

# CYNON VALLEY HISTORY SOCIETY

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# HANES

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During this Indian summer, let's hope it lasts, it is good to reflect on recent anniversaries as well as past events. We look at 150th Anniversary of the Opening of Aberdare Park, the 160th Anniversary of the establishment of the Cwmbach Co-operative Society, a local survivor of the Spanish Civil War, part 2 of the memories of Runge's shop, and, Society news. Enjoy reading about them!

## 150th Anniversary of the Opening of Aberdare Park

*by Colin Rees*

In the mid-nineteenth century Aberdare was a heavily industrialised town, with tramroads and railways criss-crossing the valley floor, waste tips, and furnaces with their chimney stacks contributing to a forbidding and inhospitable atmosphere in the valley. With much of nearby land in private hands, the working man and his family had little recreational space that was easily accessible. Responding to these circumstances the Local Board of Health, under its chairman Rees Hopkin Rhys, (Blind Rhys), acquired almost 50 acres of Hirwaun Common for creating Wales' first public park. To do so necessitated negotiating a loan of £5000, (about £620,000 today with adjustment for inflation), repayable over 30 years. The scheme had its detractors, particularly from ratepayers, and a public enquiry was necessary before the loan could be sanctioned. After a successful outcome the design and planning of the park was entrusted to the eminent landscape gardener William Barron. In 1866 work commenced with significant sums of money allocated for the construction of the circular drive, extensive drainage schemes, levelling, two lodges, two ornamental lakes, walling and fencing and for the planting of a wide variety of shrubs and trees. The park was officially opened in July 1869.

Further information about the history of the park can be found in Geoffrey Evans' publication, "Aberdare Park, A Guide and Short History," (FOAP, 2019)

**The Anniversary Celebration:** The weather was fine and it greatly enhanced a full day of outdoor activities to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the opening of Aberdare Park in July 1869. The celebrations took place on Saturday July 13th and were spread over three venues at different times in the day. Commencing at 10am in Victoria Square, representatives from participating groups congregated around the statue of Griffith Rhys Jones, (Caradog), conductor of the Côr Mawr, which enjoyed such success in the choral competition at the Crystal Palace in London in 1872 & 1873. Formal photographs were taken of over 100 of the participants and some choral pieces were performed.



**Caradog and event organiser Philip Rees**



**Choirs assemble in Victoria Square**



**'Dare to Sing' perform in the Library Square**

However, the main event of the morning commenced at 11 am in the Library Square. This took the form of a concert compèred by local resident and BBC broadcaster Mr Roy Noble. After setting the scene and giving background information about the history of The Park, Roy introduced musical items performed by Llwydcoed Brass Band, the ladies choir 'Dare to Sing,' the soloist Miss Mali Davies, the Mountain Ash RFC Singers, Cwmdare Voices, and the Cwmbach Male Choir. A large and appreciative audience

filled the area in front of the raised area to the decorative screen, which was used as a performance stage.

The third session of the day took place around the bandstand in Aberdare Park. This necessitated a brisk walk from the Library Square to the Park lower gates where at 1pm the Penywaun Paraders Jazz Band commenced the proceedings with a march up to the bandstand. Here they gave a demonstration of their marching and playing skills. The park café did a roaring trade, and there were activities organised for children. Various organisations were also present such as the Aberdare Fire Brigade. A tiered platform had been erected near the bandstand, and it was in this area that the afternoon concert began at around 1.45 pm. The Llwydcoed Band, and Cwmdare Voices and Mali Davies from the morning session were joined by the Phoenix Choir from Abercynon, and the Mountain Ash & District Choral Society. Each group and the soloist performed a number of pieces which were enjoyed by an enthusiastic audience assembled on the lawn near the bandstand.



