

CYNON VALLEY HISTORY SOCIETY

CYMDEITHAS HANES CWM CYNON

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HANES

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With Spring shoots growing and Covid-19 declining, life is at last getting back to some sort of normality.

In this issue we look at three remarkable local women, the determination of the people of Penrhiwceiber, and of a man to save chapel buildings. We continue our series on the Italians of this valley, and include our History Society news.

Happy Reading!

The Unveiling of a statue of Elaine Morgan

by Hywel Davies



Huw Morien, Tan and Gareth Morgan with the Elaine Morgan Statue

On Friday March 18th 2020 a crowd of at least 300 people gathered at the Calon Lân Health centre in Mountain Ash to witness the unveiling of a statute of Elaine Morgan (1920–2013). Much has already been written in HANES, and other local publications about Elaine's career as an author, an evolutionary anthropologist and as a campaigner. In each of these activities she won for herself such esteem that her name has become as well known internationally as in her native Wales. But on this particular day, it was the chance of Mountain Ash folk to show their admiration for one of their own.

Proceedings got under way with Felicity Evans of BBC Wales paying tribute to Elaine as an inspiration to women of every age. Simply listing her work for TV and radio, ('How Green was my Valley', 'Off to Philadelphia in the Morning', 'Testament of Youth'. 'Dr Finlay's Casebook', 'The Life and Times of David Lloyd George' etc) reminds us of the wealth of talent Elaine displayed as a scriptwriter. Felicity recalled how Elaine had been the first girl from her Grammar School in Pontypridd to win a place at Oxford, overcoming all those difficulties of economic hardship and limited aspiration that had bedevilled similar working-class youngsters for generations

Carolyn Hitt, a colleague of Elaine's from her time as a columnist for the Western Mail, also recognised the debt she owed to Elaine as an inspiration to women, while Jane Hutt, MS, the Welsh Government Minister for Social Justice, drew attention to the work of Elaine as a campaigner for women's rights. For Heather Stephens, Pro-Chancellor of Cardiff University, it was Elaine's campaigning zeal for adult education that deserved to be highlighted, along with her trail-blazing work challenging received evolutionary orthodoxy. It was such male-focused orthodoxy that Elaine's acclaimed publications - including 'The Descent of Woman' and 'The Aquatic Ape Hypothesis' - set out to undermine.

So far, so very feminist - until Andrew Morgan, Leader of Rhondda Cynon Taf Borough Council, led the contributions of those men privileged to speak at the event. Andrew reminded us of the gritty reality of Elaine's upbringing in Hopkinstown during the 1930s, and the indefatigable spirit that characterised her efforts to effect change. When Llwydcoed's Roy Noble took to the podium, we knew there will be occasion to smile. Thus, as Roy recalled his contacts with Elaine and paid tribute to her manifest intellectual gifts, we had cause to laugh and admire in equal measure.



Roy Noble

A musical interlude, and a welcome change from speech-making, was provided by the children of Caegarw Primary School, whose rendition of an arrangement of the hymn-tune 'Calon Lân', caught the joyous spirit of the day.

Gareth Morgan, one of Elaine's three sons, was able to speak of his mother with a degree of intimacy that others could not claim. And he did so initially, in good, vibrant Welsh - which reminds us of yet another campaigning concern of Elaine's. She was an early champion of Welsh medium education and ensured that Dylan, (deceased 2011), Gareth and Huw Morien all attended Ysgol Gymraeg Aberdâr as youngsters. Gareth's fluency was all the more striking when we recall that for a number of years he has lived in Greece and since Elaine's death has only visited Wales occasionally. His pride in recalling Elaine's achievements was evident, but the most touching comment was when he referred to her as 'the best mother possible'. Gareth's daughter, Tan Morgan, complemented these tributes with her own recollections of Elaine as a fond grandmother.

Finally, we got to hear from the sculptor herself. Emma Rodgers works mostly in bronze, as witnessed by her statue of Betty Campbell, unveiled in Cardiff last year. That statue was the first of five which the 'Monumental Women' organisation seek to erect in Wales. Elaine's is the second and displays a similar inventive, representational character. It's almost as if a passing breeze can be felt, as it disturbs the pages of script resting precariously on Elaine's lap.

