

COWBRIDGE AND DISTRICT LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

No. 65: December 2007

Programme for 2008

January 4th

'The History of Penllyn'
Stephen White

February 1st

The Don Wallis Memorial Lecture
'Rees Baldwin and the National Library of Congress'
Jeff Robinson

March 7th

'The Aberdulais Falls'
Roger Sellick

March 13th

Charter Day visit to Treguff

April 4th

'The Red Book of Hergest'
Professor David Davies

followed by wine and cheese

Please note that all meetings start at 7.30 pm in the Lesser Hall.

This is the first Newsletter compiled since the sad loss of our Chairman and Editor, Jeff Alden. Your Committee has met and it was agreed that Professor Dick Buswell and Beverley Tonkin should take over, temporarily, until the next Annual General Meeting as Joint Chairpersons. It was also agreed that your Secretary should attempt to produce a Newsletter, also on a temporary basis. This Newsletter will, of course, be all the poorer without the benefit of Jeff's knowledge and expertise. We are actively pursuing what we should do in order to commemorate Jeff and all the work he did for the Local History Society—and indeed all he did to keep the past alive in Cowbridge, and to maintain the importance of the Society in the life of Cowbridge.

CHARTER DAY MARCH 2008

Beverley Tonkin is trying to arrange a suitable visit. She would be grateful for any help and/or suggestions.

I feel sure that Jeff would have had a wealth of material ready to publish in this Newsletter, but as I write I have received no contributions.

After the talk on Brunel in November it seemed a good idea to re-publish a piece I wrote some time ago which may reinforce what was said about Brunel's work in South Wales, and the effect of the coming of the railway on Cowbridge. Also, members may remember that Brian Davies, in his lectures on Pontypridd last session, mentioned a connection between a vicar of Coychurch and the Indian Goddess Kali !! It may be interesting to associate that with the origin of a word ever connected with Kali, and others related to it.

BRUNEL, THE SOUTH WALES RAILWAY AND COWBRIDGE

Isambard Kingdom Brunel (1806-59) was an engineer of outstanding originality, arguably the finest ever produced by Britain. He was the son of a French emigre, himself a famous engineer who had solved the problem of underwater tunnelling. The young Brunel was appointed Resident Engineer of the Thames tunnel in 1825, and in 1830 his design for the Clifton Suspension Bridge was accepted in preference to that submitted by Thomas Telford. He also designed docks at Bristol, Brentford, Briton Ferry, Milford Haven and Plymouth and three famous steamships—the Great Western, the Great Britain and the Great Eastern.

It was, however, as a railway engineer that he is best known. In 1833 he became Chief Engineer of the Great Western Railway, and the London-Bristol line was probably the finest main line built anywhere in the Railway Age, with its gentle curves and slight gradients, the famous Box Tunnel and the terminus at Temple Meads. He introduced the broad gauge (7ft) as opposed to Stephenson's 4ft 8 1/2 inches, which made high speeds possible. He designed and built over 1,000 miles of railway in the West Country, South Wales and the Midlands. It was Brunel's plans for the extension of the GWR from Bristol into South Wales (the South Wales Railway) that had a great impact on Cowbridge.

Cowbridge was probably at the peak of its prosperity in the first half of the 19th century. The road through the town was made a turnpike road in 1764, and by 1786 there was a regular mail coach service using the Bear Hotel as an intermediary stop. There were two attempts to build a tramway to Cowbridge (similar to that from Maesteg to Bridgend and Porthcawl), in 1816 from Llanharry Colliery and in 1825 from Trecastle Colliery near Pontyclun. In 1825 there was a meeting at the Bear Hotel to promote such a tramway, with an extension to Aberthaw. Nothing came of it, however.

In 1844 the South Wales Railway was proposed, and sanctioned by act of Parliament in 1845 as a broad gauge line. Work began in 1846 and the route from Gloucester to Cardiff, Bridgend, Neath and Swansea was surveyed personally by Brunel. It

appeared to Brunel that by far the best and fastest route would be across the Vale of Glamorgan via Cowbridge, a prospect that did not meet with the approval of the Corporation or the inhabitants. Whether this influenced the choice of route is not known. It has been suggested that there would have been engineering difficulties in crossing the Thaw valley, although these would not have been as great as those experienced by Brunel later at Landore and Llansamlet. The 1844 prospectus for the railway stated that "from Cardiff the railway passes through the rich agricultural district adjacent to Cowbridge, Bridgend, Porthcawl and Pyle", and later "the proposed railway will run through the coal works about 5 miles to the north of Cowbridge, and the good people of the ancient borough are well pleased to be left undisturbed". Because of this it was suggested that "Cowbridge is an old-fashioned town, consisting of one long street, which is likely to bear a crop of grass as soon as the South Wales Railway is in operation" (CF Cliffe, *Book of South Wales* 1847).

Not all the inhabitants of Cowbridge were hostile to the railway. Revd. Thomas Edmondson, the vicar of Cowbridge, ran a concerted campaign to have the railway run through the town, although he later became convinced that the route via Pontyclun was chosen for engineering reasons. David Jones of Wallington said "No one ... believed the action of the Corporation ... compelled the South Wales Railway to pass by Cowbridge ... they were hostile to the railway when as guardians of the welfare of the town they should have taken active steps in getting the railway to enter the neighbourhood."