Part of the audience for the afternoon session

To conclude the scheduled programme there was a re-enactment of the park opening ceremony that took place 150 years earlier. The two main speakers at the original event were Richard Fothergill, M.P. and Mr Henry Richard, M.P. who were the two members for Merthyr Boroughs, which at that time included Aberdare. In the anniversary re-enactment, these parts were played by local historian Geoffrey Evans and Rev Hywel J. Davies respectively. Both addressed the audience using some of the words used in the original ceremony. Also at the original opening in 1869 was Mr Rees Hopkin Rhys, who was



Philip Rees, Geoffrey Evans & Rev Hywel Davies

instrumental in establishing the park, in spite of some opposition from those who opposed the concomitant financial burden that its establishment entailed.

The day was organised by the group The Friends of Aberdare Park, FOAP, ably led by Mr Philip Rees. FOAP members also provided Victorian Tea service where tea and cream cakes were served alongside Mrs Freeman in the café. The whole day was a most successful occasion that will be remembered for some time by those who attended.

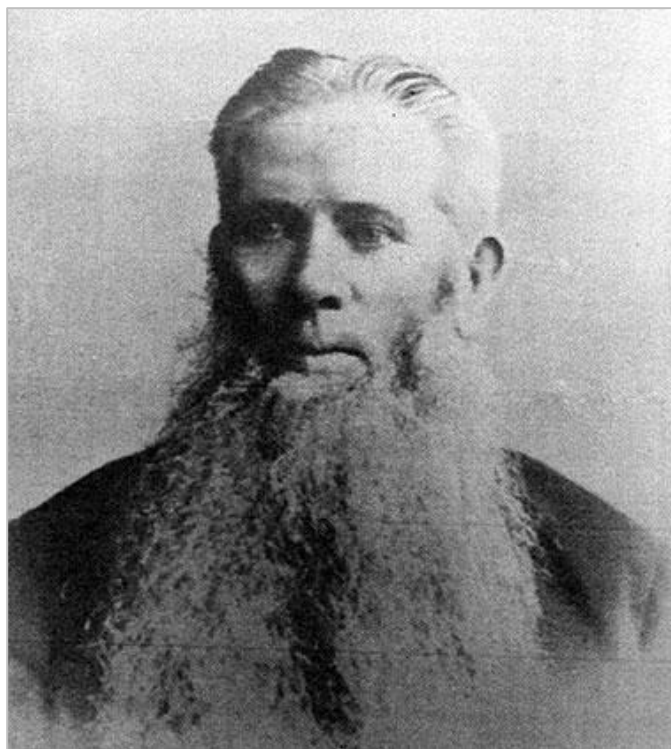
[The newspaper report of the opening ceremony can be read online in *The Merthyr Telegraph*, 31st July 1869, page 3.]

## The 160th Anniversary of the establishment of the Cwmbach Co-operative Society

It was thought that this was the first Co-operative Society to be opened in Wales but there had been a number of earlier societies between the 1820s and the 1850s, but Cwmbach was the first successful Co-operative society in South Wales.

Yet it was not the first in Britain as that honour goes to Rochdale, Lancashire, which was founded in 1844. Yet it was the Rochdale pioneers who inspired the Cwmbach venture. In 1859 a number of letters giving the history of this founding society were published in the Reynolds Newspaper. These were read by a David Thomas who was employed as a mechanic at the Lletty Shenkin colliery near Cwmbach. They inspired him to consider forming a similar co-operative venture in the village. To this end, he consulted a friend, John Rees. Together they agreed to press the matter further. Several factors favoured their endeavours: one being that there were four illegal Truck Shops in Aberdare, so there was a huge demand for reasonable priced goods.

