



# Gelligaer Times

## Newsletter of the Gelligaer Historical Society

No 31

[www.gelligaerhistoricalsociety.co.uk](http://www.gelligaerhistoricalsociety.co.uk)

July 2014

### Message from the Chair

The Society continues to be active and this newsletter carries reports on the Conference as well as recent monthly meetings and the launch of *Gelligaer Volume 21 Great War 2014 edition*. The success of all these events depends on support from members and non-members and that continues to flourish. Thanks to the work of David Mills, the programme for 2014-2015 is included in this newsletter.

A pleasing number of Society members turned up to view Glyngae Primary School end-of-year exhibition. It focussed on 1914, a year that saw the start of both that school and of World War I.

I know that there are numerous events in local places of worship as well as at local war memorials planned to commemorate the start of World War I. If you attend any of these, please send us a report (a few sentences or a photograph) for the next newsletter.

If you have any information or questions about any aspect of the history of the local area, please contact us: Gelligaer Historical Society not only has a website ([www.gelligaerhistoricalsociety.co.uk](http://www.gelligaerhistoricalsociety.co.uk)) but is also on Twitter and Facebook.

I hope you are enjoying the current summer weather and that you will have a pleasant and relaxing summer before Society meetings start again on the last Wednesday in September.

*Best wishes from Annie*

### SOCIETY MEETINGS

Society meetings continue to prove popular as witnessed by the pleasing attendance figures. Not only has the number of members attending increased but also there is a continued flow of visitors, some of whom are attracted by a particular talk while others come with the intention of joining the Society.

#### March 2014

Robin Williams of Oxford House gave an interesting and informative talk on **Pontypool Japanware** before inviting those present to handle the examples he brought with him. Pontypool Japanware was the decoration of plated ironware and had developed as an offshoot of the local iron industry in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.



## April 2014

William Cross's talk entitled **Tredegar Women - A Beautiful NUISANCE** was about Hon. Gwyneth Ericka Morgan, the only daughter of Courtenay Morgan, the third Lord Tredegar. One of the Bright Young people of the post war era, she disappeared from a house in Wimbledon in 1924 and her body was later discovered in the River Thames.

## May 2014

**Wales' 9-11 : what happened to the bodies?** was the question raised by Lyn Pask of Pontllanfraith Local History Society. Based on his experience as a mining engineer as well as thorough historical research, he explained what happened on September 11, 1878, within the Prince of Wales Colliery, Abercarn. There was a catastrophic explosion which killed 268 men and boys (though an exact number of casualties remains unknown). Only 12 bodies were retrieved leaving over 250 men and boys within the mine. Due to the ongoing fires within the mine it was sealed and flooded and the bodies have never been recovered.

## June AGM

The Society's AGM was held on the last Wednesday in June and that was followed by a short talk by Bill Smith on his recent publication *The History of the Tredegar Mineral Estate* (a review of which appeared in the last issue of *Gelligaer Times*).

## GELLIGAER HISTORICAL SOCIETY CONFERENCE

**Llancaiach Fawr - March 29th 2014**

**Voices from the Factory Floor 1945-75**

**Speakers Catrin Edwards and Catrin Stevens**

Archif Menywod Cymru / Women's Archive of Wales

Catrin Stevens talked about the aims and scope of the project. The aim was to raise the profile of women and the understanding of women's lives. It involved interviewing women about their working lives in manufacturing industry and creating an archive of interviews, diaries, letters, photographs etc. to be deposited at the National Screen and Sound Archive at Aberystwyth. Volunteers were trained in oral history interviewing techniques. The project has been financed through a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Catrin Edwards, the field officer for South East Wales put the project in context. She explained that after the Second World War, the women who had been helping the war effort e.g. in munitions or on the buses, did not go back to working in their own home. In fact many women couldn't afford not to work. There was plenty of work available in the factories on the industrial estates of South Wales, factories such as Hoover Merthyr Tydfil, Kayser Bondor Pentrebach, British Nylon Spinners Pontypool, Corona Pop Factory Porth, Freemans Cigar Factory, Poliakovs Blaen Rhondda, Sobell TV, Triang Toys and many more.