Elaine won two BAFTA and two Writers' Guild awards, and was a Writer of the Year with the Royal Television Society. In 2006 she was awarded an honorary D.Litt by the University of Glamorgan and, the following year, an honorary Fellowship by the University of Cardiff. In 2009 she was made an OBE and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. In 2013 Rhondda Cynon Taf made her an honorary Freeman of the Borough - but, one suspects, it would have been these proceedings in her home town, among her own people, that Elaine would have cherished most.

There is an hour-long video of the event at the link below.

<https://monumentalwelshwomen.com/>

Elaine Morgan was a valued member of our Society.

Bethesda Welsh Chapel, Abercwmboi, (Part 2)

This chapel sadly closed on 3rd October last year. The article in the last issue of Hanes took us up to 1960.

Rev. Arthur Llewellyn was the last minister that the chapel had. It then fell to the hard-working deacons to carry on the work of the chapel.

Bethesda had a Welsh chapel record (?) concerning a wonderful husband and wife team: Mr David Morgan Rees and his wife Bronwen who served church for an amazing total of 122 years. David started as the precentor in 1930 and continued in the role until 1982. During that time, he was responsible for leading the performance of two oratorios: "Hymn of praise" and "Judas Maccabeus" and the cantata "Snow White and the seven dwarfs". His wife Bronwen who had been appointed organist in 1929 continued playing until 1999, an amazing 70 years of service. Their daughter is the well-known actress Gaynor Morgan Rees, who whilst living in Denbigh kept close links with Bethesda.



David & Bronwen Morgan

Following the death of Mr Rees, David Watkins was appointed precentor. He also became the treasurer of the chapel and until 1997 was Bethesda's Sunday School, teacher. Another of his gifts was gardening; he tended the beautiful chapel front garden for many years.

The chapel has had numerous secretaries that ensured the pulpit was filled every Sunday, with all the services being conducted in Welsh. One secretary who served Bethesda faithfully for 25 years until his sudden death in 1981 was Morlais Jenkins. He was the treasurer of the East Glamorgan Cymanfa and its President in the year of his death. Morlais was a popular lay-preacher at Bethesda and other churches throughout the valley. His wife Megan Jenkins, who was also a deacon passed away in 2010.

Cledwyn Afan Jones stepped into the breach following Morlais's death. He had been elected deacon in 1964 and in 1981 became secretary. He was responsible for raising a sum of £50,000 for chapel repairs. He sadly passed away in 2000.

Aled Morris then became the chapel secretary, continuing to fill the pulpit each Sunday, a challenge as the number of preachers continued to fall.

For the first time in many decades baptismal services were held at Bethesda. Seven baptisms involving two adults and five teenagers were held during a four-year period between 1986 and 1990.



The Bethesda Ceiling Rose

In 2010 the chapel celebrated its 150th Anniversary on 24th June. Among the special guests were Rev. D. Ben Rees of Liverpool.

When Calfaria chapel closed in December 2011, Bethesda was very happy to receive four new members: Derek Morgan, the organist of Calfaria, and his wife Marlene, Myrfyn Roberts and Mary Hughes.

The church suffered a sad loss in 2018 when David Watkins, who was the Treasurer of the chapel and one of the pillars of the chapel, sadly passed away.

By 2021 declining membership sadly took a toll and the chapel held its last service on Sunday afternoon, 3rd October 2021. The floor of the chapel was packed with people who had been closely associated with this place of worship. There were talks about the history of the chapel and its far reaching influence in the local area.

The service ended with the singing of the hymn "Arglwydd, gad im dawel orffwys" to the

tune Arwelfa, a fitting memorial and testimony to Capel Bethesda, Cap Coch, Abercwmboi.

I would like to thank Aled Morris for giving me information about his chapel.

Further information: Hanes Eglwys Bethesda, Abercwmboi by Rhys ab Owen.

Today's History

The following four (edited) articles are all featured in the Cynon Valley Leader of 10th March of which due acknowledgement is given.

The Rescuer of Chapels

Will the chapels of the valley ever be full again? There used to be 180 chapels in the Cynon valley. Many have closed and have either been demolished, turned into flats, or used for storage.

