



GELLIGAER TIMES- NUMBER 72

MAY 2024

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE GELLIGAER HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Editor's Note

This edition is somewhat unusual in the sense that it is almost entirely devoted to reports on the talks at our monthly meetings and our Annual Conference. I would like to thank Ann Pinch who has studiously provided notes on all our monthly talks. To have these talks summarised and then published demonstrates that the Society delivers an array of topics. At the end of the reports is a note from our neighbours, the Darran Valley History Group and details of the Dic Penderyn Society Annual Conference.

I appreciate that some readers may have attended (and I hope absorbed) all the talks that are reported, but it is always useful to have “reminders”. For those who were, for whatever reason, unable to attend then I hope the reports will help you keep up to date with the Society’s programme.

The talks at our monthly meetings, and especially so at the Annual Conference, have been greatly enhanced by our new IT equipment, namely a laptop computer and a sound system. It is not only the audience at Llancaiach who have benefitted but also those who “attend” via the Zoom facility which allows people to see and hear the talks from their home. The Society is most grateful to the Caerphilly County Borough Council who provided a grant that enabled us to purchase the necessary items.



An aerial photograph of Llancaiach Fawr Manor House, the barn in the foreground is where the Society holds its monthly meetings and the annual conference.

David Mills

November 29th 2023

The Life and incredible times of Bela Bodo -Neil Hempstead

From siege to revolution, from engineer to author-the man who helped change the modern-day landscape of the Gelligaer Parish

Mr Hempstead told us of the interesting life of Be la Bodo- born in Hungary in 1932 during his childhood he endured the harsh conditions of the Second World War and the siege of Budapest followed by the 1956 Revolution. Escaping to Britain with his brother he found a place at Nottingham University to study engineering. After a period of working for the railways he moved-with his wife-to Ystrad Mynach working for the National Coal Board as an engineer, helping to stabilise the coal tips and the re-landscaping at Bedwas Colliery and the old Brithdir Colliery site.

Using photographs and telling of personal memories Mr Hempstead showed his admiration and fondness for a man who lived such an incredible life. An interesting and enjoyable talk-thank you.

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Dec 13th 2024 2023

Evan Rees MA ‘Dyfed’ 1850-1823

At the time of his death, he was known as the most famous man in Wales.

Our thanks to Dr Elin Jones who gave a talk at our December evening meeting keeping all present attentive with her interesting family anecdotes and links with ‘Dyfed’. A man who began by competing successfully at local Eisteddfodau, following on to compete at the National Eisteddfodau and later at Eisteddfodau across the world, eventually becoming the Archdruid of the Gorsedd Cymru.

Our ‘Christmas Evening’ ended with coffee and mince pies, most staying on for the refreshments and to enjoy the opportunity to chat to other members.

January 31st 2024

This month saw our annual daytime meeting with two talks either side of lunch

Dr Edith Evans gave the first talk: -

Prehistoric Rock Art on our doorstep

Speaking about the symbols found carved into stones on various mountain tops in South Wales – including Maen Gattwg Gelligaer -Dr Evans explained that these symbols date from the Neolithic and Bronze Ages. The stones all have cup-shaped hollow symbols carved into them, the number and size of the hollow shapes vary from stone to stone but the actual meaning of the symbols has been lost in the mists of time. However, they are still being discovered and after listening to Dr Evans speak this morning, I’m sure those of us who walk on the Common will be paying more attention to the stones beneath our feet, so KEEP LOOKING! You might be the next person to find a rock art stone.

