

HANES

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Newsletter of the Cynon Valley History Society Cylchlythyr Cymdeithas Hanes Cwm Cynon.

GHOST STORIES FOR CHRISTMAS

Christmas was once the traditional time to sit around the fireside with a glass of mulled wine and listen to ghost stories by candlelight. Today most people switch on their television sets for yet another seasonal repeat of James Bond or The Great Escape. In any event such local tales of supernatural powers would have been swept away during the Industrial Revolution. Hanes will not however disappoint its readers, so turn down the lights, as two such stories both worthy of Dickens or M. R. James are recalled for your Christmas entertainment.

THE RETURN OF MRS.ROBBENDY

A Ghost Story. – A short distance beyond **Abernant** station on the Merthyr road are two cottages which have been the scene of considerable excitement for several days. In one of them lived a man named John Robbendy, whose wife died a short time ago. Last week a quantity of property, including a clock, a glass and china, were unaccountably broken. This circumstance gave rise to a local belief that the dead woman was the cause of all the mischief. In consequence the most extravagant reports have been circulated. The poor man living in the house was frightened out of his wits, and was in a state of great excitement. The police were called upon, and Inspector Matthews examined the premises, and for some time kept watch. In the sleeping room was a quantity of fallen plaster, the falling of which was attributed to supernatural effects. But near the roof was a hole through the partition that separated the two houses, and from the appearance of the plaster on the floor, a strong suspicion arose that it had been thrown through there. In the next house lives a young girl, a daughter of Robbendy. She was suspected as the author of the mischief, and was duly warned by the police. The ghost has made no sign since. *The Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian* 22nd February 1868. (Was it Miss Robbendy, we wonder, or did the attendance of the police exorcise the presence?)

MYSTERY BURIALS IN LLANWONNO CHURCH

We have it on good authority that the church at Llanwonno has been the locus of unexplained happenings. For example some 20 years ago electricians working on the nave on a darkening winter evening observed a figure, dressed in black and seated at the back of the church. They took little notice of him but on looking in his direction again a little later observed that the person was no longer there. The, by then shaken, workmen searched this small church but there was no sign of the man. They swore that he had not been heard either entering or leaving the building as its heavy door was firmly closed. We cannot account for this phenomena. Perhaps the figure inhabited the church; a possibility that many would perhaps believe after reading the following account (“There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio...”)

Discovery at Llanwonno Church.

In 1893 the nave floor was raised about 2 ft 6 in. above the chancel, which was reached by a short flight of steps. I found that the nave, to the depth of the chancel, was filled with skeletons, laid as the foreman of works remarked “like candles in a box.” The laying or burying of these bodies was a subsequent addition – if I may use this expression- on account of which the nave floor was raised. The thin skim of original plaster whitewash followed the chancel westward. Local tradition says that during the Civil Wars a skirmish took place in this neighbourhood, and that the dead were laid on the church floor, and covered over. As most of the church is built on the solid rock, there seems some colour for this supposition. Nothing however, was found to indicate their date of burial. Several vaults of later date have been cut through this layer of skeletons, in which burials have taken place until very recent times. In one interment, dating probably late seventeenth century, a somewhat singular discovery was made: resting on the skull was a pair of pince-nez, with circular lenses, round the frame of which is the following inscription:-CONRAD.WEIGEL...IOH; ERHARD.MAY SEEL ERB. PETER CONRAD WEIGEL.

The lenses are 1.½ ins diameter. Immediately under the ribs of this skeleton a copper bolt was found 1.½ ins long by ¾ in. in diameter, from which one may suppose that the individual met his death by the discharge of a blunderbuss. G.E.Halliday in *Archaeologia Cambrensis* 1902 p.p.307-308. (Mr. Halliday was the Llandaff Diocesan architect Ca.1900-1920.)

THE GHOSTS OF CHRISTMAS PAST.

DECEMBER 1914

This year is the 90th anniversary of the First World War, which commenced in August 1914.

The majority believed that the war would be over before Christmas. (The Kaiser had told his troops that they would be home before the leaves fall, some young British soldiers were assured that the war would end by the 7th.October!) Yet by October a stalemate had been reached which would remain until March 1918. The reality was that the Allies were to lose 850,000 men in 1914, and half the British Expeditionary Force was wiped out.