The line from Cardiff to Swansea opened on 18 June 1850. The effect on south Wales was immediate. It was no longer remote, the growth of the coal industry was accelerated—in 1845 there were 7 pits in the Aberdare valley, by 1855 there were 28. The Taff Vale Railway was engineered by Brunel, so that 20 new pits were opened in the Rhondda Valley between 1865 and 1875. Before this the Rhondda was a "wild, untouched, mountainous region, where the lark sang and a Sabbath sweetness reigned". (F.Booker, *The Great Western Railway*).

It was never to be the same again: "its pastoral stillness was shattered forever" (F. Booker, op cit). The first trainload of coal reached Cardiff in 1855, and soon Rhondda coal, the finest steam coal in the world, fuelled the Navy and the world's merchant ships.

There was great excitement in Cardiff on the opening day of the railway. Its construction had brought about a major change in the face of the town: the course of the Taff had been altered enabling Westgate Street to be built and Cardiff Arms Park to be created. Local dignitaries met the first train, hordes of people were at the station, some even on the roof. At Bridgend a band paraded through the streets four hours before the train was due to arrive, and hundreds of people were on the streets and at the station. "This attitude contrasted with that of the people of Cowbridge, who decided that they did not want ... the railway ... anywhere near them, and lived to regret it as trade slumped with the extinction of stage coach travel" (H. Williams, *Railways in Wales*). At every stop along the line to Swansea there were huge crowds, the pealing of church bells and the flying of flags. (The journey from Cardiff to Bridgend took one hour, the second class fare was 1/6d. From Bridgend to London cost 15/6d).

The effect on Cowbridge too was immediate. The mail coach service was withdrawn a month later, in July 1850. The Quarter Sessions were held for the last time in Cowbridge in 1850, and the town soon began to stagnate. The *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian* suggested that "the want of a railway reduces Cowbridge ... to a state of hopeless isolation ... and confines Cowbridge to the humble position of a small country market town".

There began almost immediately agitation in the town for the construction of a railway, a branch from Llantrisant or a loop line from Peterston-super-Ely through Cowbridge to Bridgend.

Five long years of agitation followed. In December 1855 a public meeting was held at the Town Hall, and a committee was formed to press for a branch line from Llantrisant to Cowbridge. This ended in failure, and another meeting at the Town Hall in September 1860 with the Mayor, R C Nicholl Carne, in the chair recommended the building of an independent railway from Cowbridge to Llantrisant at an estimated cost of £25,000. A further meeting in October 1860 suggested the railway be built by the TVR company, but the project came to nothing.

Finally in 1861 a committee was formed to promote the Cowbridge Railway! A prospectus was issued with a capital of £30,000, and the TVR agreed to subscribe £5,000. There was however great difficulty in raising funds in Cowbridge. "Tradespeople came forward with modest sums, but the wealthy landowners seemed reluctant to support the venture" (C Chapman, *The Cowbridge Railway*).

Despite the shortfall in capital, plans went ahead and in June 1862 the Cowbridge Railway Bill was passed. There were great celebrations in the town, and the GWR agreed to assist with costs (the SW Railway sold out to the GWR in 1863) despite continuing difficulties in raising funds. In April 1863 Messrs Griffiths and Thomas were appointed contractors and on 9 June Nicholls Carne cut the first sod. The town was packed and there was a procession headed by a band to the proposed terminus in Eastgate Street, and a public dinner was held at the Bear Hotel that evening. Although construction work on the railway was slow, largely due to men being taken away during harvesting, the railway was completed on 12 December 1864. The Cowbridge Railway was ready to start operating.

Don Gerrard.

THUGGEE

From the Hindu word THAG (THIEF) and the Sanskrit STHAGATI (to DECEIVE).

The "THUGS" were an Indian network of secret fraternities, all worshipping the Goddess Kali, engaged in murdering and robbing travellers from the 17th to the 19th centuries. The word passed into English usage, as did many other Hindu words during the British Raj.

The victims of the 'thugs' were strangled with a yellow scarf, symbolic of Kali. It is estimated there may have been some 2 million deaths between 1600 and 1835, when the cult was finally suppressed. This was under the Governor General Lord Dalhousie, largely as a result of a campaign led by a civil servant, William Sleeman.

John Master's book "The Deceivers" (see Sanskrit) is perhaps the best novel on the subject, and on film the best depictions are "Gunga Din" (1939) and "The Deceivers" (1988).

HOOLIGAN

The word first appeared in a London police report in 1889, when it referred to an Irish hoodlum from Southwark called Patrick Hooligan, but the name may well have been mis-spelt. There was also an Islington street gang named Hooley. It is however far more likely that the name originated from a family in Bermondsey with Fenian* connections, called O'Houlihan. They were a byword in the 1860's and 70's for savagery and lawlessness, and were responsible for many crimes of violence. They were probably responsible for the infamous Clerkenwell Prison explosion in 1867.

*(The Fenian Movement—founded 1848—aimed at independence for Ireland from British rule).

VANDAL

This was a Germanic tribe that ravaged Gaul, Spain, North Africa and Rome in the 4th and 5th centuries, destroying many buildings, books and works of art.

Don Gerrard.

LIBRARY :: *I am asked to remind members of the existence of the local history section in Cowbridge Library. There is a wealth of material available there, and also on the local history shelf.*

SEASONS GREETINGS TO ALL OUR READERS