To endeavour to establish a Co-operative society at Cwmbach Thomas and Rees decided to call a public meeting that was held at the Mount Pleasant Inn on 19th October 1859. But the meeting and the society almost foundered as David Thomas had to go immediately to his colliery to repair a breakdown of the machinery there. Thankfully John Rees decided like an able lieutenant whose captain was "hors de combat", to proceed into action and chaired the meeting very well, answering no end of questions. The response was enthusiastic. It was resolved to start a Co-operative society without delay: 56 people joined the society, but only 19 paid the entrance fee of 1s..1d whilst three others



John Rees

"Rockefellers": John Rees (the able lieutenant, I presume), Thomas Morgan and William Thomas paid £5.00 each. Of course, the total, £16..0s..7d, was a very small sum but from a small acorn a giant oak would grow!

For five months the pioneers continued, trying to increase the number of subscriptions, and as these mounted up, they took a lease of some cottages, known at that time as Capel Bricks, for the purpose of erecting a Co-operative shop and proceeded with the necessary alterations, which were completed on 24th February 1860. They found they had money in hand, so two men were appointed to go to Merthyr to purchase the following goods for the shop: — 100 pounds of cheese, 10 pounds of tea together with such quantity of sugar, soap, candles and tobacco as they thought fit.

The site of the new shop had been selected with great wisdom being close to the quay on the Aberdare canal. Thousands of tons of goods came subsequently in canal boats from Merthyr Tydfil.

The shop first opened on the evening of Thursday, 8th March 1860, but at the end of that night, there was a meagre takings totalling of seven shillings five pennies and a halfpenny. They thought it unwise to open on Friday night but thankfully on Saturday the takings increased to £40..6s..8d. Stock ran short, a hand-truck had to be borrowed, and volunteers sent to Aberdare for further supplies. There were many tales from these earliest days about wheeling flour and other heavy goods along the canal bank from Aberdare to Cwmbach — sometimes knee-deep in mud along the canal side. On one occasion, both man and load fell into the canal. It's said the load had to be "written off". No mention was made of the man.

Initially the Society had organisational problems, not least with five secretaries in the first 18 months of its existence. However, the fifth, David Jacob, was secretary for over thirty years, from 1861 to 1894. The Society had reason to be even more thankful to him as in 1861 he averted a terrible disaster. When the third quarterly accounts and balance sheet had been compiled, the committee were delighted to be informed that the dividend worked out at six shillings in the pound. Fortunately, Jacob discovered a huge error in the accounts that would have led to £400 being distributed instead of £60, which would have crippled the society.