Many interviewees thought that they had nothing to say but they soon realised that they had plenty to tell about what was for some, the best time in their lives. The process of the interview made many realise that their life experience was significant. The women talked about working conditions. The factories were well lit but heating was poor - boiling in summer and freezing in winter. Health and Safety issues were not considered. At the Corona factory women wore clogs because of all the broken glass on the floor. They wore no gloves and they got glass in their hands. An interviewee who worked as a machinist in a garment factory remembered a needle going through her finger. But there were no memories of serious accidents.

There was great camaraderie in the factories. At Horrocks factory on the Treforest Industrial Estate, records were played and women sang along. Shirley Bassegy was one of their employees. Some employers laid on Christmas parties for employees, one such being at Cardiff City Hall attended by hundreds.

Many factories were unionised and democratic. A shop steward at Hoovers remembered the campaign for equal pay in the wake of the Equal Pay Act 1970, which they won in spite of an unofficial strike of the men who were against it.

*Sue Allen*

## **MASTER MARINER, SHIP OWNER AND PHILANTHROPIST- REMEMBERING WILLIAM REARDON SMITH 1856-1935 Speaker Dr David Jenkins**

Senior Curator, National Waterfront Museum, Swansea

William Reardon Smith was born in Appledore, North Devon, in 1856. It was a centre of shipbuilding and was linked with the cod trade in Newfoundland and the tobacco trade with Virginia. He was the youngest of nine children born to Captain Thomas Smith who was involved in 'stone hacking'. This involved loading limestone and coal at Lydstep on the South Wales Coast and transporting it to Appledore where the limestone was burnt in kilns to be used as quick lime, mortar and whitewash.

His father died in the Royal Charter Gale of 1859. William first went to sea as a cabin boy, peeling potatoes. His early adulthood was spent as a master mariner, captaining ships trading in iron and steel to places as far away as USA, Russia, Argentina and Chile. He first became a ship owner in partnership with William Seager, a ships' chandler at Bute Street, Cardiff, their first ship being the Tempest in 1904. In 1905, on his own, he set up the Instow Steamship Company with family money. He set up a new company with each ship that he bought and never created one consolidated company. His wife always invested in shares in his ships. He traded out of Cardiff in coal, grain and timber. In World War I his ships were chartered by the government for the convoys. He lost 16 vessels in all.



After the war, he was able to purchase a peerage for himself. He invested heavily in ships in the post war boom, but reparations undermined coal sales resulting in a large number of ships being laid up in Roath Dock. His business recovered and, in 1928, he ordered two motor ships with diesel engines. He bought the Margareta as a family yacht in 1925 but he was never accepted by the Royal Yacht set. In 1930 he became Deputy Lieutenant of Glamorganshire.

William Reardon Smith was a typical Victorian Laissez-Faire liberal. He was opposed to government subsidies for shipping, government interference and government taxation policies. In the 1920's he became a great benefactor and philanthropist. He was generous to many causes including religious causes, founding a chair at Exeter University and making a large contribution to the construction of Bideford and District Hospital. He also helped to raise money for the National Museum of Wales where his name is commemorated by the Reardon Smith Lecture Theatre. In his personal life, he was not a very nice man, treating his family like a ship's crew. He did not spend money on his own enjoyment and never spent money on dogs, horses or mansions. In spite of being a hard headed capitalist, his outlook had been tempered by poverty.

