



Gelligaer Times

Newsletter of the Gelligaer Historical Society

No. 17

www.gelligaerhistoricalsociety.co.uk

Spring 2010

Welcome to the slightly re-vamped version of the Gelligaer Times.

As Editor I hope members will make a contribution to the forthcoming issues and not leave all the writing to me. I think this will make for varied and lively reading to reflect the dynamics of the society. You can see some of my suggestions below.

A brief word about my experience in this field: While a member of the Keep Fit association of Wales in the 1980's I edited the quarterly newsletter for members. During this period, as an employee of British Gas Wales, I edited the Headquarters 'Bulletin' for NALGO members. Later, when I moved to Taff's Well, I wrote a weekly column 'From our Correspondent' for the Pontypridd and Llantrisant Observer. I have an English Degree from University of Glamorgan. I am currently semi-retired, but teaching English as a Foreign language as and when needed.

Iris Owens

This is the first edition of Gelligaer Times to be produced since Terry McCarthy stepped down as Chairman of the Society and founder and editor of Gelligaer Times. It is safe to say that the idea of The Gelligaer Times has proved to be a success and lots of people, not just members of the Society, look forward to reading it.

It is therefore highly appropriate that this edition should contain the thanks of all the members of the Society to Terry for the many, many hours he has given to the Society over the years. Under Terry's chairmanship we have seen the society grow not just in membership numbers but also in reputation.

Terry has overseen the move of our meetings from Bargoed Library to Llancaiach and was extremely instrumental in organising the annual conferences we have held. In typical Terry fashion he has agreed to procure the speakers for this year's conference despite the fact that he may well be the other side of Britain by then.

We wish both Terry and Mary all the very best in their proposed move and although we do not want to see them go we hope that the move takes place as soon as possible so that Terry and Mary will be much nearer their family and they can then enjoy the delights of being Grand Parents without having to travel hundreds of miles.

Dave Mills

Bargoed Gilfach Project - an update by Annie Owen

Regular *Gelligaer Times* readers know that, as part of GHS's Golden Birthday celebrations, we are working to produce a comprehensive history of the communities of Bargoed and Gilfach, the largest urban area within the former Gelligaer parish and UDC. This involves coordinated research efforts as well as securing the finances necessary to ensure publication.

On the research side, the team is making pleasing progress with a wide range of topics. Some members are concentrating on the era from prehistoric to Victorian times, covering Celtic, Roman and medieval developments, and tracing the history of local farms and rural industries. Others are focussing on local railway and coal

mining developments, crucial to the emergence of the modern communities of Bargoed and Gilfach. A further cohort, researching various aspects of life and work in the new post-1900 communities, has made good progress in topics such as music, places of worship, educational developments and the local Italian community, and has started to research other topics including hotels, public houses and clubs, housing and living conditions, local government and the fire service. Recently, the group has been enhanced with two new researchers, who are concentrating on two other important topics, namely sport and retail. There is plenty of scope for others to join the group, especially to study topics such as health and social care, entertainment, and aspects of culture.

Several researchers are working hard reading local newspapers such as Merthyr Express and Bargoed Journal, extremely useful sources of information on the post-1900 history of Bargoed and Gilfach. This is time-consuming, and volunteers to assist in this aspect of research will be warmly welcomed. Similarly, if anyone has memories and stories of life and work in Bargoed and Gilfach, we will be very pleased to hear from you.

The group is currently trying to secure estimates of the cost of printing and publishing our book, and investigating the possibility of applying for grants to bring BGP to a successful conclusion before the end of 2011.

If you are interested in contributing to the research in any capacity, please contact us via GHS website www.gelligaerhistoricalsociety.co.uk or telephone the coordinator (Annie) on 01443 813122.

Personal Encounters with the past - Llandaff Cathedral

During WW2 Llandaff Cathedral was seriously damaged by enemy bombing, which destroyed much of the roof of the nave. For years after the war, religious services were restricted to the Lady Chapel, the rest being boarded off from public access and view.

When I was about 12 years old, my friend and I became intensely interested -if not obsessed- with what lay behind the screens and wanted to see it for ourselves. We stepped up our church attendance and also went regularly on a Saturday morning to see if we could work out how to gain access.

We were also members of the Cardiff Junior Naturalists- a very broad church, which included Botany, Ornithology, Geology and Archaeology. One evening, there was a talk on Llandaff Cathedral, where we sat enthralled by the slides, one of which showed an worn stone staircase. We worked out that it would give access to a door we had seen, on the roof of the Lady Chapel leading into the 'Off Limits' area of the nave.

The following week was half term, we walked to the Cathedral one bright morning and slipped up the stairs from the Chapter house and onto the roof. We had to walk right around the perimeter to access the other door to get in to the gallery, which was high above the nave. It was quite vertiginous. With a quick push, the door gave. We were in, having achieved our goal of seeing a sight which few people had seen since January 2nd 1941. The devastation was unbelievable. The roof of the nave and the presbytery had been wrecked. Stone, glass, wood and metal lay in chaotic heaps, although there were signs that restoration had begun. Pigeons flapped in and out through blind windows and scared us half to death as we walked along the gallery but we were in for a much bigger shock. As we turned to retrace our steps, we were met half way by a very stern-faced officer of the church who scared us far more than the expedition into the ruined cathedral. He was seriously displeased at our presence. We completed

our descent, heads bowed and shaking more than we had been, high above the nave.

