

# Garw Valley Heritage Society Newsletter



## Croeso i Gaeaf 2020/1



After a horrible year for many people we can only hope that things will get better, and that a quiet Christmas for most will bring peace and goodwill to all our friends and family and neighbours. This edition is featuring the Bridge at Pontycymer, a little of its history, and its sad demise; an item on a well-known footballer, a mis-diagnosis in the 1930's, a mining explosion, ( a story of the mining population rapid expansion in Blaengarw, not an actual pit disaster), and some cures from a past-era medical help book. Plus, a robin or two, and some carolling misadventures, to fit in with the season.

We are proud to show on the front a striking painting by Russell Farmer, taken from a photograph, which I hope you like as much as we did. The title is our own, as we do not know the exact reason for the gathering below ground.



Carols and Coal, by Russell Farmer

## The Mining Explosion

CT Davies

Having already looked into the population of Blaengarw from the 1841-1911 censuses inclusive, I have attempted to carry out a similar approach for the other Garw mining communities. However I have restricted my research to the population immediately before the housing development and immediately afterwards.

I did not fully anticipate the size of the problem: I had to retire to a darkened and quiet room and the headache still haunts me! The way that the available census returns are laid out is such a hotch-potch, not making it easy to find out where one community ends and the next begins. Another hiccup was that in 1881 Victoria Street, Price Street and Stiles Street in Pontycymer were not found in the returns for Llangeinor parish but were instead in Betws parish ( see comment below).

It must be borne in mind that in the earliest returns not all the areas under research were named as they are today. Stating the obvious, Pontycymer could not have been named as such until the bridge had been built. Many modern road lines were in the past just simple tracks which forded the water courses, with later a crude footbridge set on the up-stream side; this was the situation where the road to Betws forded the Garw River at the future Llangeinor Railway Crossing.

The following figures may well be found as incorrect by more dedicated researchers, and I will have to plead *the headaches* if challenged. However the initial knock-on effects of the “explosion” may become apparent once the dust between my ears has settled.

Community	Year	Persons	Year	Persons	Year	Persons
Blaengarw	1881	61	1891	2462		
Pontycymer	1871	23	1881	550	1891	2358*
Pant-y-gog	1881	36	1901	599		
Lluest	1871	9	1881	138		
Pontyrhyl	1871	7	1881	262		

\*The figure for Pontycymer for 1891 is incomplete. In a page by page viewing of the three Enumeration Districts (E.D.) for Llangeinor Parish and the one E.D. for Betws Parish has not revealed anything lying between Tymeinor Farm Blaengarw, and Waun Bant Pontycymer, save for Ffaldau Farm.

In 1881 the names Victoria Street, Price Street, and Stiles Street, may well have been over the river in Betws Parish with a population of 223, and if added to the 2358, they would not provide an unreasonable figure owing to further housing being built during the interim, such as the Adare Streets, Hill View etc. However in the 1901 census there were listed 2 persons in Ffaldau Villas and 286 in Gwynfryn Road- no mention of any other road lines. Could the then-named Gwynfryn Road have been renamed Victoria Street? If so the total for Pontycymer may well have been 2581 in 1891, increasing further after that census had been taken.



A Bettws coal boy- how many of us can remember doing just this???

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**Billy Rees**

Ian Black

Billy REES was born in Pwllcarn Terrace Blaengarw in March 1924. He was spotted playing local football by Cyril SPIERS who was the Cardiff City manager. Billy signed for Cardiff playing 83 war time games for them and scoring 74 goals a record any player would be proud of. Billy also played in the 1945 Wales v England War International.

When the Football League restarted after World War 11 Billy helped Cardiff City get promotion from Division 3 South to Division 2. Playing inside forward he was their top scorer the following season. In the summer of 1949 Tottenham Hotspur paid £14,000 for him but he only played 11 games for them scoring 3 goals as he suffered a series of injuries which had resulted in him struggling to get in the first team. He was soon sold to Leyton Orient for £14,500 where he spent 6 years scoring 58 goals. Billy also played non-league football with Headington Town and Kettering Town.

Billy Rees was very proud of his 4 Welsh Caps for playing against Northern Ireland, Belgium, Switzerland and Ireland where John CHARLES was one of his team mates.

After his football career was over Billy Rees returned to the Bridgend area working for a pharmaceutical company. He ended his life living in Llangeinor back in the valley he was born in.

## SAVED BY A BAT.

Gerald Jarvis

In 1932, 12-year-old Peter Mainwaring, of Llangeinor in the Garw Valley, was stricken with a serious illness. The boy was taken first to Bridgend General Hospital and X-Rays revealed something on his lung. Tuberculosis was immediately suspected and Peter was sent to Craig-y-Nos Sanatorium in Powys.