Hanes has looked at the events of the first Christmas of the War as recorded in the copies of The Aberdare Leader held at the Central Library. Those reproduced here recall some of the happenings both in the Cynon Valley and on the Western Front.

AT HOME

- **Anti German Feelings.** Shonin sold his razor because it was German hollow-ground and a Domino game being played in Cwmdare was hastily ended when it was discovered that the pieces had been made in Germany!
- Aberdare Valley Golf Club (Mountain Ash) Members subscribed £22.0.6d to provide our soldiers and sailors with Christmas puddings.
- The first Belgium refugees, ten in number, arrived in Aberdare.
- A Recruiting Parade marched through the principal streets of the town headed by the Cynon Valley Band (under J.Manley), followed by Troops of the 5th. Btn. The Welsh Regiment (Pontypridd) under Capt.Kirkwood, the Special Police and the Church Lads' Brigade. The band played The Marseillaise. The parade halted by the fountain in Victoria Square where several recruits were enrolled.
- Christmas is very near and many movements have been set going with a view of providing our troops at the front, and those who have not yet gone with presents. Christmas is closely associated with charitable doings...and the wish to do something is very general (Leader comment.)
- Frank Hodges (of the clothing firm) sent parcels of cardigans, jackets, belts, socks, mittens, gloves, chocolates, peppermints, laces and cigarettes to soldiers from the locality. He is to send similar items to those held as prisoners of war.
- The Chamber of Trade also sent Christmas parcels to the Front, and the Constitutional Club's gifts consisted of three batches of cigarettes and cigars.
- William Hagggar's Bioscope Show screened real fighting pictures from Nieuport, Dixmunde, The Ysar and Ypres.
- May local women, dependants of Soldiers at the Front complained of the delay shown by the Paymaster in granting payments due to them.
- "Recruiting has fallen off...some are afraid of the cold weather!"
- The same issue contained a Recruiting advert containing a Roll of men who had won the Victoria Cross, and the superscription "***There is room for your name on the Roll of Honour. Enlist Today! God Save The King***"
- It was announced that J.W.Hurt, Fishmonger of Canon Street, was to entertain all the children of Soldiers and Sailors from Aberdare and District now serving with the Colours and the Belgium children, to a Tea Party, and Christmas tree at the Market Hall on Christmas Day.

Oh! It's a Lovely War

Oh, oh, oh, it's a lovely war,

What do we want with eggs and ham,
When we've got plum and apple jam?

How shall we spend the money we earn?

Oh oh oh, it's a lovely war
Oh oh oh, it's a lovely war.
Oh oh oh, it's a lovely war!

DECEMBER 1914.

AT THE WESTERN FRONT.

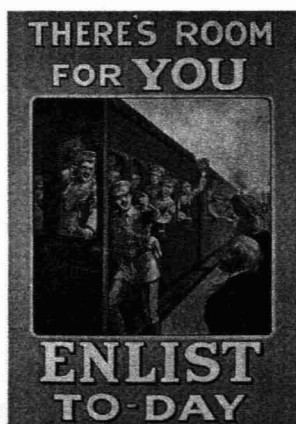
- Wynford Lloyd of Aberaman, who has been in France since the War broke out, wrote home to say he has had some thrilling experiences and urges the young men of Aberdare to come out to help in the great struggle.
- Pte. Morgan, writing to his brother in Cwmaman on the 21st. November, requested tobacco and woollen gloves, as it was very cold in the trenches at night. He continued "I shall be very glad when it will be all over, as I want to spend my Christmas at home if I am spared. (And on the horrors of War), We have had a hot time in the trenches. My pal was shot dead close to me. I can say I shot a couple of Germans...we caught one greasy German picking a dead man's pocket, and we gave him one through the head. One German exploded when shot – he must have had some explosives in his pack!"
- R.H.Jenkins to his brother "Christmas is very near, and it looks as if we are going to have plenty of good things to eat"
- The Hon.H.L.Bruce (the heir to the barony) of the Royal Scots, in a letter home, wrote, "I wish you could see me in conditions that would stop even you shooting Golden Plover, but By Jove I love it! – It is the finest life I have lived". A week later, on the 14th December 1914, Capt. Bruce sustained a fatal head wound in a trench at Ypres.
- A Private Thorney of Mountain Ash was killed just prior to the announcement of Capt. Bruce's death prompting The Leader to record, "*Of the Duffryn heir and the Mountain Ash miner, it can truly be said that they were gallant and brave in life, and in death not divided.*"
- Pte. David Francis of Trecynon, serving with E.Company 6th. Welsh Regiment, informed relatives that he had enjoyed a "Grand Christmas Dinner!" – plenty of pudding, fruit, wine and beer.
- Prior to Christmas, Martin Jones of Foundry Town was sent home on sick leave after contracting Rheumatic fever in rain sodden trenches.