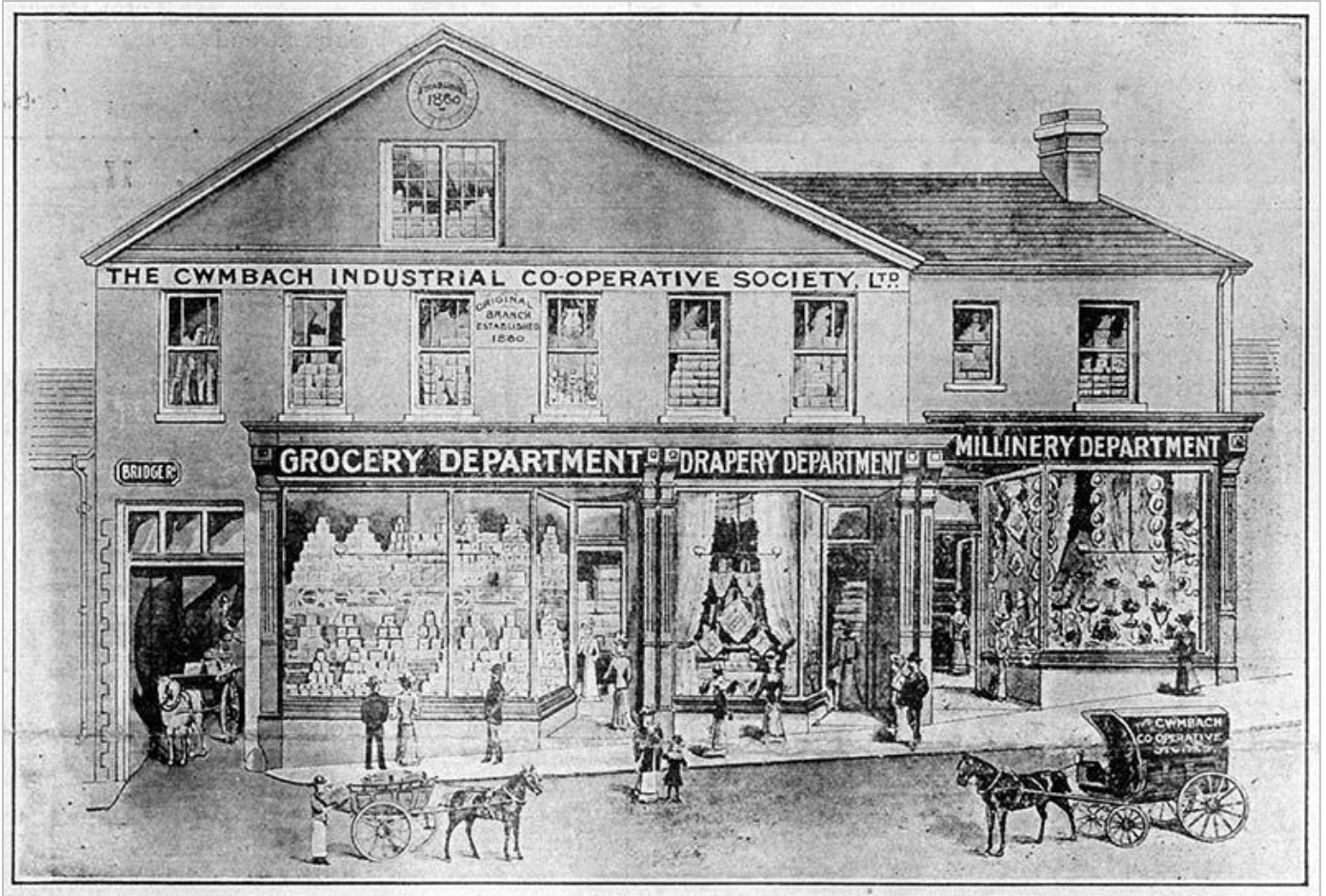
A second person who was a stalwart in the society was John Rees, (I don't know if he was the able lieutenant), became the manager of the stores on 18th July 1860. It was said, "He has done more for the Co-operative movement in South Wales than any other man. He has worked in season and out of season for 28 years on behalf of the movement and has assisted young societies and their managers to a very large extent and made the Co-operative society a thorough success."

In 1899–1900, the original Cwmbach store was itself completely rebuilt, and these new premises were those that remained until the site was cleared for housing around 1975.

Yet that was not the end of the Cwmbach Co-op as a new Co-op store has recently been built besides the New Road, on the site of the old canal so the people of Cwmbach can still, 160 years later, shop at the Coop!

Sources: The Souvenir history of the Cwmbach Industrial Co-operative Society by its General Secretary, Evan Jones, in 1900.

Note: Our nonagenarian member Elfed Davies of Gadlys Road is now writing a book on this subject entitled Co-operative Societies in the Cynon Valley 1859–1988 which will be published soon.



Cwmbach Industrial Co-operative Society Building

## Recollections of Runge's, Jewellers, Cardiff Street, Aberdare

by Glan Davies, Watchmaker at Runge's

An edited version of the illustrated lecture delivered to the Probus Club in 1993

Part Two – continued from *Hanes* 87



Glan Davies at his workbench at Runge's Shop

We also repaired brooches, necklaces, earrings, rings and even spectacles. Other services we offered included ear piercing and cutting off rings that had become too tight and that caused pain to swollen fingers.

We repaired silver plated and pewter items. Many a good cup of tea has been poured from a teapot repaired at Runge's. Chains of office sometimes needed repairs, or cleaning and adding a disc of the latest holder. Valuable items from local churches come to us for repair. In fact, we have recently repaired the altar cross from St. John's Church.