With between £100,000 and £200,000 money that he inherited, Rev Robert Stivey has currently bought 13 chapels in South Wales including Calfaria Chapel, Aberdare; Bethania Chapel in Mountain Ash; Saron in Aberaman and Siloam in Penderyn. The 73-year-old says that he wants to "Spread the Lord's work". He decided to do his utmost to buy as many chapels as possible and his ultimate aim is to re-open them and have services in them.

Maybe he can buy Bethesda chapel, Abercwmboi ? — and others in the valley to save the chapels — a very important part of our roots and culture.

Will Millard has made a TV programme in which Rev Stivey is seen in part of the episode called *Hidden Wales: Last Chance to Save*. The programme is available on BBC iPlayer.

The Incredible Spirit of the Penrhiwceiber People

In 2013, RCT Council closed down many outdoor swimming pools in the area because of spending cuts. The people of Penrhiwceiber, which is one of the poorest communities in the area, could have meekly accepted the announcement of the closure of their Lee Gardens Pool as harsh medicine and taken the decision lying down but they are made of sterner stuff!

In three years, by gritty determination and successful grant applications, they re-opened their pool and now they have received £500,000 for a total redevelopment of the site which will be completed this summer.

Not only was the pool re-opened but the charity now organizes many activities that promote a great sense of well-being and physical health: Feed the family, After School Art and Caring Through Crisis.

This shows how a community like Penrhiwceiber can greatly improve the quality of life for their villagers!

300 new houses on the old Aberdare Hospital site

The Fothergill family, the great ironmasters of the valley, once lived in Abernant House. After their departure, the house was unoccupied for several years, but became St Michael and All Angels Theological College from 1892 to 1907. Later it was converted into a hospital but has recently been demolished despite its historic importance. Now there are plans for 300 houses to be built on the 36-acre site by WDL Homes.

If the planning application were to be successful, construction would start in summer 2023. The metal gates, railings, and hopefully the entrance pillars will be preserved.

The Dualling of the A465

The reasons for dualling this important trunk route to make this 3-lane carriageway into four lanes are to make it safer and to reduce journey times. Now the last piece in the A465 dualling jigsaw is the Dowlais Top to Hirwaun dual carriageway of 11 miles is being built at a cost, which seems to vary from £590m to £1.4 billion, and should be finished by

2025. This necessitates felling hundreds of trees and building large roundabouts at the Hirwaun, Baverstocks, Croesbychan junctions and where the A470 joins the A465. With the building of a bridge over the junction at Hirwaun, the village in April will come close to being cut off! A new bridge will be built over the Taf Fawr river.

Cynon valley motorists are having to endure traffic jams at peak periods and 40 mph average-speed cameras on the A465. When the construction is finished, it is hoped journeys will be safer and speedier.

AquaDare – DŵrDâr

A new splash pool will be opened in Aberdare Park on 9th April and from then until September it will be open every day from 10am to 6pm.

Society News

The CVHS National Lottery Heritage Fund Grant

In Spring 2020, the Society applied to The National Lottery Heritage Fund for a grant to help develop its digital skills and online activities. Under the guidance of former committee member and museum manager Charlotte Morgan, the application was successful, and we were allocated the sum of £10,000.

During the first period of lockdown our ability to meet together to discuss and work on the project was almost completely scuppered.

However, as the committee became more familiar with online conferencing using Zoom, meetings of a sub-committee did start, and with further relaxation of the Covid-19 restrictions, face-to-face meetings have been taking place for several months. We have also employed Ms Zoe Lloyd on a very part-time basis to help with data entry, sorting and cataloguing. We have until the end of June to complete the project.

So, what are the objectives of the project? Broadly it is to increase the proficiency level of our digital skills; to use digital technology to make more of our historical resources, society archive and records more secure and easily accessible; to encourage more Society members to become involved in using digital skills to archive and publish historical materials; and to encourage an increase in membership with an objective of drawing in younger people to the society.

So far, we have started to place some of our materials on the *Peoples Collection Wales* website, (PCW). For example, you will see posted there a copy of our anniversary calendar that we published in 2011, also an essay on an important local coal-owner Rees Llewellyn. We are also in the process of adding our archived copies of the newsletter *Hanes* to the PCW website. An index of *Hanes* is also being prepared. The PCW *Hanes* archive will be a backup to the collection, which is already on our website. The backup responds to an observation that our external adviser correctly made, that our website is vulnerable in that only one person maintains it.