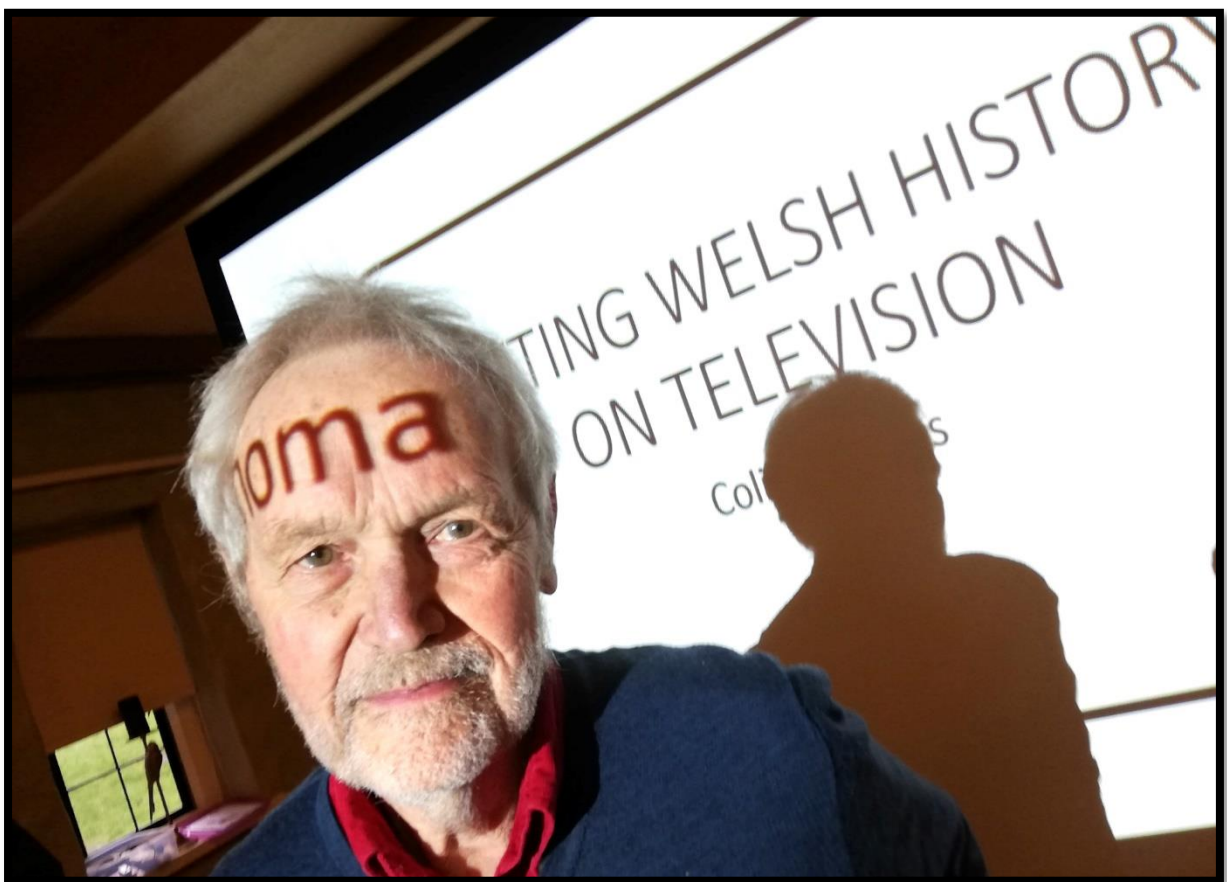
After lunch Mr Colin Thomas, a writer, television producer and director spoke about

‘Putting Welsh History on Television’

An amusing introduction to his entry into television production – especially his involvement with the programme ‘The Dragon has two tongues ‘-was followed by anecdotes and interesting incidents all holding his audience’s attention. Excerpts from his programmes showed how television has evolved and helped to show Welsh history in an interesting visual way. This development, said Mr Thomas, is on-going with the advent of social media and the enablement of the computer age widening our outlook.

The day was well attended and the talks enjoyed by all. After the meeting Dr Edith Evans led a group to Llanfabon where they were able to see the new “find”-another cup marked stone.

The following photographs were kindly supplied by Brian Jarrett





Wednesday February 28th 2024

The Steel Sheet and Tinplate Works of Pontardawe and District-Jeff Childs

Showing his pride in his home town, Mr Childs began his talk with slides of famous people either born in, or with connections to Pontardawe.

Old pictures-some pre-1830- showed the green fields and beauty of the region prior to industrial development. The first tinplate works was founded in 1843 by William Parsons but in 1861 the nine existing mills were leased from him by William Gilbertson who developed the works still further bringing employment to the area. Not only investing in the industry, but also in the people of the area-helping with education and building a church. The Gilbertson family built large houses for themselves in the district -ensuring they were not within view of the factories!

