dancing was kept up with spirit till 5.00 am Wednesday morning.

Merthyr and Dowlais Times and Aberdare Echo, January 3rd, 1895.

CHRISTMAS DAY BURIALS

Ysguborwen Colliery, sunk by Samuel Thomas in 1849, was continually troubled with water. It was closed in 1895 and left to flood. On the 6th December 1896, a deluge of water from this colliery broke through into the workings of River Level drowning three men and three boys. Their bodies were not recovered until December 23rd after the pit was pumped clear of water and gas.

The funerals of the victims took place on Christmas Day. Amongst those buried were two boys aged 14, and another of 13, whose father also died in the flooding.

THE SIX VICTIMS

John Phillips, 17a Moss Row, Abernant, (39)

Thomas Jones, 4 Foreman's Row, Abernant, (29)

George Evans, 15 Bridge Street, Robertstown, (14)

John Williams, 8 Little Row, Abernant, (13)

John Jenkins, Margaret Street, Trecynon, (father,)

Thomas Jenkins, Margaret Street, Trecynon, (son,) (14)

Christmas Day, the most joyful season of the year opened bright and cheerful [with] a bright sun. But alas! a gloom was cast over the whole of the Aberdare, the festive day having been selected as the day of the funeral of the victims of the inundation at River Level Pit.

During the whole day the various trains on the Great Western to Abernant and Aberdare, as well as the Taff Vale trains brought an enormous number of people into the town, while many hundreds walked over the mountain from Ferndale, Mardy, Merthyr and Dowlais. The funerals were timed to start from Aberdare at 2.30 and pass through the town to be joined by the funerals of the two Jenkins (father and son), and that of the boy George Evans at Trecynon.

The streets of the town were literally filled with spectators and when the procession arrived it was only with difficulty that room could be made for it to pass through the mass of people who had congregated in the streets, and every inch of the way from Abernant Road to the entrance to Aberdare and to the cemetery the streets were lined with people ... in many places 9-12 deep. Funeral services had been held at the houses of the deceased, and the funeral processions joined into one huge procession at the railway crossing close to the River Level Pit. When it entered the town it consisted of close to 2,000-3,000 people; the cortege was led by a number of chapel ministers, Sir W.T. Lewis Bt. and other colliery owners and managers, the High Constable, Alderman David Morgan (Miners' Agent), the Oddfellows Friendly Society and the choir of Bethel Chapel. Fifty-six mourners walked behind the coffins, and there were 18 mourning coaches; the procession was a mile long before it joined with the Trecynon cortege and took fully half-a-hour to pass through High Street, and all the way from High Street to Trecynon it was joined by others. As it moved along those present sang "Beth sydd i mi yn y hyd," to Parry's Aberystwyth. Many Friendly Societies participated, and at the entrance to the cemetery the colliery owner James Lewis (Plasdraw) and his son James Windsor Lewis stood bare-headed until the coffins had passed; the crowd at the cemetery was estimated to number 5-6,000 with another 20,000 lining the route.

Note: The 500-strong River Level work force resumed work at the pit, on the following Tuesday.

Merthyr Times, December 31st 1896

CHRISTMAS 1896

The Directors of the Cwmbach Cooperative Society Ltd. have decided to grant three days' holiday during Christmas week, at the request of their employees. These will take place on December, 25th, 26th and 27th. This speaks very highly of the Directors as employers of labour, and the friendly relationship existing between them and their employees is very commendable.

Merthyr Telegraph, December 31st, 1896.

ABERDARE AT YULE-TIDE 1906

WHAT YOU MAY SEE AND BUY AT THE SHOPS.

Aberdare assumes its usual Yule-tide brightness. The shops are altogether lovely, and the shopkeepers put on their best smiles and manners. Let us take our annual survey of the town, our starting point being the top of Victoria Square.

Mr. W.H. Jones' Cough Elixir may come handy at this time of the year. It is the season, not only of goodwill and peace, but also of coughs and colds, and the chemist is often called upon to undo the doings of the butcher and confectioner.