Although he received excellent care in the 9 weeks he was there Peter grew worse instead of better. One day his family received the message to come immediately because he was dying.

They came and took Peter home to Llangeinor and made him as comfortable as possible. During that long night, as his father recalled,

"It was about two'clock in the morning. I sat in the kitchen stirring the embers of the fire. Mary, my wife, was upstairs, and in the next room lay Peter dying. I heard a loud scream and I ran into the room. Hurling itself against a half-open window was a large bat trying to escape. I let the bat free, and attended to Peter. He was coughing so violently I thought each gasp would be his last."

The local doctor was called and found a large molar tooth had been dislodged from Peter's lung, and he had coughed it up! Its point was very sharp, like a needle. The boy must have swallowed the tooth two years earlier, and it had entered his lung, causing the symptoms of Tuberculosis. Once Peter had coughed up the tooth, his condition improved and he made a full recovery.

## Oh Carols

Gerald Jarvis

As a (quite often) penniless child there were a few ways one could achieve financial stability, and Christmas Carolling was one of them. Of course it required a good strong voice and a varied repertoire if you were to go solo, and it could be very rewarding.

Singing in a group though had its problems, one of them being you had to share the monies out at the end of the session. What carols and length they should be were discussed, and then whether to knock first and burst into 'Once in Royal David's City' when the door was opened, or sing the first verse of 'Good King Wenceslas' and then knock. All these things needed to be factored in.

Choosing the streets, and even which side of the street, was important. With three-storied valley houses, there was no point in knocking the door, as most people lived in the bottom storey, and then they had to come up one flight of stairs to answer the door, usually out of breath.



If you were lucky you could call at a house which was just putting up their trimmings and decorations, so a quick burst of 'We Wish you a Merry Christmas' could net you a Shilling. (5p)

Often you would be asked for requests for old favourites, and this paid more for sentimental reasons. An evening carolling had its pitfalls, one of which was having members of the choir having to be 'in' by a certain time, but normally this disruption could be countered by co-opting a passing child. Of course the one leaving would demand their share out for services rendered so far; stopping to do this every so often was not unusual.

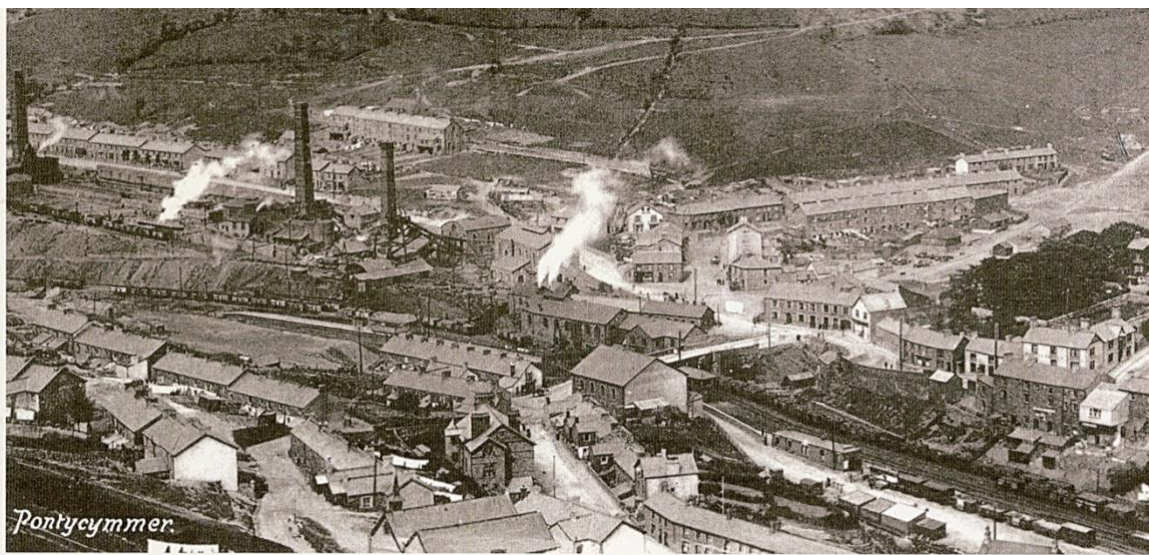
Another obstacle was the Fish & Chip shops, of which the Garw had in abundance, and these shops would just be opening for the evening and their smells hung heavily on the air, resulting in a minor mutiny in the carolling ranks and demands for a share out to purchase threepennyworth, or a bag of 'scratchings' at the next chippie we come to.