We saw unpleasant and ugly impressions of the works and the effects on the landscape-pollution, scars above the ground and slurry left lying on waste ground-but by the 1960s things had changed and with the closure of the industry the factories were demolished and the chimneys which had polluted the landscape with their poisonous fumes for so long were pulled down. In the 1970s restoration work began and where the factories once stood a new school has been built.

Thanks to Mr Childs for an interesting, educating evening.

Wednesday March 27th 2024

The Chartists of Llanfabon and Gelligaer - David Mills

The first part of David's talk was a tribute to the late Brian Davies, someone who gave so many successful and amusing talks to our society.

David and Brian were friends and tonight we were treated to anecdotes of their meetings and adventures (plus photographs!) -including their love of steam engines, Brian's retirement project-a steam driven launch, berthed at Penarth Marina. David explained that their meetings revolved around lunches, first of all at the café in Pontypridd Bus Station, then a café in Penarth Marina and in more recent times the 'Fish and Chip Bar' in Gelligaer, which became Brian's favourite because a meal deal for O.A.Ps.

Going on to speak about the different levels of society – even within the coal and steel industry there were different levels to aspire to. While in the Chartist Movement there were differing levels, namely middle class and working class, when meetings were held in the Coffee Houses of London by the middle-class and those held in the local, working- class, public houses in the south Wales valleys.

Speaking about the Llanfabon area we were told that Chartist lodge meetings were held at The Colliers' Arms, near Nelson in 1839 and this had links to the Blackwood Chartists. The Gelligaer and Llanfabon Chartists made an important contribution to the unsuccessful Chartist March on the town of Newport in November 1839. Whilst in 1843 unrest continued as demonstrated in a newspaper account which mentioned the *Gelligaer Riots*; colliers working at Llancaiach colliery took exception to workers "imported" from Dowlais and literally chased them away.

This talk was enjoyed by all present – as responses to the humorous remarks proved -. so, thank you David for sharing your memories and photographs of Brian Davies with us tonight.

2024 Conference Saturday March 23rd

On Saturday, 23rd March, Llancaiach Fawr again hosted Gelligaer Historical Society's annual conference - and once again it was recognised by everyone as a success! It was very well attended and delegates at Llancaiach enjoyed the social side of the event, the lunch and talking to people they meet only occasionally. They also appreciated browsing through the displays and sometimes purchasing books as well as the "goodies" sold in support of Ty Hafan. Displays and bookstalls were provided by GHS, Six Points, Dic Penderyn Society, Merthyr Tydfil branch of Glamorgan Family History Society, Merthyr Tydfil and District History Society and Glamorgan Archives.

On the right is a photo of Ann Pinch multitasking: looking after the GHS stall, writing reports on some of the talks and guarding the bar?



The main purpose of the day, however, was to hear the four excellent talks which were also enjoyed by a few members via Zoom, a major innovation for GHS conferences. These have been summarised below. I want to thank everyone - our organiser, our speakers, those who were able to help on the day as well as all those who came along and supported the event. Thank you also to the many other south Wales local history societies who advertised the conference resulting in the participation of delegates from the whole of the region. We have confirmed the venue and date for our next conference so I hope you will all join us again at Llancaiach on 22nd March 2025.

Judith Jones

Women in Welsh Coalmining: Tip Girls at Work in a Men's World

Norena Shopland

This was the first talk of the day and Norena Shopland, author and historian, spoke eloquently on the life of women working alongside men at the coal face. In the nineteenth century not only women but also young children worked down the mines and while the Factory Act of 1853 had restricted the employment of children in factories this did not apply to the working of women and children in coal mines. Laws were put in place to ban young children and females from working underground, but were not enforced until towards the end of the century when women were moved to work at the pit head-but this was still heavy and dangerous work.

Attempts were made to stop this exploitation of women through a number of Parliamentary Bills but the women protested against the abolition of female labour at the pit head even marching to Westminster in 1887 and 1911 asking that they be allowed to work in peace. New machinery phased out the number of female coal workers, the last one finishing work in 1966.