We have also dipped our toe into the world social media, albeit only into Facebook. Currently this is used to advertise our meetings – hopefully to a wider audience.

In addition, our local secondary schools have been approached in the hope that they will enter a competition that we are organising whereby students, or groups of students, will produce a digital presentation of a Cynon Valley local history topic. There will be generous prizes!

We would very much like to encourage existing Society members to join with us in the process of digitisation of materials that we already possess. But in addition, if you possess historical documents, photographs or artefacts of local interest that you would like to display to a wider audience, we suggest you offer them for scanning or photographing. Ideally, the aims of the project would be better achieved if you could digitise and publish the resulting material yourself, after appropriate training if it were necessary.

The Aberdare Italians: The Croci family: Joe Croci



Giovanni "Joe" Croci, 1899–1966
Pictured at rear of the Ivy Bush Pub,
Cwmaman, 1922



Joe and his wife Albina
Christmas 1965

Mr Giovanni Croci, (popularly known as Joe Cruci), died on 21st January 1966 aged 67 years, just a month after he and his wife Albina returned from a five-month holiday in Italy.

Mr Croci was born in Piacenze in northern Italy and came to this country at the age of 12 on the death of his parents. He joined his elder brother Domenico at a café in Penrhiwceiber Road, Penrhiwceiber. Another brother Chris had a café in Merthyr at that time. Later the two brothers moved to start up a café in Aberdare, (on the site where Chic Fashions now stands.).

During the First World War, Mr Croci saw service in the Italian army (on the side of the Allies) in Africa, Egypt and Libya.

On his return he started up on his own in a café in Fforchaman Road, Cwmaman and soon after married his wife, Albina, at St Joseph's, Roman Catholic Church, Monk Street. They had known each other since they were children.

Perhaps the happiest part of Mr Croci's life was during his stay in Cwmaman – from 1918 to 1934. While there, he became the first person to own and ride a motorbike in the district. He was also a keen supporter of Cwmaman football team.

Besides running the café, he went out with a horse and cart, selling ice cream and fish-and-chips to his many customers.

From 1934 to 1940, the family lived in Morgan's Row, Cwmbach selling fish-and-chips, and confectionery, at the end of which they moved to their present premises in Duke Street, which Mrs Croci still runs. (This was demolished in the 1980s)

They also own the Whitcombe Street café, which Mr Croci opened in 1940, which is now run by his son John. [This is now run by his grandson Danilo, Ed.] Besides a widow and a son, Mr Croci is survived by two daughters, Giulia (Julia) and Anna.

Up to the time of his death, Mr Croci owned the small house in northern Italy where he was born, and where he returned every year after the war for a holiday.

Last year for the first time, his wife accompanied him to Italy and this year they did the same.

A requiem mass was held at St Joseph's Church, prior to the funeral to Aberdare Cemetery.

Transcribed from the *Aberdare Leader* 30th December 1966.

(To be continued.)

Eirlys Hatton 1931-2021



Eirlys Hatton, (née Roberts), the only child of Gwladys and Tommy Roberts, was born on 1 April 1931.

She went to Bangor Normal College to train as a teacher, specializing in music and Welsh. These subjects would be central to her life.

Eirlys married Raymond Hatton in August 1955. They were blessed with two daughters, Lynfa in 1956 and Moira in 1962. Raymond like Eirlys was a teacher, and his sudden death in 1981 was devastating for her and her daughters. Another blow came to Eirlys in 2003 with Lynfa's death; cruelly young.

Eirlys began her career in education at Ysgol Gymraeg Pont Sion Norton in Pontypridd. She spent nearly twenty years in the Welsh-medium education sector, first moving as a teacher to Ysgol Gymraeg Cwmdare where she was one of the earliest teachers of the new school before moving with the school to Ysgol Gymraeg Ynyslwyd in Aberaman where she was for a time deputy head. In 1973, she was appointed head of her old school, although now known as the Comin School; she remained there until her retirement in 1989.

Ebenezer chapel was central to her life and faith at the heart of her humble and active character. She was a member of the chapel since her teens and in 2002, she became chapel secretary, ensuring there were preachers every Sunday, and working hard to ensure the continuation of the proceedings after the chapel itself had closed, when all its activities moved to the vestry.