Going down the Square we find that Compton House no longer wears a deserted and gloomy appearance. It is all business and brilliance. What's in a name? Ah! A great deal, I can assure you. It is shop Williams' redivivus. The old name has a magic appeal to the old inhabitants, and the scent of bargain appeals to all and sundry.

Mr. Emrys Evans' historic Show House is once more open, and is replete with a myriad of articles, unparalleled in variety and unsurpassed in beauty and utility. Seeing is believing, and the sceptic is invited to test the truth of this statement. Xmas and New Year's cards, private and public, grave and gay, obtainable here. [This business remained open until c 1980. The premises consisted of some three shops, one of which is now occupied by a Building Society.]

The Beehive is as industrious and as busy as ever, and Mr. Pritchard as genial as of yore. Messrs. Pritchard and Powell offer a unique opportunity to bargain hunters in the happy hunting grounds of drapery. Their motto as usual is "The best value for money." No one should turn a deaf ear or a blind eye to this opportunity for securing something worth having. [The shop is now occupied by a firm of solicitors.]

Across the road Mr. Miles' shop is as usual the centre of gravitation to all that seek the meat that perisheth. Within and without there are rows of carcasses dressed in such an artistic manner and presenting such an appetising appearance as would have converted even Shelley from vegetarianism. [Durbin's Estate Agents.]

Mr. Reed the ironmonger and furnisher, has of course many implements and utensils that come useful. Sharp cutlery to tackle the steaks and cakes is required, and holiday trunks may be wanted, besides many other articles too numerous to mention, as the auctioneer would say.

Messrs. Parker Bros. have a good supply of the inevitable phonographs and records which infuse harmony and sweetness into our existence at this dull season. Electric Bells and Fire Alarms are fitted by them, and we have all the wonders of the vehicular world, from a pram to a motor-car. [62, Cardiff Street.]

Mr. Harmston introduces his King of talking machines — the Gramophone. He has also a record stock of bone-fide Gramophone Records. If this class of musical instrument does not suit you then Mr. Harmston has a most excellent selection of pianos, organs, etc., perfect in tone and ultra low in price.

Messrs. Hall and Sons have, as is customary with them, a wonderful variety of choice presents. The windows will give you a faint indication of what the shop consists of in the way of dressing cases, work boxes etc., but the best plan is for you to “enquire within upon everything.” [9, Canon Street.]

In Station-street we find that Mr. Harris in his “Triumph Studio” is as per usual triumphant in his display of the best the photographic art can produce.

Returning to Cardiff-street we find that Mr. C. A. Harries’ Xmas and New Year Cards are by no means inferior to that of previous years. His showrooms are well worth seeing.

We next visit Commercial-street. Mr. Emlyn Morris’s establishment is well stocked with seasonable requirements and their name is legion. Whether you want over-wear or underwear, whether something to adorn your person or to make existence more comfortable Mr. Morris is able to provide you with the useful and ornamental, the artistic and utilitarian. [20, Commercial Street.]

To those about to be married, or about to be engaged, Messrs. Thomas and Co. has a particular line to offer. At this season there is generally a good run on the little hoops of gold, and it is surprising that a number take the jeweller into their confidence just now. Messrs. Thomas and Co. has rings of every size, weight, price, quality and pattern. [Now Super Drug, the shop still retains its bow windows.]

The next step will be the purchase of furniture, and the big J on the opposite side of the street denotes the place where the requirements of the household may be obtained. Messrs Jay & Co’s reputation as Credit Furnishers requires no eulogy. Their business has been firmly established all through the country. Give a call at their Aberdare establishment. [8, Commercial Street.]

Xmas without the traditional cake and pudding is inconceivable. At his shops in Victoria Square and Commercial-street Mr. Caunt, the king of local caterers, has, according to his want, made lavish preparations for the inner man. Chocolate boxes, bon-bons, mince meat and mince pies and an infinite variety of cakes are being prepared here, where the art of confection is perfection. [24, Victoria Square, and 1 Commercial Street (Café Mona). The Victoria Square shop, recently Blockbuster Video, is currently empty.]