Photographs showing how these 'Tip Girls' would wear colourful scarves or fancy, feather decorated hats and even- scandalously -trousers! These women were criticised and depicted as hideous and immoral but other photographs showed how they would completely change when dressed in their "Sunday Best"!

Although women in the Welsh coalfields were in the minority compared to men their work was just as important and as such, we must remember them and their determination to withstand the constant criticism of their wish to exist in 'a Men's World'.

Our thanks to Ms Shopland who opened our conference with such an enthralling talk

Ann Pinch.

When the taps failed: Living with drought in Victorian & Edwardian Wales

Professor Keir Waddington

Keir Waddington is a Professor at Cardiff University, specialising in urban history, environmental history, the social history of medicine, and, more broadly, nineteenth-century British and European history, with a number of related publications under his belt. His research focuses on the interconnections between medical and environmental history, 1800 to the present. His current research examines health and pollution in the Victorian and Edwardian

rural environment, the relationships between climate and public health with a focus on the lived realities of drought.

Professor Waddington began by explaining that in studies of drought, the experience and emotions of those who live through it are often ignored. His talk was intended to place these elements at the centre of the discussion.

Wales is known as a wet country, experiencing more rainfall than England, so it is contrary to expectation that it should experience drought. Yet after a relatively wet eighteenth century, between 1826 and 1911, there were a number of severe droughts in Wales, more than elsewhere in Britain. Professor Waddington wanted to examine this period in terms of:

- Physical and social phenomenon
- Coping Strategies
- Emotion
- Disease and fear
- Resilience, adaptation and vulnerability

Drought may be caused by more than just the weather. It may also occur as a result of water management. Industry may place stress on water supplies; iron works were particularly demanding of water and mining resulted in many diverted water courses. Urbanisation also increases demand.

After 1850, drought was seen as a recurrent problem for towns and villages. This worsened after 1880 when there were fewer “partial” droughts and more “absolute” droughts, or “water famines” with no rain at all for three months or more. Up until then, droughts had been largely caused by low rainfall but the twenty-one years between 1880 and 1911 saw hydrological and meteorological factors combine to create repeated droughts.

This “dry season” as the South Wales press called it, resulted in some people being rationed to an hour of water a day, others begging for water on the streets of Cardiff, loss of jobs, rising prices and even the death of people and animals. The experience may have varied from area to area but vulnerability to drought was universal.

On the whole, Cardiff, with its reservoirs, fared better than Swansea, where supplies remained precarious until 1891 and at one point had no water for 10 days.

Water restrictions were common. In more than one year, the Rhondda was restricted to three hours of water a day, printed signs warning of the times when it would be available. In Pontypridd a bell was rung to warn people of an impending ‘stop tap’. People resorted to leaving buckets under open taps to catch water as and when supplies were restored. Whereas in colliery towns, supplies were eked out in one way or another, rural areas remained dependent on streams, ponds and wells. The Western Mail acknowledged the difficulties in these areas of getting water, where utensils had to be used to fetch water from the nearest available source, often miles away, and with inevitable spillages.

Daily routines were disrupted by the need to queue for water or to fetch it over long distances. In Swansea, women young and old were seen carrying three-to-five-gallon containers of water. Elsewhere, water carts were mobbed. People stopped cooking so frequently, mindful of the

danger of fire in a time of water shortages. In Llanelli in 1907, the population were reduced to using ditch water for their domestic needs. The Temperance movement even went so far to advocate drinking beer, on the grounds that it was both more readily available and more reliably pure.

All these coping strategies created a growing anxiety about the weather. The situation was not improved by the stench of polluted or stagnant water, such as in Riverside in Cardiff in 1896, where the smell made the inhabitants physically sick. Tempers flared in water queues with major fights breaking out in Llanelli in 1864 and Aberavon in 1896. One employee of a water company even committed suicide out of despair. Letters written to Charlotte Guest about the supply of water to the iron works reveal a mounting anxiety which was only relieved when at last it rained. Anger at water companies and at corporations was very real but the worst outrage was reserved for those who wasted water, whose behaviour the press described as “heinous” and worse than robbery, as it affected so many others.