It should be noted that individual Christmases depended upon if you were in or out of the line, and in which section you were serving. The Aberdare Leader makes no mention of the famous, so called unofficial "Christmas Truce of 1914"

LEST WE FORGET

700 MEN FROM THE U.D.C. OF ABERDARE DID NOT RETURN FROM THE GREAT WAR. THE MEMORIAL TO THEIR HONOUR WAS UNVEILED ON THE 15TH.MARCH 1923. THE FIRST MEMORIAL TO THE FALLEN OF THE VALLEY WAS SET UP IN LLWYDGOED PARK, AND DEDICATED ON THE 28TH.SEPTEMBER 1921.

Further Reading : Daddy, What did you do in the Great War, by Victor Evans. Old Aberdare Vol.5.



HOW WE CELEBRATED CHRISTMAS THEN.

Mr. Lewis, butcher, Commercial Place, disposed of no fewer than 350 geese during the Christmas week, in addition to an extraordinary quantity of prime meat. Unfortunately the supply was not at all equal to the demand. (1863)

- The joyous and festive season was ushered in by the ringing of bells and the sound of music, vocal and instrumental...The weather was exceedingly fine...Towards evening, the more thoughtful, wended their way to churches and chapels. In many places of worship the attendance was very large (1867)
- Mr. W.D. Williams (a Solicitor and the High Constable) successfully promoted the first Christmas Market Show of meat in the town, which continued for several years. (1882)
- "We do not think, taking it all in all, that we ever saw a better Christmas show than our shopkeepers gave us this year. The windows in Canon Street and Commercial Street were works of art. They would compare favourably with anything to be seen in the Metropolis (1888 Editorial – **The Aberdare Times**.)
- F.W. Mander, grocer, was instrumental in providing the indigent poor in Aberdare and neighbourhood with a Christmas Dinner, which resulted in the whole of the recipients of outdoor relief, and a number of other aged persons, being entertained to an excellent dinner at the Market Hall, followed by a splendid miscellaneous Concert (1892)
- During Christmastide an excellent party of waits perambulated the streets of Aberaman and sang several selections in a very sweet manner...we shall probably hear of this party again (1896)
- The birth of the New Year was heralded at Aberdare in the customary way. The streets were crowded with people, and social gatherings and watch night services were held at various places. When the clocks struck 12.00 shrill blasts were blown on the hooters etc., and the bells in St. Elvan's Church rang forth a merry peal. (1897-1898.)
- "It will prove of interest to the members of the Aberdare Temperance Society who sent a protest to the Board of Guardians against the granting of beer for the paupers' Christmas Dinner to learn that out of the several hundred paupers who sat down to dinner only half a dozen or so refused to drink beer. This goes to show that the vast majority of the inmates "like a drop!" (Letter to the **Aberdare Times** 1897)
- Local theatres had applied for permission to give performances on Christmas evening. There were bumper houses at the New Theatre to see "The Christian" by Hall Caine, and also at the Grand Theatre in Aberaman and at the Empire in town. (1912)
- **ILLTYD WILLIAMS'S XMAS BAZAAR IS NOW OPEN** – Immense selection of **TOYS** of every description (1914)

CHAIRMAN'S CHRISTMAS MESSAGE

2004 has been yet another good year for the Society, and a very busy and memorable one for me. I refer of course to the publication of my new book *Chapels Of The Cynon Valley*. By the time you receive this fourth and last edition of *Hanes 2004* the book will have been successfully launched and hopefully will already have been purchased by you, and wholly or partially read. If not I recommend it to you on behalf of the Society and hope that you will mention it to your relatives and friends as the ideal Christmas present.

It is indeed a lavish production containing 440 pages in a hard back case cover, with 800 photographs (200 in colour and 600 in monochrome), chapel drawings and town plans.

Thank you for your support over the past year, and best wishes to you all for Christmas and the New Year.

Alan Vernon Jones, Chairman.