

## The Edmondes Diaries - account of Jeff Alden

Many years ago, I picked up in a second-hand bookshop a few copies of a magazine called 'Wales', an interesting literary magazine published in 1946. In one of the issues I chanced upon an article entitled *The Archdeacon's Diaries*, written by Ralph Edwards, Keeper of the V & A and father of Nicholas Edwards, one-time Secretary of State for Wales.

As I read, I became intrigued – and excited. It dealt with the diaries of an archdeacon, diaries which were rescued during the war from the ruins of a bombed house. Ralph Edwards had known the man and it soon became apparent on reading the article that I too knew of him, even though no names of people or of places were spelled out. The use of initial letters was sufficient when coupled with the descriptions of “that long stretch of woodland, heath and pasture known to its denizens as ‘The Vale’, which falls gently from the high hills of the teeming industrial area to the precipitous, rock-bound coast of the Channel. The archdeacon’s old home was in the middle of a market town – no more than a large village with a toll-gate at one end. He attended the ancient grammar school in the town and according to local custom proceeded to one of the smaller Oxford colleges”. So we had Cowbridge, and I had sat often enough in the choir stalls of Holy Cross church to study the wall-memorials there and to realise that the article dealt with the diaries of Fredric William Edmondes, the second son of Revd Thomas Edmondes who was the rector of Llanblethian with Cowbridge for much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

So I embarked on a search for the diaries themselves, a search which involved contacting John Edmondes in Ewenny – he was delighted to read the article but did not know the whereabouts of the diaries – Nicholas Edwards, and his mother (Ralph Edwards had by this time died), the V & A, and others – all without success. The trail had become cold. Then, a number of years later came a phone call from John Edmondes saying that the box of diaries had turned up from another branch of the family – and would I care to look at them?

It was a real treasure chest – a substantial box, filled with substantial and well-bound books, some with striking illustrations as the frontispiece. The contents turned out to be, in a way, rather drier than I had hoped – but to be fair, Ralph Edwards’s article had warned me that they were short notes, severely factual and concrete, and after reading the short notes written daily from 1860 to 1918 one emerges with a picture of a conscientious, hard-working man, with interests and a way of life very much different from that of a present-day parson.

So what of Fredric William Edmondes himself? He was the second son of Revd Thomas Edmondes, the rector of Llanblethian, and was born in 1840 at St Quintins in Llanblethian; they moved to the Edmondes family home of Old Hall in 1847 on the death of Thomas Edmondes’ mother. Fredric was educated at Cowbridge School and then at Jesus College, Oxford. He was ordained deacon to Newcastle and Laleston, Bridgend in 1864; became Rector of Michaelston with St Brides super Ely in 1867. He married Constance Knight of Nottage Court (the cryptic allusions to C... K... of N... C... in Edwards’s article were what made me sure that I was on the trail of Fredric!) in 1868. He became Rector of Coity with Nolton in 1873 and then of Oldcastle Bridgend, and was made Archdeacon of Llandaff in 1897. He was offered the bishopric of Llandaff, but refused, and he died in 1918.

One of the interesting aspects of the life of FWE was picked out by Ralph Edwards: 'The parents of the future Archdeacon had relations of friends in most of the comfortable unpretentious country houses which then abounded in that fertile land', and so there are many references to these families. Even in the first diaries, those of 1860 and 1861, written when he was 19 or 20, we read of him dining with Captain Boteler at Llandough Castle and at Penlline Castle, attending a ball at Merthyr Mawr and dances at Capt Jenner's at Llanblethian Cottage (later the Old Vicarage) and at Bonvilston House. There was obviously a great deal of eating out and taking tea, and doing the rounds of friends and acquaintances for entertainment, with his parents having dinner parties at home. Some of these were particularly splendid events, with dancing afterwards; the menus for a number of Christmas parties at home in Cowbridge have been preserved elsewhere.

A particularly splendid do was the "ball at Clemenstone for Evie's coming out, given by Mr and Mrs T Mansel Franklen and Mrs Franklen in August 1910. A large marquee for dancing, floor sloping very much; another marquee for elaborate supper – Roberts's band. Non, Nancy and I went in landau from Woodward, I had William to fetch me 12.15; got home 1 am. The others not back till 4.35. About 230 said to be there. Lighting along the drives and through the tents with paraffin and incandescent".