Hand in hand with anger went fear – fear of epidemics and diseases such as cholera. When most water sources were foul – disused wells, stagnant ponds, polluted brooks, the river Ely full of sulphuric acid from the tin-plate works – there were difficult choices to be made. People were aware of the dangers but had no alternatives. It was said of Penarth in 1884-5 that they had Hobson’s Choice – “either foul water or none”.

Despite the many stresses to which they were subject, no community reached a tipping point. Lives were disrupted, behaviours modified but the population coped.

Professor Waddington contended that by paying attention to the everyday and the lived experience of drought and the complexity of the experience, we can extrapolate valuable information for contemporary climate change studies. Such anthropogenic data can prove a valuable contribution to understanding human reaction to meteorological events. In this way history has much to teach us about our current predicament.

All in all, this was a fascinating talk about an unexpected and disruptive problem in the South Wales of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which provided much food for thought and prompted some lively questioning from the audience.

Ceri Creffield

Glamorgan’s Blood: Dark Arteries Old Veins, Unearthing the records of the National Coal Board at Glamorgan Archives-Rhian Diggins

Always an enthusiastic and interesting speaker- Rhian Diggins did not disappoint today. A range of folders and documents referring back to 1864 and covering a snapshot of life in the coalfields were displayed during the talk. Later volumes covering differing periods hold information in minute detail of a miner’s life, his employment, his family. They are also an important photographic record of home life in the mining villages; with references to valley activities-choirs, sporting activities, strike conditions, introduction of the pit-head baths, the influence of new machinery to name but a few. Concluding with a summary of how and why these records are so essential in completing a picture of an industry which has been so important to - .and had so much influence on (for good and evil) the coal mining areas of Wales. Thank you for such an interesting talk, Ms Diggins and convincing us that these records will help future generations understand life during the coal mining years.

Ann Pinch

The Welsh Not: Language and Education in 19th Century Wales

Professor Martin Johnes

The fourth and final speaker of the conference was Professor Martin Johnes from Swansea University. This was an engaging and lively talk informed by the research conducted for his latest book: “Welsh Not: Elementary Education and the Anglicization of 19th Century Wales” which will be published later this year and discusses the impact of the Welsh Not and its legacy on the Welsh language in Wales.

Johnes’ talk started in 1846, explaining the background to *Reports of the Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of Education in Wales*. Welsh MP William Williams led a motion in parliament highlighting the state of working-class education. Williams argued that mine owners were not interested in educating the masses, and that fear and finance should motivate them. An uneducated populace was a danger to society and successful businesses. Williams claimed that with better schools the working classes would revolt less. Williams words prompted the school inspections and reports, now commonly known as The Blue Books.

These reports made judgements about the state of Welsh Education and highlighted the practice of the Welsh Not, which was also known as the ‘Welsh Note’ or ‘Welsh Stick’. These reports also included judgements about the Welsh language, namely how it hid immoral and criminal behaviours, and they were damning to the Welsh character. The message of The Blue Books was that people needed to speak English to become civilised, to better themselves and to progress in the world.

In his research Johnes discovered that the use of the Welsh Not started before The Blue Books report and was mainly used in Welsh Language strongholds; this is contrary to popular opinion that the Blue Books created the Welsh Not as a means to beat the language into submission. Johnes has examined the quality of the teachers and teaching the 19th Century; both physical and psychological violence against children was commonplace, school attendance was sporadic and class sizes were large with a wide age range. Teachers were not specially trained educators but, often, soldiers invalided after the Napoleonic wars, finding paid employment wherever they could. Teaching was poorly paid and had a negative reputation. Teachers were expected to teach English despite the fact that some could not speak the language themselves. The Welsh Not was, therefore, more likely to be a means of controlling a class and not a pedagogical tool. Johnes has found evidence of a ‘Speak Not’ and ‘Late Not’. As schooling was paid for, parents could be demanding and intimidate with threats of violence if they felt children were not receiving the education for which they were paying. The message of The Blue Books, that the use of English was a gateway to a better life, was reinforced by many parents.