Music was her passion and when she wasn't involved in her own musical activities, she would attend concerts and operas with her wide circle of friends. She was a member of the Ebenezer Choral Society from a young age but in 1969 became the fourth choir conductor, with her first Hymns of Praise concert taking place on 22nd February in the chapel. It was appropriate that it was her granddaughter Rhiannon who presented her with a bouquet when the choir celebrated its 150th birthday in a major concert at the Coliseum in 1999. This would be Eirlys' final year at the helm.

Her 30 years as conductor had seen her present about 100 oratorios and concerts, as well as touring to perform with other choirs at the Albert Hall and St David's Hall. The Choir frequently participated in Caniadaeth y Cysegr and The Morning Service on the radio and Dechrau Canu Dechrau Canmol came to the chapel three times during her time. It was also a lovely coincidence that the choir shared a programme with the Ysgol Gymraeg Aberdâr Choir in 1999 as the school celebrated 50 years and the choir celebrated 150. The choir was also involved in the extensive Caradog centenary celebrations in 1972 and if she were still with us, surely Eirlys would have been enjoying the Caradogfest to be held this summer.

Eirlys died at the age of 90 at a care home near Ross-on-Wye on 28th December 2021. We send our condolences to her daughter Moira and her husband Owen and to her granddaughter Rhiannon. Her passing is a great loss and she will be remembered for her many talents which supported the cultural and Welsh traditions of this valley.

Dr Nesta Roberts 1917-2022

The death occurred of Dr Nesta Gwendolyn Roberts on January 10th, 2022 at the grand old age of 104.

Dr Roberts was for many years a medical officer in Aberdare. Her husband was the dental surgeon D.G.E. Roberts, known as 'Dafydd'.

Nesta was born in Cardiff in March 1917, the only child of Rowland and Josephine May Morgan.

Medicine was her chosen career and it was while she was the Community Medical Officer in the Rhondda that she met the dentist David Roberts, as she was the anaesthetist for his tooth extractions.

They married in 1952 and their only child, Gethin, was born in 1953. In Aberdare, they lived at Ynyslas, Broniestyn Terrace, Trecynon. Nesta continued as a Medical Officer of Health until she retired in 1984. Whilst in the town she was an active member of Aberdare Soroptimists.

In 1985, Nesta and Dafydd left Aberdare and eventually moved to a bungalow in Llanbadarn, Aberystwyth. In 2017, Dafydd died, but Nesta continued at their home for a further two years. In 2019 after breaking her arm, she moved to Plas Cwmcynfelin Care Home, Aberystwyth. It was there she died peacefully in January.

These last two articles first appeared in Clochdar for which due acknowledgment is given. They have been translated into English and slightly edited.

Caradogfest 2022

July 2022 will mark the 150th anniversary of the epic achievements of Caradog and the Côr Mawr. To mark the occasion, a 400 strong choir from Aberdare will be drawn together, recreating the epic performance of the Côr Mawr at Library Square, Aberdare. The event will also feature a massed children's chorus, a brass band and a guest soloist.

Taking place on the weekend of July 15th to 17th, the full DRAFT schedule of events is as follows:

Friday July 15th, 7:30pm

Gala Concert at St Elvan's
Guest Soloist | Massed Choir

Saturday July 16th, 12:00pm

Fanfare at Aberdare Conservative Club
Procession St Elvan's to Library Square
Llwydcoed Band | Massed Children's Chorus |
Côr Mawr
Massed Performance
Children's Chorus | Côr Mawr | Guest Soloist |
Brass Band

Saturday July 16th, 1:00pm to 5:00pm

Individual Performances
Outdoor Venues
Library Square | Lloyds Square | Aberdare
Market
Indoor Venues
St Elvan's | Cynon Linc | Cynon Valley Museum

Sunday July 17th

Official Opening - St Elvan's Church

Errata

In the article about The Jews of Clifton Street, Aberdare, the first sentence of the second last paragraph should read, "Before the Kahns lived there it was a manse, as Rev Thomas Henry Bryant, the minister of Green Street Methodist Chapel, and his daughter Doreen lived there."

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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