From the 1880s, Shakespeare readings were a popular afternoon social event in the larger houses of the Vale and FWE obviously took great pleasure in taking part. He records going to Llantrithyd for 'Two Gentlemen of Verona, 'a not very lively play' in 1886, to Marlborough for the Merchant of Venice in 1889 when he was Shylock and his daughter Non Portia. In 1893 'to Ewenny for the first Shakespeare – some new members elected. I was clown. Most of the readers rather rusty.' He entertained the group in Fitzhamon Court, Bridgend for the first time in 1894, and lists the actors – quite a few of the *crachab*: Mrs TM Franklen, Maudie Llewellyn (Court Coleman?), Miss Franklen, Mary, Fan and Mabel, Mrs Picton Turberville, Miss Dixon, Canon Allen, RC Lewis and Mrs Dr Stewart, &c, &c. Edith Picton-Turberville in her memoirs is rather less than kind in her comments: "The wearisomeness of these Shakespeare meetings was beyond belief. Few who took part could read well with the exception, perhaps, of a veteran Canon who awed me by saying that he remembered the death of William IV and the coronation of Queen Victoria" (Canon Allen, perhaps). Her mention of a Miss Llewellyn being chosen to play a corpse is perhaps some indication of that lady's acting ability.

The picnics were also great social events. 28 August 1890: 12 in a break from the Wyndham, Bridgend to Monknash where "some of us got out and walked down the cwm and along the shore to Marcross. Dinner soon after 1. Fowls and ham, haunch of lamb, jam turnovers and bread and butter pudding; lemonade, beer, stout, hock. Left for St Donats 4.30. All driving. Tea there. Iltyd Nicholl of Ham joined us for tea..." Monknash and Marcross were the favoured locations for the picnic, and the 1910 diary (when they were 14 in the break) notes that it was a rough road and overgrown from G Bruce's house to the sea. Today, of course, it is now almost impossible to discern a wagon-wide track to the sea there. That picnic had veal and ham pie, chicken and tongue, ham, meat patties ("a failure"), apple turnover, chocolate éclairs, Swiss roll, cheese, tomatoes, cucumber; while for tea they had 3-cornered tarts, half-penny buns, small cakes, plum cake, scones, bakestone and raspberry jam. The beverages were 18 Schweppes ginger ale, 18 salutaries, 2 botts claret and 1 gallon milk.

Apart from the Shakespeare readings, we are not made aware of many intellectual pursuits, with the exception of the quasi-compulsory 3 months learning Welsh at

Penybont near Llanfyllin, but FWE was obviously a keen sportsman. Cricket, riding, hunting and shooting are frequently mentioned, and skating in winter. Winters in the 1860s and 1870s were colder than those we have recently experienced; he records skating on Mynydd y Glew in January 1861, and again in December of the same year: “28<sup>th</sup>: went to Mynydd y Glew to skate but the ice would not bear; 30<sup>th</sup> Good skating today. Frank fell down and cut his face. 1864, 4 Jan: Went with Evans to Caecady to lunch and to Mynydd y Glew to skate. Got on pretty well; 7 Jan: drove the girls (Mary and Constance Knight, who were staying at Old Hall) to Caecady to a skating party and walked thence to the pool – a lot of people there. 8 Jan: went with Conny and Mary to Korrucks pond and skated – no room”. In 1870 when he was rector of Michaelston, on 14 Feb he went to St y Nyll pond and skated for half an hour.

As far as cricket is concerned, he appears to be enthusiastic but not particularly distinguished. He played for the Cowbridge School Old Boys in the annual match with the school; he never seems to have scored many runs, nor is bowling or fielding mentioned, though when playing for Cowbridge v Bridgend at Merthyr Mawr in 1862 he made 12 out of Cowbridge’s total of 100 (they won by an innings and 42). He continued with the ‘Old v Present’ matches at least until 1872 (though in much the same vein; 1871 – ‘I was bowled first ball’ and 1872 ‘I made 3 and 2’).

Hunting was another early obsession. Hares as well as foxes proved to be the quarry, with meets throughout the Vale: Sutton, New Forest, Golden Mile, Stembridge, Castle upon Alun, Flemingston were all mentioned within 6 weeks in early 1862. Later in that year we read ‘Hunting at St Mary Hill. Killed three hares but not much cunning. Four days later: ‘Hunting Marcross Down. No find till 1.30 or so, then a good run, another, then a choppy run near Colwinston. I have killed and run to a drain (?)’. Other examples come from March 1862 ‘Went to Aberthin. Hounds out, and caught but saved a vixen fox near Argoed’; and 5 days later: ‘Hunting about Llanilid. Poor sport – no kill. 96 hares killed this season up to this time’. The final entry, for 8 January 1864, reads: ‘Hunting. Marcross Down. Splendid run in morning – found under Llampha – a run towards Clemenstone over the brook, back across to Brocastle, killed by Ewenny Bridge in Ewenny park’. Plenty of ammunition here for the anti-hunt campaigners.