Tudor Williams’ Balsam of Honey is a panacea for many ills, which the season of cheer and happiness brings in its train. If owing to extraordinary strain the grinders cease because they are few and futile, you may have them extracted and exchanged for new at Mr. Tudor Williams’, not without money and without price, it is true, but without pain. [Medical Hall, now Sheppard’s Chemist shop.]

Going up along Canon-street we find that Mr. D. Evans has a very fine display of drapery at the London Warehouse. He has a splendid show of goods suitable for the Xmas trade. The milliner’s art has no more successful devotee than Mr. Evans. You are requested to watch the windows for special lines. But to see the Xmas show in all its glory you should walk inside.

Mr. Halewood's boots uphold that traditional merit. Nothing like leather, especially the leather which is constructed into footwear at this long-famed and far-famed establishment. [31 & 32 Canon Street with factory premises to the rear, on the present lower Rex Cinema car park.]

Mr. J.A. Evans, Constitutional Buildings, makes a speciality of headgear of every description, while Mr. D Phillips on the other side of the road provides you with any sartorial requisites that you may fancy. [Evans' shop was between Trinity Chapel and the Constitutional Club. The shop is still extant.]

You will of course require healthy, seasonable drinks to swill the channels of your stomach. These are obtainable from the two well-known firms Messrs. J L. Bowen, Windsor Works, Aberdare and Mr. H. McLaren, Windsor-street Trecynon. They offer you a very varied selection of beverages wherewith you may quench your Yule-tide thirst, without fear of inebriety or an aching head. At the Black Lion Brewery you will also get a choice and varied supply of drinks-alcoholic or non-alcoholic, according to the dictates of your conscience. [Bowen's Sarso (a blood purifier), Ver-Etta, Dandelion and Burdock, and Sparkling Hop Bitters. McLaren's Temperance drinks, included Iskey Stout, Banana Beer, Sarsaparilla, Cream Ginger, and Ginger Beer.]

Mr. J. W. Prowel, Trecynon, has a large stock of Gramophone records, and all accessories that a wheeler may need. [Primrose Cycle Depot, Hirwaun Road. Mr. Prowel also sold and made bicycles, hence the reference to wheelers.]

ABERAMAN

Mr. I. E. Thomas, of the Medical Hall, Lewis-street, has a fine array of Xmas Gifts. An inspection is solicited. It is more than probable that your taste will be gratified.

Next door is Mr M. I. Jones, the well known optician, who has, apart from his supply of ocular requirements, every article of domestic use in his large and well equipped ironmongery department. You may need several of them in preparing your Xmas dinner.

A little lower down is Mr. J. Lewis's Modern Tailoring. The outer man must not be neglected any more than the inner man during the season of chills and wintry blasts. A warm overcoat will probably be needed by you, and at this establishment you will get modern models of style at revolutionary prices. *Sartar Resartus.*

In conclusion we wish all the readers of the "Leader", and all buyers and sellers, providers and consumers

A MERRY XMAS

Aberdare Leader, December, 22nd, 1906.

Editor's Note. Where possible the location of these old shops and the present trades carried on there are given in square brackets.

GETTING AROUND AT CHRISTMAS 1914

Christmas week was easily a record in the number of passengers carried on the new tramway system since it was inaugurated a few months ago. The exact number carried was 56,434 during the six days, December 22nd – 27th. This is slightly more than the whole population of Aberdare and district.

Aberdare Leader, January 3rd, 1914.

[There follows details, supplied by the electrical offices, of the number of passengers carried, the total mileage travelled over the routes, and the number of cars used during those six days. Tramcars were introduced in Aberdare in October 1913, and the system ran until April 1935.]