I left behind my life in the shop in 1939 to join the Army, but returned to Runge's in 1945 sitting at the bench again, even before my demob leave was over, and the long years in the Middle East, a thing of the past.

It was in the early fifties that Bernhard Runge bought the premises next door; you probably remember Frederick Escott's sewing machine shop. Then the Royal Liver Insurance office moved over to Merthyr, and we were able to extend our premises right to the corner. This meant that the retail side of the business could expand, and the Runges had a far more comfortable flat upstairs. By this time, I was married with two small children.

With a larger workshop, we had room for an apprentice, and after a succession of boys, (who all seemed to be called either Davies or Jones!), Ken arrived. Ken Jones stayed with us, he was recommended, as I was, by Bernhard's son Guy Runge, a local schoolteacher. With twenty-five years experience, and fully qualified, Ken has now taken over the responsibility of running the business.

Larger premises also meant we were able to take on a weekly delivery, repair and maintenance service. We had the contract to maintain all the school clocks in the valley, from Carnetown to Rhigos, but the homely looking clocks are a thing of the past now, replaced by quartz battery clocks. We also maintained the Boys' Grammar School Clock, and still do. There is also the clock in the pavilion in Aberdare Park, which I had to wind every fortnight.

We have maintained the St. Elvan clock for many years. It was installed in 1862 and originally had to be wound manually once a week. I believe that this was the responsibility of Mr. Kerley of Monk Street for many years, climbing the 39 steps up to the clock chamber in the church steeple. Then a decision was made that the winding mechanism should be electrified, and a firm from Croydon, Gillet and Johnson, won the contract for the work.

The Longcase or grandfather clocks that came through our hands were of humble stock, many of them from the farms around Penderyn and Ystradfellte. It was a common sight to find a grandfather clock standing in a depression in the floor of the farm's best room, because the ceilings were too low to accommodate a 7-foot clock! It was an enjoyable day out collecting and delivering these clocks, bus to Penderyn then being picked up there by a farmer in an old banger!

Another outing took us once a year to overhaul the clock at The Hendre Bailey Water Works at Llwydcoed. This clock controlled the water supply through the system.

The variety of clocks that passed through our workshop was endless. Glass-domed anniversary clocks, beautiful French carriage clocks, the forerunners of the modern travelling clocks, ships clocks, cuckoo clocks, and pigeon clocks essential equipment for pigeon fanciers locally.

The largest collection of clocks locally belonged to the Johnson family in Hirwaun. We supplied, maintained and repaired many of them over the years.

Finally a section on watches. So many interesting pieces with many sentimental stories attached to them. In fact, I estimate that I have repaired about 27,000 watches in my working life, from late 18th century verge pocket watches with two and a half inch dials, to the tiniest of ladies' watches worth more as decoration than timekeeping! I was surprised to find that I have repaired four thousand ladies' watches since I retired.

The watch has gone through a big transformation in the past ten years, like so many other aspects of life, more changes in fact than in the previous 500 years! The watchmakers craft is disappearing which really is a great loss. The marvels of modern technology and electronics are not to be dismissed lightly; however, many of us cherish the old clocks and watches as a solace to our nostalgia for the craftsmanship, which is receding into the past.

To demonstrate our confidence in the toughness of the working watches we sold, with the name B. Runge on the dial, we would toss it over the counter at the customer's feet!

Last, but not least, I must mention the most important facet of the trade — the customers! I suppose I could go on at great length about all the people I have met; the good friends and acquaintances I have made over the years. But it will be enough to say they have added to my work an extra dimension, one that I value very much, that is, a strong sense of belonging to the community.