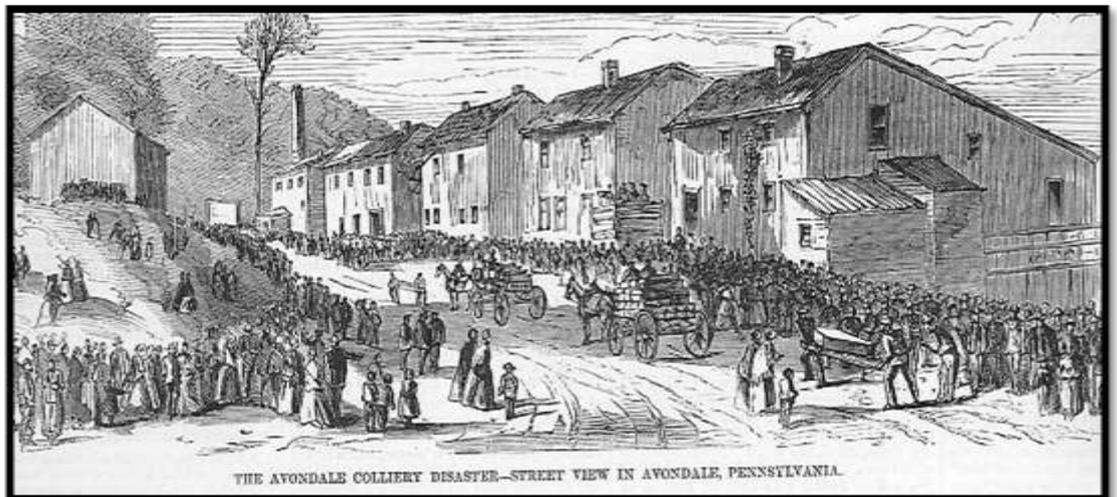
*Sue Allen*

### **A WELSH MINING DISASTER IN AMERICA: AVONDALE, PENNSYLVANIA, 1869** **Speaker Prof. Bill Jones**

Professor of Modern Welsh History, Cardiff University

Dr. Bill Jones began his talk by entertaining the conference members with the first verse of the ballad of Avondale, then continued to captivate his audience with the tragic explanation of the origins of the song and with its Welsh connections. He has long been interested in, and has made a study of, Welsh miners and their families who emigrated to Pennsylvania, mainly those of the Stanton area, close to Avondale. This was the scene of a major disaster, an explosion in 1869 when 110 miners and two rescuers were killed, mainly from suffocation and fumes, not from the blast itself. He calls this "a very Welsh disaster as well as an American one".

Of particular interest was Dr. Jones' discussion of the cause of the disaster. The owner's preferred version was of arson due to a feud between the Welsh (who were skilled workers and bosses) and the Irish labourers (the latter being at a funeral and not in the pit at the time).



THE AVONDALE COLLIERY DISASTER—STREET VIEW IN AVONDALE, PENNSYLVANIA.

The official verdict, however, was that a spark spread from the furnace to the bottom of the shaft,

lighting the wooden brattice and spreading up to the breaker at the top of the pit. Dr. Jones maintains that the price Welsh men and their families paid for coal was as great in the US as in South Wales.

*Judith Jones*

## **CHRISTIANITY, LITERACY AND LORDSHIP: SOUTH WALES FROM THE ROMANS TO THE NORMANS**

**Jeremy Knight**

Author

Due to a technical problem the notes on Jeremy Knight's talk were not available for insertion in this Newsletter. Hopefully, this will be remedied in the next newsletter. In the meantime readers may wish to find out more about the talk by getting hold of a copy of Jeremy Knight's fairly recent publication "South Wales from the Romans to the Normans". It is available on Amazon.

*David Mills*

## **JOHN NIXON AND THE WELSH COAL TRADE WITH FRANCE**

**Brian Davies**

Pontypridd Museum

Members of Gelligaer Historical Society have learned to expect interesting and entertaining talks from Brian Davies, expectations which were realised during his discussion of John Nixon and how Nixon's entrepreneurship led to South Wales' coal feeding the emerging ship-building and steel industry of St Nazaire in the nineteenth century.

Brian described Nixon's mining engineering education in Durham and how he came to South Wales because suitable jobs in the north-east were dominated by established mining and engineering dynasties. Nixon answered a job advertisement for a position at Crawshay Bailey's Nantyglo ironworks, but on turning up at Nantyglo found that the job had already been given to the son of a friend of Bailey's. Refusing the offer of the position of second-in-command, he walked to Cardiff where he obtained a job surveying all of the Bute mineral rights in readiness for the renewal of the infamous Dowlais lease.

Brian Davies then explained how observations of smoke from steam engines and ships at Penydarren, Cardiff, St Nazaire and later London led Nixon to recognise the high quality of coal produced in South Wales compared to his native Newcastle coal, and so he returned to South Wales to invest in the business. Failing to buy coal from Lucy Thomas at Merthyr, he set up in business at Cwm Bach with Thomas Powell, chartering ships to send coal to western France. At the time, coal from Newcastle was being used to refine the sugar which was imported to Nantes from the West Indies and Nixon set out to prove that time and quantities of coal could be reduced using South Wales' coal. He then obtained the contract to supply all the coal to the French Admiralty and proceeded to greatly expand his operations, contracting to sell coal to all the passenger and merchant paddle steamers on the Loire, buying Deep Duffryn Colliery and later, Navigation Colliery, Mountain Ash, developing Merthyr Vale Colliery and finally, buying Cwm Cynon Colliery in Penrhiwceiber.

