



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

## *PENDERYN'S NOTED WITCH. OUR CHRISTMAS FIRESIDE TALE.*

A superstition persisted in Wales until the late nineteenth-century that certain old women were believed to have the power of casting spells over people and animals. Many place names refer to this once widely held belief in witches, e.g. Cwmgwrach, which is not many miles from Aberdare. Among the powers popularly attributed to witches was the ability to ride a broomstick through the air, to tell fortunes and to heal and cause diseases by means of charms. Long forgotten, but once one of the most famous of the Welsh witches was Yr Hen Jem of Penderyn.

In September 1870 the funeral procession of a mysterious old woman made its way to Ystradfellte. Her only mourners were a group of high-spirited youths, who had perhaps come along just to mock her. The person being buried was Jemima Jones (Yr Hen Jem), a reputed notorious local witch. It was said that she first appeared in this district in 1854, when she arrived as a vagrant, or straggling woman. All that was known about her was that she had once been a servant at Cwrt y Cadno, the home of a Mr. Harries.

She was taken in by two brothers, bachelors, Phillip and Griffith, whose surnames are unknown. They lived in a lonely cottage at Blaencadlan, Penderyn; one was a drover, the other a farm labourer.

Jem's mode of dress set her apart from other woman. In appearance she was short, of solid build, had brilliant piercing blue eyes, and a Roman nose. She invariably wore a gown and skirt made of sacking, over which was a man's grey jacket which had once long ago belonged to one of the brothers. Her head was covered with a thick shawl, so that only her eyes and nose could be seen, bringing to mind verses from the *Scottish Play* "What is this, so withered and so wild in her attire that look(s) not like an inhabitant of th' earth and yet (is) on't"

It was her actions however that caused people to consider her a "Secret, black and midnight hag". She acquired a reputation of being a person who could foretell the future. The word got around, and she became much in demand for spells, portions and predictions. She had a deep masculine voice, and spoke with speed and authority, and was said to be "longheaded and cunning". The room she occupied was protected with heavy shutters, so that no natural light ever entered it. She refused to see any person outside the confines of this room. If people came to consult her she would retreat into a corner of her room, light a rush candle and commune with the "Evil One". Once ready her visitor was instructed to enter, and stand near the fire whilst she swore them into the midst of the Spirits. If her "Clients" tried to conceal the truth from her, she would interrogate them minutely, and as so often happened, the more foolish would make a clean breast of anything they had to hide. She had great success in terrifying the superstitious.

Around the year 1864, the two brothers moved from Blaen Cadlan to Blaen Hepste. Curiously their home at the former place caught fire on the night they left the premises. Yr Hen Jem, it is said, stood on a nearby hilltop watching the old cottage being consumed by fire. She was subsequently charged with the destruction of the property, but was acquitted. In 1869 she moved again with the brothers to Nant-y-Deri, and it was there that she died on the 8<sup>th</sup> September 1870. She had long maintained the brothers, after they became too old to work.

So ends our short history of the Soothsayer, Jemima Jones, "Yr Hen Jem", some said she was a White Witch. Others had a different opinion! (Source Dewi Davies: *The History of Penderyn* pp. 83-84). The Editor is grateful to Mr. Douglas Williams for translating the Welsh text of the short record of the life of Jemima Jones contained in this work. The Editor has added some colouring to the piece.

See also Meic Stephens (Ed.) *The Oxford Companion to the Literature of Wales*. Sub. Witches (Oxford, 1986), 665.

## AND NOW FOR THE WEATHER FORECAST...

On average we all receive a hundred or so Christmas cards\*. The majority of these show those two great myths of the British Christmas – The Stagecoach (already an outmoded means of transport when middle class Victorians invented the “traditional” Christmas), and idyllic snow scenes.

Christmas is however a time to speculate on the weather, as secretly we probably all yearn for that white Christmas (After the shops have closed of course!)

What then were weather conditions in the Aberdare Valley like in the past? Answer, very much as they are today. Here are some examples taken from Notes compiled by The Revd.R.Ivor Parry.