From his research, Johnes argues that although it does have a psychological legacy, the use of the Welsh Not was not the most significant factor in the decline of Welsh speakers. He argues that as the 19th century progressed, teaching improved due to many factors, including the professionalisation of teaching and the changing societal view of childhood. Johnes argues that other factors including the decline in the religious influence in communities, the mass migration to areas such as the South Wales coalfields and the rise in mass media such as the wireless radio had a greater impact on the language. Professor Johnes’ talk was thought provoking and enjoyable. It entertained all at the conference and prompted many questions.

Kate Wynne.

A gallery of photographs from the Annual Conference

Kindly provided by Kate Wynne



Left to right are Rhian Diggins, Bev. Robins (Ty Hafen Stall) and Norena Shopland



On the left G H S President Dr Elin Jones talking to Norena Shopland



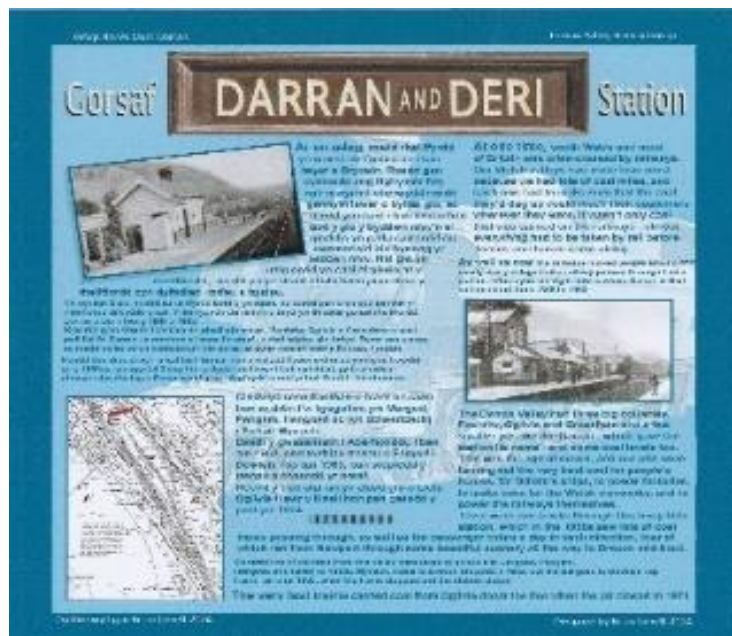
Darran Valley History Group Steams Ahead

The Darran Valley History Group is on track with its latest project to remind Deri of its not-too-distant past. The group has had the aim of providing the two villages in the valley with tangible memorials so that this and coming generations will always have a visible link with their history. Since it began in 2008 it has erected a plaque naming the 27 miners who died in the Darran Colliery disaster, a memorial for Fochriw people who died in the mines and in military service, and a War Memorial in Deri, which, with Fochriw was one of the few settlements without one. A Roll of Honour, linked to the Deri memorial was on display in the village library until the building was damaged in a storm. More recently, an information board and a seat were placed where the 'Lost Village' of Penybank once stood.

The newest scheme will be to unveil a similar board where Darran & Deri railway station was until passenger trains were withdrawn in 1963. On 15th May local school-children and residents will be invited to the launch, performed by a man who was once a porter on the station.



The children have taken part in a poetry and art competition, and the winners will be announced on the same day. Generations of secondary school pupils travelled to Bargoed, Pengam and Hengoed from Deri station, which was also the starting point for the annual Sunday School trips to the seaside, shopping expeditions to Newport or Cardiff, and many family outings to Brecon, through magnificent Beacons countryside.



Brian Jarrett

PS. Please forgive the railway puns. I spent too long working with journalists. BJ

DIC PENDERYN SOCIETY ANNUAL CONFERENCE

When SATURDAY 25TH MAY 2024

Where MERTHYR LABOUR CLUB-COURT STREET MERTHYR TYDFIL

Time 10am to 4 pm

Speakers ROBERT GRIFFITHS—SCOTCH CATTLE

HUW WILLIAMS--MERTHYR CHARTISTS 1830 to 1850

LISA POWELL--WOMEN IN THE 1ST WORLD WAR

SIAN CARTWRIGHT—GREENHAM COMMON

£5 ENTRY CHARGE and REFRESHMENTS AVAIABLE AT A NOMINAL CHARGE

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