Brian Davies did not ignore Nixon's extensive engineering expertise, for example, describing how he solved the long-standing ventilation problem at Deep Duffryn and also how he developed a machine to weigh the coal produced by miners at each shift, thus extinguishing the need for the controversial "croppers".

*Judith Jones*

## **GELLIGAER CEMETERY EXTENSION**

Following a field evaluation survey in 2012 and geophysical survey in 2013, earthworks commenced in the south-east field of the proposed cemetery extension on 21st July 2014. It had been decided that this area be initially developed because, although trial excavations here had revealed evidence of activity in the Roman period, the evidence was less than found in the north-west field.

During previous works to extend the cemetery numerous coins were detected over a short period, many of them of late date, but little record was kept and so valuable information was lost. On this occasion a qualified archaeologist is in attendance providing a "watching brief" during excavations and it had been agreed that, at completion of work each day, Society members and metal detectorists would assist by sweeping excavated areas and spoil with metal detectors with a view to locating and recording any finds which would have escaped the human eye. Unfortunately this was not to be! An hour or so after completion of works on the first day we were ordered off site by the contractor on "health and safety grounds", never to return. Requests to examine spoil removed off site to a compound were also refused and so, sadly, yet another opportunity to shed some light on the Roman presence in Gelligaer has been lost.

*Clive Andrewartha*

## GELLIGAER HISTORICAL SOCIETY WWI PROJECT

The Society's World War I project continues.

1. Information continues to be added to the database of names on local war memorials on the Society's website ([www.gelligaerhistoricalsociety.co.uk/index.php/wwi-memorials](http://www.gelligaerhistoricalsociety.co.uk/index.php/wwi-memorials)) and we have had useful feedback from a number of people, including former residents and family members.

2. A substantial crowd, including contributors, Society members and friends, gathered at Lewis School Pengam on Thursday June 26 for the launch of *Gelligaer Volume 21 Great War 2014 edition*.

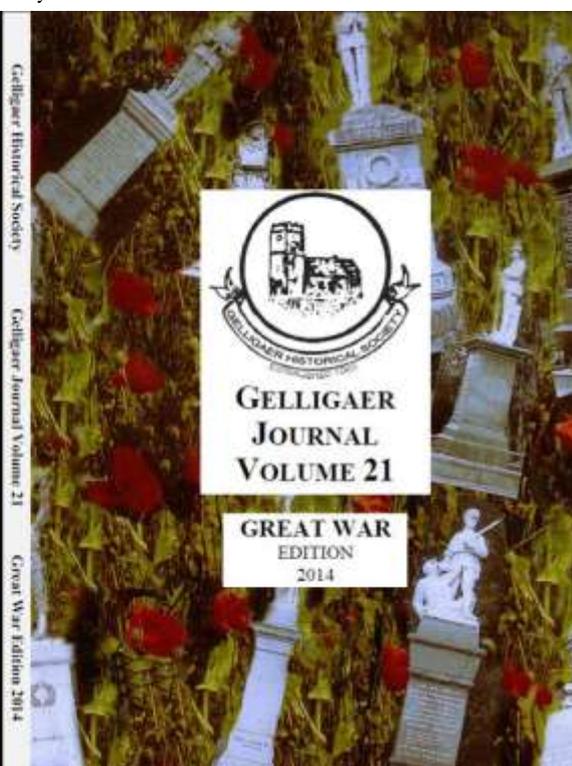
The short formal part of the evening, chaired by Annie Owen, started with a welcome from Elwyn Morgan, Chairman of Governors LSP, and that was followed by his short photostory. Society members, Dr David Williams and Mrs Iris Owens, read poetry and prose before Jeff Cuthbert, AM for Caerphilly and Minister for Communities and Tackling Poverty, spoke on commemoration Wales-wide and formally launched the journal. There were short contributions from His Worshipful



the mayor of Caerphilly County Borough Council, Councillor David Carter, and Wayne David, MP for Caerphilly and Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Leader of the Opposition, before Society President Nesta Jones presented copies of the newly-launched Great War commemorative journal to the speakers and the headmaster of LSP.

Thanks to everyone who contributed to the event and to Lewis School Pengam for hosting the event.