Runge's Shop after expanding into adjoining premises



Eileen Jones, Ken Jones & Glan Davies

Glan Davies, (1918–2010), was brought up in Cwmaman, but in later life resided in Clifton Street, Aberdare. We are indebted to Glan's wife Joyce, (née Burrows), for making available her husband's notes for the lecture he gave to the Probus Club in 1993. This *Hanes* article is an abridged version of that illustrated lecture.

### Morien Morgan: International Brigader in The Spanish Civil War

Morien Morgan was born in Ynysybwl in 1916 and was the son of John Edward Morgan who was a collier and founder of the Labour party there, and Secretary of the Lady Windsor Lodge. Following in his father's footsteps, he later became Chairman of the Labour Party in Ynysybwl. A few years before this appointment he had been on holiday to the University of Strasbourg in Germany where he saw many soldiers, new fortifications, and army training camps: the material reality of re-armament. Later back at University in Cardiff, he wrote an essay about this and the Italian invasion of Ethiopia that won a prize.

At a meeting in Cardiff, he met a medical student Alastair Wilson who asked him to join the Communist party, which he did as they both wanted to help Spain.

The Fascists were approaching Madrid and an urgent call came for volunteers; and so, at the end of 1937 he decided to volunteer to join the International Brigade fighting in Spain. Arriving at the Pyrenees, he and the other volunteers were given Spanish slippers: cork soled with strings tied round their ankles. They slept in the snow-covered mountains and when they woke up there was snow on their blankets. At last, in early March 1938 they got



Morien Morgan

over into Spain. While on a small farm he had an attack of tonsillitis. Later that month near Calaceite his company were marching when they were attacked by Fascist armoured cars. The fighting went on for hour after hour. Morgan writes: "We were greatly outnumbered and there were very few of us left. One chap: Morgan Harvard was badly wounded and we decided to retreat taking him on a stretcher. Twenty of us took in turns to carry him but the terrain was very precipitous and after several hours, we decided to leave him on the roadside while we carried on marching. He was taken by the Fascists and taken to hospital. His leg was operated on but he lost an arm and eventually got back to Britain. After marching for a few days my tonsillitis struck again. I found myself unable to keep up with the rest of the men and I collapsed on the mountain side and fell fast asleep. I woke up feeling better; eventually I found a piece of bread about two inches square, dirty and rock hard. I went to a stream, dipped a corner of the bread into the water and sucked it. It was like nectar. It was the sweetest thing I had ever tasted in my life.

After a week without any food I suffered from delusions, finally I came to an encampment of soldiers who spoke Spanish. I went up to them with a cigarette and asked for a light and I had a meal with them by a fire. When I woke up the next morning, I was captured. They were Fascists and I don't think they realized who I was until they saw this star on my uniform, which was either five or six pointed. The trouble was that the uniform of the Spanish Regular Army was the same uniform worn by both sides. They both had a star but one star had one point more than the other. [This was rather a very poor way of differentiating an enemy from a friend! Ed.] My throat was still hurting pretty badly, my Spanish was very halting, and when they questioned me, I found it very difficult to talk. Then they took my glasses off me. That made it very difficult for me to see. They searched me and found a very small shaving kit, which had been bought in Woolworths. They were convinced it was made of silver for some reason. Now, the Spanish were so utterly poor that they knew that anyone who could afford a silver shaving kit must be very wealthy. Anyway, they felt then that I should not be shot (up to this time all prisoners had been shot by the fascists)." [So Morgan was saved from death by a Woolworths shaving kit! Ed.]

The second part of his memoirs about his life in a concentration camp and his eventual release will appear in the Winter issue.

Morien Waldo Parry Morgan, (1916–1997), was married to the celebrated writer and playwright Elaine Morgan (1920–2013), née Floyd, in 1945. They lived in Abernant and later in Mountain Ash. Together they and raised three sons.