If hunting ceased soon after his ordination, riding certainly did not. In many cases of course it was a necessary means of transport, both to go around his parish and to visit friends. So we read of him riding to St Donats and Llanmaes, to Cowbridge from St Brides-super-Ely. A typical example, 17 March 1876, from Cowbridge: “Rode Kitty in after. Llantwit, Boverton, called on Miss Bassetts, Bethesda, Flemingston, St Hilary. Cowbridge service at 8.” One considerable three-day expedition in 1867 was with his father into the so-called hill property of the Rhondda and Cynon valleys, the lands the family had inherited by marriage and which were now beginning to show real value because of the coal which underlay them. “Tues 25 June: At 3 my father and I started for the hills- rode by Dinas to Cynllwyndu, then over Cefn Gwyngyll to Newbridge about 9pm. I slept there. Weds 26 June: left Newbridge about 10.30. To Glog, saw the squire. To Lanwonno church, Duallt, Mt Ash, Aberdare, lunch/dinner at The Boot. Over the hills by Bettws and Mardy to Abergorchy – on to Treherbert. No stabling there so back to Aberg. I slept on a sofa – got in about 9.30. Tremendous rough way from Aberaman to Abergorchy. Thurs, 27 June: Left Cardiff Arms 9.30 – over Bwlch y Clawdd to Blackmill. Lunch – on to Bridgend – thence each home.”

It is clear that FWE retained a keen interest in his horses, buying and selling them himself, often at St Mary Hill fair (26 Aug, 1869: To St Mary Hill fair, sending Heretic on. Sold him to Williams for £20 and 10/- luck, Bought a smaller pony, Tom, from Lewis of Aberkenfig 5 or 6 years, bay, black points, £14.)

Shooting was an interest which developed over the years. The early entries are mainly about going to see the Volunteers shoot, although there is an October 1862 reference “Rode to the rifle range and shot 10 shots. 5 at 400 – none! 5 at 160 – 6”. Once FWE was married, the mentions increase, possibly because his wife seems to have been enthusiastic.

“28 Dec 1869: C’s birthday – 27 yrs. Trying to clean the gun most of the day – in after(noon) shot a blackbird which C had for dinner. She and I to look for larks but could not see any.

14 Feb: Shot a missel thrush through dining room window with new gun; and the following day, C and I shooting in after(noon). 5 larks, 3 redwings, 1 fieldfare, 2 blackbirds, 1 greenfinch. We were going to the Alvas, but sport too good...”

In 1872 he bought a powder flask, powder and shot at Birds, and a gun licence. At least his shooting now must have been legal, but could still be considered enthusiastic rather than skilful. In 1878, 1 Oct: “With Birt Jenner and Ted Davies (Llanilid) shooting. Birt drove us to the Cross, St Hilary, and we began there and got on by degrees to Llanbethery. Bag 9 brace pheasants, 9 partridges, 5 hares, 1 rabbit (keeper killed it), 1 pigeon. I killed 2 hares, 2 partridges and 5 pheasants as far as I can make out.” When he moved to Bridgend, his favourite terrain was ‘The Wilderness’ which was the heathland between Merthyr Mawr and Newton, where on an October day in 1872 he and a friend bagged “a duck, teal, 4 snipes, 2 pheasants, 3 partridges and 21 rabbits”. With their dinner that night they enjoyed a bottle of Madeira and an 1820 magnum of port. In December 1893 he noted “Shooting with Turberville, 6 guns. JPT, his sons Chas and Jack, his brother-in-law Mr Ebsworth, TT Lewis and I. Ewenny Park and the big wood to the road to Wallas and Wick. Bag about 36 pheasants, 3 woodcock, 16 rabbits or so. Rain in morning and very wet after, otherwise it would have been a capital day”.

Among other sports, croquet and tennis get a mention – croquet being played largely at Old Hall and frequently in the early years mentioned because it was a sport in which Constance could also take part. Tennis was played in December 1875 in Old Hall, and in the following year FWE noted that he had marked out or measured out the tennis court at Old Hall. I can remember in 1966 that the boys were playing football in what Idwal Rees described as ‘the old tennis court’ – where the library now stands – when he took me on a tour of inspection.