*Gelligaer Volume 21 Great War 2014 edition* is now on sale for £5. The Cover is shown below with the contents. If you want a copy before September's talk then it is available from Bargoed or Ystrad Mynach libraries



**PROGRAMME : 2014-2015**

<u>Date</u>	<u>Speaker</u>	<u>Topic</u>
September 24 2014	Oliver Blackmore(Newport Museum)	<i>Excavations at Caerwent</i>
October 29 2014	Alan Thorne	<i>German U boats WWI around coast of UK</i>
November 26 2014	Greg Buick	<i>The Prichards of Llancaiach Fawr</i>
December 10 2014	Open Evening	<i>Details to be announced</i>
January 28 2015	Lewis School Pengam	<i>WWI Project [11.00 a.m. start]</i>
February 25 2015	Stephen Rowson	<i>The Glamorganshire Canal</i>
March 25 2015	Chris Jones-Jenkins	<i>Visualising the past – Architectural Reconstruction Drawings</i>
March 28 2015	Conference	<i>Details to be announced –pre-booking necessary</i>
April 29 2015	Ray Howell	<i>Silurian update</i>
May 20 2015	Stuart Wilson	<i>Excavations at the lost city of Trellech</i>
June 24 2015	Annual General Meeting	<i>Details of short talk to follow to be announced</i>

Readers may wish to consider getting some advance information on two of the talks:

Visit the summer excavations at Trellech, for details visit [www.lostcityofrellech.co.uk](http://www.lostcityofrellech.co.uk)

Basically the annual excavations start on 12<sup>th</sup> July 2014 and continues until 10<sup>th</sup> August 2014. Work starts each day at 10 a.m.

Visit Newport Museum and discover the very interesting exhibition of Roman finds from Caerwent. There is a complete mosaic on display and of course many other exhibits other than Roman. The Art Gallery is also well worth seeing.

**OXFORD HOUSE/RISCA INDUSTRIAL MUSEUM**

We have received an invitation from Oxford House Industrial History Society to visit Risca Industrial History Museum. The Society has been collecting artefacts for almost 50 years and these are now housed in the former Risca Colliers Institute. The visit would not be until at least September. If you are interested please let us know, and whether you would prefer an afternoon or evening visit.



**LOCAL EVENTS**

WINDING HOUSE starts an exhibition entitled Our Duty to Bear which is about the First World War and the County Borough of Caerphilly; the exhibition starts on 2<sup>nd</sup> AUGUST 2014

Another World War 1 exhibition starts at GWENT ARCHIVES, Ebbw Vale on 1<sup>st</sup> AUGUST for TWO weeks. The exhibition is being produced in partnership with the Western Front Association (Gwent Branch)

**GELLIGAER HISTORICAL SOCIETY OFFICERS AND COMMITTEE 2014-2015**

President Emeritus	Mr Islwyn Hughes	Committee	Mrs Audrey Griffiths
President.	Miss Nesta Jones		Mrs Ann Pinch
Chair	Mrs Annie Owen		Mr Bill Smith
Vice-Chair	Mrs Judith Jones		Dr David Williams
Treasurer	Mr Roy Smith	Auditor	Mrs Joanne Thomas
Webmaster	Mr Greg Buick	Life Members	Dr Fred Holley
Programmes	Mr David Mills		Mr Islwyn Hughes
			Mr Terry McCarthy

**MESSAGE FROM [ecologycymru@gmail.com](mailto:ecologycymru@gmail.com)**

Are you interested in learning what wildlife, plants, fungi, birds and local history exist in your area? Then please email [ecologycymru@gmail.com](mailto:ecologycymru@gmail.com) with your interest and we will update you on walks that are available for your group or family. We deliver power point presentations on gardens and wildlife, birdwatching in Spain or on Mallorca or a wildlife quiz for your group. Also on offer are full day courses on identifying birds in the wild (with beaks, feet, skulls, pellets, feathers and much more to see on the course) and courses on how to survey birds in the wild. Testimonials available and any area considered for walks, talks and survey courses.

**FOUND AMONGST SOME OLD PAPERS OF A LOCAL FAMILY**

For Foot Rot in Sheep in 1830  
 Two ounces of the best gunpowder  
 Two ounces of blue vitriol  
 Two ounces of spirits of salts  
 Two ounces of Verdigrase (Verdigris)  
 One ounce of butter of antomy

Although I printed this I offer no warranties *David Mills*

Ritter of Antimony has been used in the past to dissolve and remove horn stubs from sheep without