Although we had planned to give false names and addresses and say we went to different schools, we gave way at the first question and blurted out who we were and where we came from. He didn't seem in the least interested to know why we had wanted to get inside. The thought of him contacting our respective parents and, heaven forbid, head teachers, sent even more shivers through us.

Luckily we got away with just a stern reprimand and went home hoping there would be no follow up. We left it quite a long time before going back to Evensong and concentrated our activities at the Junior Naturalists on collecting fossils, pressing wild flowers, and going on an archaeological dig in the Wenvoe area. Lessons learned.

Iris Owens

Have you had a personal encounter with the past? Maybe you have lived in a very old house, visited an old building, been on a dig or chatted to someone with interesting memories of times past. Send us a short article for the Gelligaer Times. Head it Personal Encounters with the Past. Word limit 250 words. Email it to us - webmaster@gelligaerhistoricalsociety.co.uk

Meetings Reports

November 2009 Llanbradach by Dennis Selwood

After a gap of many years Dennis Selwood returned to the Society to give another talk about Llanbradach. Dennis has written 4 books about Llanbradach and most of the talk was linked to the Thomas family of Llanbradach Fawr and their descendants who did much by way of philanthropic work in the areas of Llanbradach and Ystrad Mynach. Dennis claimed that he was rather nervous of "coming out of retirement" to give a public talk but if there was any nervousness it soon disappeared and Dennis gave a very relaxed and entertaining talk illustrated by a number of very interesting slides, one to be noted was of the winding tower at Llanbradach Colliery that had a very ornate cover on the top that made it almost look like a pagoda.

The last quarter of the talk contained a number of slides on railways in the Llanbradach area; this delighted our then Chair Terry McCarthy who was invited by Dennis to make some informed comments and a rarity occurred because there were some 'railway' slides that Terry had never seen.

We hope that Dennis will not lapse back into retirement because his knowledge and love of Llanbradach is a boon to any local history society.

January 2010 Dinner at Llancaiach Fawr

This was the second annual dinner to be organised by the society. On our web site it was cleverly advertised as our annual Christmas dinner. This was a good move by our as forty of us, including friends and relatives of society members, sat down to an excellent dinner. The food was good as was the service by the staff and the company was excellent.

One slight panic occurred because Terry McCarthy and his wife Mary were "slightly" late because they claimed to have been given the incorrect starting time, but no more will be said about that !!! Terry was presented with two coloured prints by Society President Islwyn Hughes. One was of Bargoed viaduct and the other of Hengoed viaduct. Islwyn also presented Mary with a bouquet of flowers. For those who do not know Terry has stepped down as Chair of the Society because of his (and Mary's) planned move to the east of England to be nearer their family. Terry was thanked for the many, many hours he has spent

working for the good of the Society both as Chair and committee member Terry also did the Society a lot of good over the years as he became a well known speaker on the local history circuit.

We hope we can build on the success of this year's dinner especially as we approach our 50th anniversary when we hope to do something "different"

March 2010 Henry Morgan by Howell Moses

Despite the snow, sleet, hail, rain and high wind one of the largest audiences of our "season" turned up to hear Howell Moses talk about Henry Morgan the Buccaneer. Howell has the distinction of being the oldest person to be awarded a doctorate from Cardiff University; he was 74 at the time !!!

Perhaps it was the thoughts of a talk about the sunny Caribbean that attracted people and Howell quickly had everyone at ease with his easy going manner which he maintained throughout his talk, which was both entertaining and informative. Howell is still a fairly frequent visitor to the Caribbean as he has a son living on the Cayman Island.

Before talking about Henry Morgan he gave a back-ground to the Pirates and Buccaneers and dispelled most of the myths that surround their images that have been mainly "created" by the film industry. He also pointed out that Wales had many strong links with piracy and at one time the Welsh gentry supported pirates in the Severn and took a share of the spoils.

There are all sorts of stories about Henry Morgan and Howell tested the audience with a few questions, some of which were the popular misconceptions about Morgan. He then developed some of stories and revealed which were fact and which were fiction. One thing seems quite certain and that is that Morgan originated from South Wales. However, Morgan never spoke about where he was born or even his childhood. He invested in a sugar plantation on Jamaica which he called Llanrumney which some take as a hint as to where he was born. His year of birth is generally accepted as 1635 but this is based on deduction rather than record. Morgan had acted with the express approval of the Government and was made an Admiral of the Fleet of the Royal Navy. He invested his money in property and did not act like a "normal" plantation owner by taking advantage of his female slaves and his conduct was exemplary; nothing like the boisterous, hard drinking and womanising characters that are portrayed in films. Morgan was so upset by a biography which was published by a Dutch surgeon who had worked with him that he took a libel action against the Dutchman. This was the first libel action in the High Court; Morgan succeeded and was awarded £200.

He died at the age of 53 and was buried with full military honours at Port Royal, Jamaica. Some years later there was an earthquake and the cemetery collapsed into the sea along with Morgan's grave and coffin.

Could you be a Scribe?

No, we are not handing out quill pens, parchment and application forms for calligraphy courses, but inviting members to share the task of writing brief meeting reports for inclusion in the Gelligaer Times. Don't panic! You don't need shorthand. We don't want verbatim transcription notes, just an overview of the content of the talk, something about the speaker and any interesting visual aids he or she used, possibly your own perception of the tone or style. A maximum of 250 words. Please mention it to a committee member if you would like to be in the Scribe Pool. What's the collective noun for scribes? If anyone knows, please pass it on to the committee.

Deadline for pieces for next issue 30th June – date of AGM