FWE would no doubt have been pleased that the Grammar School leased Old Hall from 1932 on, for he was a great supporter of the school which he himself had attended. His older brother had started at Cowbridge School but when Hugo Harper, the headmaster and whose wife was a cousin to the Edmondes, moved to take the headship of Sherborne, many students including Charles Gresford Edmondes went with him. The younger FW E however, stayed at Cowbridge, and faithfully attended many events after he had left school, not only the annual cricket match. In December 1863 he attended the presentation of a testimonial to his headmaster, WH Beever, made by old and present boys; he attended the Athletic sports in April 1867 and in the dinner ‘returned thanks for the ladies’. In 1870 and many times thereafter he went to the prize day at the school. Sometimes this seems to have been followed by ‘The school entertainment – some music first and then *Ici on parle Francais.*’ The first Old Boys dinner was held on 26 November 1903 at the Park Hotel, Cardiff; FWE was in the chair, as he was in 1904, and it is clear – from reading the reports in the *Bovian* – that he was a popular chairman, with a good sense of humour. He was a considerable benefactor to the school; he presented the Greek Testament prize as an annual award and in the final diary he records that he sent his £11 to the school – if this was for the prize, it was a substantial sum. In that entry we

are told that there were 65 pupils, with the number of boarders kept to 28. In 1913 he recorded that he was a trustee of Sir Leoline's Trust.

Other items in the diaries show his interest in gardening, particularly in growing vegetables and fruit, or at least in organising the planting and getting his gardener to do it. From his first home in Michaelston to his homes in Bridgend, we are given clear lists of species chosen, something which would be of considerable interest to garden historians.

His excursions to the large numbers of sales held in the country houses are recorded, as are all his purchases. In 6 months in 1871-2 he attended sales at Llanmaes, Pwllwyrach and Marlborough, and bought a pony, 8 dining room chairs and 3 sets of curtains, poles, rings etc, and in 1877 at Leigh Morgan's sale at Llanmaes he bought a plate-warmer and knapsack, and 15 books. He does make me feel quite envious!

There are of course details of the properties in Cowbridge owned by FWE: East Villa, houses in Aubrey Terrace, and the Closes where the Lower School huts stand today. In 1900 – 'drove to Cowbridge to the Aunts' house, meeting Alfred James there. Ordered chimney stack to be rebuilt with pot, and small repairs. To 2 Croft Terrace, saw Mrs William Joseph the new tenant, ordered new water tank' is a typical entry. In 1915 – 'Yorwerth says £25 is what the timber merchant offers for the trees in the closes: 10 elm, 1 ash and 1 sycamore'. 1916 – 'Gwyn as agent alleges that the trees endanger Dynevor cottage – then to Cowbridge to lunch, going to the Mill Road first. The timber is cleared away. The wall needs attending to.' Interestingly, we can glean further details about this matter from letters from FWE in the Gwyn & Gwyn files.

A few details of Cowbridge life also emerge. On 2 March 1862: "harmonium at Llanblethian church for the first time". Jan 6 1882: "Rogers the ironmonger shot himself"; 5 May 1888: "C Booth Meller elected Medical Officer for Cowbridge District, the only other candidate being a Dr Moynan". 3 June 1892: "sent the trap to Tilley as the shaft had broken under William". There is naturally much more about town life in Bridgend: a rich seam yet to be mined.

Mining – of coal – deserves a mention, partly because it provided the basis of the wealth which became apparent in his later years. Royalties from mining at Dinas (Edmondstown) and Cynllwyndu (Tylorstown) were considerable – but so was FWE's generous response: he provided the land and £400 for a church at Tylorstown. He also responded generously to various charity appeals, and distributed property, or the proceeds of property sales, among members of his family. By contrast in his early years, he cannot have been very well off, and appears very grateful when his father paid for a carriage from the Bear in Cowbridge back to Bridgend

There is not a great deal of attention paid to outside events; when Emma Edmondson was receiving those air balloon letters from Paris, there is no mention of the Franco-Prussian war, nor of Harriet Charlton's sufferings. There is indeed very little mention of his own sufferings with the death of his wife, mother or father, or any details of the health problems of his son. Occasionally comes the result of a Parliamentary election – but only when he has voted. The arrival of Belgian refugees in 1916 is noted, but again because he has been involved in the committee dealing with housing them, or has entertained some of them.

I have of course here concentrated on Cowbridge and the central Vale, with little mention of Bridgend, which is where FWE lived for most of the time covered by the diaries, but I am pleased that he maintained his ties with the old borough throughout these years.