2013 CHRISTMAS QUIZ

We set out below twelve local history questions, one for each of the traditional twelve days of Christmas. They are taken mainly from various quizzes set by W. W. Price and presented to older members of various Aberaman clubs and societies in the 1940s. The complete set of questions, which are mostly relevant to Aberaman, can be seen at Aberdare Central Library. (LH3/6/3)

1. Which is the oldest Congregational Chapel in Aberdare?
2. Which Chapel was called *Penpound* and why?
3. What industries provided employment in Aberdare apart from iron, coal and printing?
4. Who was the sexton/caretaker of the parish church of St John for 45 years?
5. What was C. B. Stanton before he became a Member of Parliament?
6. Where is the source of the River Cynon?
7. Who sank *Nicky Nacky* colliery and where did its owner live?
8. Where was Aberdare's first Empire Theatre and where was the second?
9. What is the pub once named the *Hen and Chickens* now called?
10. Who started the Salvation Army in Aberdare and where?
11. What was the name of the town's first railway?
12. What famous minister lived at Rose Cottage?

The answers can be found at the end of this edition of *Hanes*.

One difficult question called for the names of four Aberaman policemen of former days and required the recall of verses written about them by some local wit. The verses containing the officers' names are set out below.

Fish caught a fish,
Salter salted it,
Boiler boiled it,
Sly Fox eat it.

More Cash Railways

The last edition of *Hanes* contained an article on mechanical methods used in some local shops to transport customers' payments (and return change and receipts) to a cashier's office by means of overhead wire 'railways'

Society member, Mrs. Denise Jones, recalls similar arrangements at Pugh's (Drapers) and at the Co-operative Society's Central Store in Cardiff Street. It is recalled that a vertically challenged female assistant there had difficulty in reaching the cash containers! It is thought that the Co-op also had 'Cash Railways' at other larger branches such as Gadlys.

CYNON COAL

Are you searching for a copy of *Cynon Coal* or a bargain Christmas present? If so, the Society has a limited stock of complete but slightly imperfect copies at £7.50 (by mail order, £13.50 including postage).

Hardback copies, 282 pages, profusely illustrated, maps. Note: some of the pages are not bound in sequence, otherwise complete. Please contact Mr. Haydn Williams on 01685 879793 or at haydnwilliams3@hotmail.com

Forthcoming Lectures

December 19, 2013: *Chair's Christmas Evening*

2014

January 16 :	<i>Charles Dickens</i>	Mrs. Jennifer George
February 20 :	<i>Passchendaele and the Welsh Memorial.</i>	Peter Carter Jones.
March 20 :	<i>Turning Men into Boys.</i>	Dr. Stephanie Jones



The Chairman and Committee wish all our readers a very Happy Christmas and a prosperous New Year.

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www.cvhs.org.uk

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Registered charity No.510143.

Printed by Dial-A-Print, Penrhiwceiber, 01443 474822

December 2013

Answers to the Quiz.

1. Siloa founded in 1844.
2. Calfaria formerly Carmel English Baptist chapel. The name comes from the pound in which straying animals were confined. This stood below the Black Lion Hotel on the site of the old underground public conveniences (Caradog's statue is now near the spot).
3. Glancynon and Dare Foundries, Rock Brewery, Black Lion Brewery, George Brewery, Halewood's Clog factory, Cambrian Lamp Works, Saw Mills at Gloucester Street and the Trap.
4. Martha Thomas popularly known as Martha Eglwys and Martha Black. Her likeness can be seen in a stained glass window in St. Elvan's Church. (Green Aisle) See Hanes No.48, Autumn 2009.
5. Miners' Agent. He succeeded Ald. David Morgan (Dai o'r Nant).
6. Behind the old Post Office at Pontpren, Penderyn.
7. David Williams (Alaw Goch). He lived at Ynyscynon House, Cwmbach.
8. (1) Rock Grounds alongside the present RCTCBC offices. (2) Within the Constitutional Club.
9. The Whitcombe Inn, Whitcombe Street.
10. Mother Sheppard. The long room of the Lamb and Flag Hotel.
11. The Aberdare Railway which when opened was immediately leased to the Taff Vale Railway.
12. The Rev. Dr. Thomas Price, Penpound (Calfaria).