You can listen to the full account of these Spanish Brigade memories, spoken by Morien Morgan, using the following link:

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80009639>

Source: Imperial War Museum: Morien Morgan's oral memoirs

## **Aberdare Community School wins History awards**

The School has won the Moondance Foundation prize of £800 and The John Hopla Society Prize of £100 for its project about World War 1. The pupils created three large mosaics depicting the beginning, middle and end of the war. They also researched stories about family and local community members who gave their lives in the war.

## Society News

### A Walk around Abercynon

Rob Jones, a member of our society who had given a fascinating lecture about this area a few months previously, led several members on a walk around the area on 5th June. He started at the Navigation Inn, which was the headquarters of the Aberdare Canal Company.

We walked through Martin's Terrace named after Henry Martin, the founder of Abercynon colliery, which closed in 1988. Going north, we passed the shop in Glancynon Road that was the grocer's shop where George Ewart Evans, the founder of oral history, was born. Farther up the road we came to Plymouth House which was on the site of Lock Cottage of the Glamorgan Canal, the lock is still in situ in the garden. Coming back down the road we came to the Fire Station where there is a plaque honouring Richard Trevithick, who ran the first steam locomotive in the world from Merthyr to Abercynon on 22nd February 1804.

The fascinating walk ended at St Thomas's Roman Catholic Church at a shrine of the Virgin Mary which had been built by local miners in 1925.

### The Cwm Project

Mr Dorian Holmes has a large number of photographs of the area and we are having discussions with him about producing an oral history about The Cwm.

### Sad News

We are sad to report the deaths of two of our members: Mrs Linda Kendall and Mr Brian Waterson.

Brian had a great knowledge of and interest in the iron industry and was a senior volunteer at Ironbridge, where he had carried out excavations. When he came to live in Aberdare, he was excited to learn that the museum was on the site of the Gadlys ironworks. His legacy is the super scale model of the ironworks that his widow Susan has kindly given to the museum.

We extend our deepest sympathy to both families.

## Death of Rev Glaslyn Bowen

Rev. Glaslyn Bowen has died at the age of 92. He was born in Red Roses, a village north of Pendine. He served for four years in the Welsh Guards, serving in Palestine in the 1947 war. In 1952, he was ordained into the Presbyterian Church of Wales, and was the minister of Trinity, Canon Street, from 1966 to 1992, when he retired. During his ministry he became the minister of several other chapels in the valley. He was an astute administrator, second to none.

Trinity Presbyterian Chapel is situated at the junction of Canon Street and Weatherall Street in the centre of Aberdare. It is a Grade 2 listed building, but ceased to be used for religious services in 2011 after being in use for 140 years. Its two large schoolrooms became unusable prior to the closure of the main chapel. Amongst the founders of the chapel were Mr & Mrs Walter Lloyd proprietors of *Y Gwladgarwr*, the Welsh language weekly newspaper published at their Canon Street premises.

## Cynon Valley Museum Exhibitions

- Rugby in the Land of our Fathers. The exhibition, which ends on 28th September, takes an in-depth look at the rugby clubs in the valley and the 27 local players who have played for Wales.
- On Saturday, 12th October, there is "Party Ponty." A day long celebration of local arts, heritage and culture.
- Aberdare Art Society Annual show, 4th October to 19th October.
- Photography: exploring Japan, 25th October to 9th November.
- Exhibition of the most popular artists from the last three years from 6th December.

## Local Historical Books

- Anthony Mor O'Brien has recently published a 253-page paperback entitled "Charlie Stanton and the Block Strike in Aberdare, 1910." It is available from Amazon, price £6.00.
- Mr O'Brien has also published a novel called "Picaresque: Scrapes and scams of Stanley Sharp, 1945," which records the humorous activities of a kind-hearted rascal and, in part, recalls Pontypridd in 1945. This 276-page novel is also available from Amazon priced £6.00.
- Penywaun: from two small farms to a community of 2000-plus people: The history of the community and its people from the 1750s to the 1950s, by Robert Cornwall. This is A5 size and consists of 150 pages.

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