### FROM THE ARCHIVES

#### One hundred years (almost) of Pontycymer Bridge- David Dimmick

Demolished during the 1990's on the demise of the railway line and the diversion of the river, this bridge over the railway and the Garw river was opened on the 7th of June in 1901 and became a prominent feature in the Garw Valley.

The ironwork for the bridge was made at Swindon and transported to Pontycymer for installation, but the stone for the abutment walls and the capstones was quarried locally, and Mr Joseph Isaacs of Bryn Hyfryd in Pontycymer was the stone mason employed.



Pontycymer 1900, bridge lower right quarter of photograph above, and in 1950, bridge in centre of photo below.



Demolition of bridge in 1990's, above.

Bridge as it is today, forking right over to Bridgend Road.



## WHAT WE HAVE BEEN DOING

Not as much as we would be doing normally, under the circumstances, but correspondence through Facebook and the Garw website has been as busy as ever, and we have received a fair number of photograph collections and articles that we plan to use in future displays.

Now that we are a registered charity the trustees will be embarking on training courses organised by BAVO, (Bridgend

Association of Voluntary Organisations), whose help has been invaluable. In the New Year plans are being made for a programme of events for when the crisis eases, but keep looking at our website! Our photographer Colin as ever has been 'out and about', and managed to capture a moment over the recent WW1 commemorations at the local memorial in Pontycymer. A low-key affair this year of course, but nevertheless a little bit of cheer and inspiration amongst the sombreness of the day when a robin suddenly appeared and Colin was on hand to capture the moment.



## SOME LITTLE KNOWN FOLK REMEDIES.

### *Taken from the Physicians of Myddfai, 1861.*

How to be happy:

If you would be at all times merry, eat Saffron (*Crocus sativa*), with meat or drink, and you will never be sad; But beware of taking too much, lest you die of excessive joy.

To be delivered from intoxication:

Drink Saffron (*Crocus sativa*), digested in spring water.

A specific cure for warts:

Bathe the warts with water from a font in which the seventh son of the same man and his wife is baptised.

For a plaster to reduce a swelling:

Take Mallow (*Malva sylvestris*), Chamomile (*Chamaelum nobile*), Maidenhair fern (*Adiantum capillus-veneris*), Chickweed (*Stellaria meia*), and Ground Ivy (*Glechoma hederacea*), Boil them all together in the stalest urine you can get. Apply to the affected part as a plaster, it will reduce the swelling.

To strengthen the teeth: Take the dried root of the herb Elecampane (*Inula helenium*), Pound in a mortar, and scrub the teeth therewith briskly, it will make them firm, white and healthy.

To banish noise in the ear: Take one clove of Garlic (*Allium sativum*), prick in three or four places in the middle, dip the whole in honey and insert into the affected ear, cover it with black wool. Let the patient sleep on the opposing side every night leaving the clove in for 7 or 8 nights unchanged. This treatment will prevent the running of the nose and restore lost hearing.

*We are keen to borrow historical material so that can be indexed and copied with the consent of the owner, and would be grateful for any photos, family recollections, funny stories, tales of excitement or adventure in the Valley.*



**Some Old Welsh Christmas Customs**

This  
that  
take  
the  
hours

A large rectangular area enclosed by a dashed black border, intended for a drawing or illustration.

**Plygain**

was the  
singing  
would  
place in  
dark  
of

Christmas Day, before the cock crowed, usually between the hours of 3 and 6 o'clock in the morning. Men (not women), would gather in the rural churches to sing unaccompanied three- or four-part harmony carols in a service that went on for three hours or so. This tradition is still carried out in parts of mid-Wales today.

### **Taffy**

Families would while away the dark hours on Christmas Eve, before Plygain, by boiling up pans of toffee on open fires. Dollops would be dropped into icy cold water and the taffy curled up into all sorts of shapes, like letters, and this was a way of divining the initials of the younger and unmarried future loves.

### **Mari Llwyd**

The Grey Mare, a pre-Christian tradition, is still acted out in parts of Wales today. If a real horse was not available, a horse's skull, ( or in recent times a polystyrene or cardboard construction), would be placed onto a broom handle and a sheet covered the neck to the ground. On visiting friends and neighbours door to door, the jawbone would be clacked against the skull, or broom handle, as you wished everyone a merry Christmas. In older times the verbal exchange was more likely to be a challenge of rhyming insults.

### **Calennig**

From dawn until noon on New Year's Day, all around Wales, groups of young boys would go from door to door, carrying three-legged totems, chanting rhymes and splashing people with water, all the time asking for calennig- gifts of small change. This was a custom that pre-dates the modern 'trick or treat', and may have been its inspiration.

Stay well and stay  
safe from us all at  
The Garw Heritage  
Society