- 1785 Great floods throughout summer. Crops swept away cattle moved to hillside for safety.
- 1805 During first week of May snowdrifts to depth of 5 feet on road between Pont Neath Vaughan and Merthyr.
- 1813 Heavy floods in June when whole of village of Aberdare inundated. Bridge at Lluest Wen swept away by raging torrent. Centre of village underwater.
1823. Heavy rain swept away bridges in summer.
- 1829 Valley completely under water. Wall surrounding Maes -y-Dre (Then Glebeland) collapsed under pressure of water.
- 1833 May. “Bad news for the tithing. The lambing season in Mountain Ash has been unusually hard. On most of the hill farms around Rhigos, Aberdare and Llanwonno the loss of lambs has been two out of three..
- 1833 November. The oldest inhabitants cannot remember such heavy floods as poured down the Aberdare Valley on the evening of the 28<sup>th</sup>. There was one uninterrupted lake from Gadlys to Dyffryn
- 1834 Very mild. Strawberry slips in fruit in November.
- 1840 Except for two showers, no rain from February 16<sup>th</sup> to May 6<sup>th</sup>.
- 1845 December. Gooseberry bushes in bloom.
- 1846 December. Weather severe, ponds frozen to a great depth. Fortunately recent increase in traffic on the local canal saved it from being frost-bound. Shareholders are secretly pleased that the T.V.R. has just raised freight charges. This it was hoped would help to keep the canal navigable
1854. May. Severe thunderstorms accompanied by hailstones. Mr. Williams (Carw Coch) weighed six, which came to one ounce.
1864. September. One of heaviest showers in living memory.
- 1866 May 5<sup>th</sup>. Fall of snow.
- 1870 Ponds in Park covered by persons skating and sliding.
- 1874 Violent gale demolished many houses in valley.
- 1875 January. Thunderstorms demolished one of the stacks at Abernant Forge. No one was injured.
- 1878 November. Torrential rain flooded Duke Street, Station Street, and junction between Gloucester Street and Commercial Street. Congregation at Nazareth Chapel found themselves cut off after morning service.

\*The first commercial Christmas card was published in 1846. The Temperance movement condemned this as it showed a family group “cheerfully drinking wine”. Cards really came in to their own in the 1870’s when Messrs. Tucks started mass-producing them. By that date the country was well into the railway age.

## MORE GHOSTS OF CHRISTMAS PAST

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"The European Wine Company. Local Agent, T.W.Evans, Chemist, 14 Commercial Street, Aberdare".  
Sherry. Fine Pale, 2s 9d a bottle. Very Old 3/-  
Superior Port, 2/6d a bottle. Old Port 3/-  
Cognac Brandy 3/7d a bottle.  
London Gin 2/-  
Whisky (very old) proof. 3/4d

1872 (Christmas Advertisement)

Modern Christmas celebrations are selfish and self indulgent, and revolve around the family and perhaps one or two select neighbours. Those of our parents, grandparents and earlier generations were mainly community affairs, influenced by religion and culture, and centred on church and chapel. Local Eisteddfods were frequently held on a Christmas day. Ebenezer held a Christmas day concert in 1849, and Handel's Messiah was performed at Hen de Cwrdd on the same day in 1853 On Christmas morning in 1855. at Ramoth, Hirwaun, John Rees Morgan (Lleurwg), a noted poet and lecturer, spoke for two hours on "The Flood". During the afternoon an Eisteddfod took place, and in the evening Lleurwg again lectured for 2 hours on "The Millennium".

On Christmas Day 1873, The Aberdare Choral Union inaugurated a series of Oratorio Concerts at the Temperance Hall. These were still being held in 1889, when at the seventeenth annual concert they performed Mendelssohn's "Elijah", at 2.30 and 7. p.m. each day, on Christmas Day and the following day. The enthusiastic forces taking part consisted of the soloists, an orchestra of 25 players, and a choir of 150 voices. The conductor was the famous Rees Evans.

Wirt Sikes, the United States Consul at Cardiff recalls, "*In Aberdare, one Christmas, nearly four thousand persons paid for admission to hear the Oratorio of "Samson" (Handel) in the old hall whence Caradoc's (sic) famous musical squadron marched on London: and I was assured that nine-tenths of this vast audience were Welsh working-men, with their wives and sweethearts. And they could all sing too, after a fashion*" Wirt Sikes, "Rambles and Studies in Old South Wales", London 1881, p.276)

On another Christmas Day, in 1878, The Revd Thomas Price of Calfaria, Aberdare, Presided over an Eisteddfod which included tests for Sunday school children in needlecraft, scripture, literature, geography and English and Welsh grammar as well as musical competitions, sustained by a well earned tea-party.

"To win first prize for their rendering of "Worthy is the Lamb" (The Messiah) at a Mountain Ash Eisteddfod one Christmas Day, towards the end of the nineteenth century, a choir from Bethania Baptist Chapel, Maesteg, had to walk over the intervening mountains in pouring rain" (Neville Granville, "Chapel Going", *Morgannwg* XLV11, 2003.)

### Christmas with Mr. and Mrs. Edmund Stonelake and family.

*"At Christmas we worked hard in our efforts to create a festive atmosphere. A Christmas Tree always came from somewhere. Then my wife toured shops buying cheap trinkets and small toys with which to decorate it. To keep the legend of Father Christmas intact, the decorations began after little eyes were closed in sleep, the tree decorated and stockings filled, named and hung up on a line in front of the fire in order that Father Christmas should not miss one; and then to bed. At the break of dawn tiny footsteps could be heard on the stairs followed first with whispers, then laughter, and thus were we repaid for all the work involved, All this made an impression which has lasted to the present day and those children, now men and women, frequently ask their aged mother if she remembers the Christmas tree, and how we had a draw for the prizes from the tree on New Years Eve. These memories are sweet in our old age"*

(From The Autobiography of Edmund Stonelake pp.67-68, Edited and Introduced by Anthony Mor-O'Brien, Bridgend 1981.)

## CHRISTMAS IN LLWYDCOED.

One of the best-known South Wales Christmas and New Year customs was the Mari Lwyd (Grey Mare). This was a form of wassailing, and perhaps derived from the Miracle Plays of the Middle Ages.

In this strange ceremony a party of people dressed as Sergeant, Merryman, Punch and Judy accompanied the Mari Lwyd - a horse's skull covered with a white sheet and decorated with coloured ribbons. This was carried on a pole by a man who crouched beneath the sheet and manipulated the jaws. The group went from house to house. At each stop they would chant and sing, demanding entrance. Precedent dictated that entry was at first refused. The strange visitors would then enter into a formal dialogue, in song and words, with those turning them away, until eventually they were admitted. Once in, the Mari would run wildly after any females in the house, snapping at them with its jaws, until the time came to be suitably refreshed with food and drink, or otherwise recompensed. This interesting old custom continued in the village of Llwydcoed until the late 1920's.

*"There was a knock on my door one dark night, and there confronting me was a nodding head which I thought was a horse, until it spoke! A very strange custom I thought"* The writer (An English Lady) also records that *"Christmas in Llwydcoed was something special. There was the annual parade of women taking Christmas cakes and poultry to Tanybryn Bakery to be baked in the big oven. The cakes were carried in old-fashioned clothes baskets. The whiteness of the cloths covering them was remarkable. They were as pure as snow. For twenty-one years Boxing Day was Gymanfa day in the non-conformist chapels. All day being spent in the singing of hymns."*

(Source: Mrs. May Davies "Fifty Years in Llwydcoed". *The Aberdare Leader* 24<sup>th</sup> August 1978.) Mrs. Davies was born in the Forest of Dean. Her daughter, Mrs Rhiannon Reynolds, was for many years a journalist, and Art and Drama critic of the *Aberdare Leader*.

The note relating to Mari Lwyd is a valuable record of the survival of a mid 19<sup>th</sup>. Century Glamorgan custom well into the Twentieth. If any readers would like to revive the custom, examples of the horse's skull are exhibited in the galleries of The Museum of Welsh Life at St.Fagan's, and its archives contain tape recordings of verses associated with the ritual. If any reader has knowledge of other incidents of the appearance of Mari Lwyd in the Cynon Valley, or any other old Welsh folk traditions (e.g. The Wren House, Biddings or the Pastai,) the Editor would be glad to publish them in a future issue.

### CHAIRMAN'S CHRISTMAS MESSAGE.

THE SOCIETY HAS AGAIN HAD A VERY GOOD YEAR WITH AN EXCELLENT SERIES OF LECTURES, AND I MUST THANK MR. HAYDN WILLIAMS FOR HIS ABILITY IN FINDING THESE. THE CURRENT PROGRAMME BEING OF A SIMILAR STANDARD.

CHAPELS OF THE CYNON VALLEY HAS RECEIVED A NUMBER OF EXCELLENT REVIEWS AND SALES SHOULD FLOURISH WITH SUCH ACCLAIM..

I THANK EVERY MEMBER OF THE SOCIETY FOR THEIR CONTINUING SUPPORT OVER THE PAST YEAR, AND TAKE THIS OPPORTUNITY TO WISH EVERYONE MY SINCERE COMPLIMENTS OF THE SEASON, AND GOOD HEALTH IN THE FUTURE.

ALAN ABRAHAM.

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. Published by Cynon Valley History Society

Registered Charity No.51014.

. Printed by Dial-A-Print, Mountain Ash 01443 474822.