

Some Old Welsh Customs

Plygain

This was the singing that would take place in the dark hours 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.

Wassail

Not a uniquely Welsh custom (the word Wassail comes from Anglo-Saxon 'Waes Hael', meaning 'be, or grow, healthy'), drinking from the wassail bowl was a common custom at Welsh Christmases. The bowls were often elaborate and many-handled, filled with fruit, sugar and spices, and topped up with warm beer. As it was passed round the drinkers would make a wish for a successful year's farming and a bumper crop at harvest time.

May we all at the Garw Valley Heritage Society wish our followers a very good Christmas and a peaceful and happy New Year.

Garw Valley Heritage Society Newsletter

CROESO I RHAGFYR 2019

This edition has the usual mix of Garw related subjects and includes animals, sport, and Christmas recipes (if you have rather a lot of people visiting!) And a poem of course!



Photograph by GVHS photographer Colin Simper.

Our Website: www.garwheritage.co.uk

Full of photos from our archive and local stories and memories, the Garw Valley Society website is building up a collection of local stories of past events and personalities.



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enquiry@garwheritage.co.uk

The Great Welsh Run - David JK Jones

The Great Welsh Run was a huge sporting event in the Welsh calendar back in the first thirty years or so of the 20th century. It was either run at the Taff Vale Park, Pontypridd or Virginia Park, Caerphilly. Runners came from all over the world to compete in it. Colloquially, it was known as the Welsh Powderhall or the Great Welsh Sprint. It truly was a feather in the cap for any runner to win this famous race and attracted such athletic legends as Jack Donaldson of Australia and the American legend C E Holway. A crowd in excess of 40,000 always watched this event. The runners ran on a track of cinders or grass.

The first winner of this prestigious event was a Scotsman, Harry Howden from Edinburgh. Wales didn't have to wait too long for a winner with F Coombes of Tonypany winning the race in 1904.

The most controversial race ever run which incited crowd anger was run in 1911 and involved a runner from Pontycymer, Alec (Alexander) Rowe of 145 Oxford Street. Alec Rowe, Coal Miner was 21 in 1911 and was born in St Brides Major but had lived in Pontycymer for the majority of his life.

Tommy Oldfield from Cardiff was to win the race "by the thickness of his running vest". The contentious issue however was the manner of his finish.

Oldfield clearly broke the finishing tape with an outstretched left arm but to his left was Pontycymer's Alec Rowe whose left foot clearly reached the line before Oldfield's stretch for the ribbon. The vast majority of the crowd considered Rowe to be the winner but it was the Referee's decision that counted.

The ref was Dai Williams of the Greyhound Hotel, Pontypridd who sent the crowd into an angered frenzy by awarding the race to the Cardiff man.

In years to come, it transpired that these events were rigged and fiddles by bookmakers, athletes and some referees were commonplace.

The last Great Welsh Run was ran in 1934. Alec Rowe returned to Pontycymer a hero and several newspaper reports show that he continued to run and won many more awards.

NOTICE: All items printed in our newsletters come from archive material which in turn has been given to us by contributors, or researched from acknowledged sources by our members. If any reader has additional information on the subjects listed, or wishes to correct an error, please get in touch with us via the website or ring the editor on 01656 856091.

"A LITTLE BIT OF HEAVEN" IN WALES

An acknowledgement of the recent Remembrance Day events, to the soldiers who fought in the 'Great War to end all wars'.

There's a spot that I know,
A spot far away.
Where a man don't go thirsty
All the long day;
Where the heat is not scorching,
And the ground is not dry.
Where green grass doth grow,
And where sand does not fly;
Where a man can walk,
After nine in the morn.
Without getting struck
By that fierce shining sun.

Where flies do not pester,
And Jackals don't howl;
And where after darkness,
The enemy don't prowl.
That place is in Wales,
And its name is Bridgend.
And it's there (though I'm Irish),
My days I would spend.
And now, all you people,
You've read my poor rhyme,
Pity a poor 'Tommy'
Out in this sunny clime;
He's fighting and sweating,
And keeping quite fit,
In Mesopotamia;
A-doing his bit.

L/cpl. 358587.Gerald O'Connell. Welsh (Pioneer)Regiment
Survived the war; invalided out 15/1/1919. Printed in the Glamorgan Gazette 24/11/1916

A Child's Letter About Blaengarw in 1899



"Dear Uncle Joe,

I am going to write you a description of Blaengarw. First of all it is the shape of a triangle. It is situated at about 8 miles from Bridgend. In the centre of the town is a triangular park, with some lovely trees growing in it. There are four large chapels and one church, and two more denominations without chapels. There are two large steam coal collieries in Blaengarw. They are called the International and the Ocean. The International is managed by Mr James Picton and the Ocean by Mr D Matthews. The International raises about 1,000 tons a day. The population of Blaengarw is about 3,000 people, Blaengarw was started about 15 years ago. There is a large school here as well. The headmaster is Mr Hargest; the headmistress is Miss H. Gelder*. There is a large Workmen's Hall and Institute, all built by the workmen of Blaengarw. The Library consists of 1,400 to 1,500 books of both languages, and a good number of magazines for the young men to read in their spare time. The only drawback to Blaengarw is that there is no railway station here. We have to walk all the way to Pontycymmer which is about a mile away."

Written by Thomas John Jones (12) published in the South Wales Echo in 1899

* *Helen Gelder, along with Fanny Thomas, were the leading suffragists in the Garw Valley, doing much in South Wales to bring about voting rights for women.*

***Blaengarw station was officially opened on May 26th 1902.*

Resurrection Cheese

About the years 1860-64, a Mr. PLOWDEN, of Trefenty, Nr Llanfihangel, permitted a local shepherd to keep two cows on his land; the milk they gave enabled the shepherd to make some cheese which he sold on to supplement his wages.

The shepherd could not afford a cheese-press (peis), but being an enterprising fellow, he looked around for some suitable stone to suit his purpose, as in those days a farmhouse cheese could be up to 2 feet in diameter. On discovering a couple of fallen headstones in the graveyard of a deserted church, he took a couple away, and after a bit of work re-shaping the stones he was happy with the finished job and put them to work immediately. However, he did not see that one of the stone presses bore the inscription 'In Memory of David THOMAS', and it was those words that came out clearly impressed into the new cheeses.

The shepherd took his wares to St Clears Market one day, and it was not long before he attracted several interested customers, one of whom remarked 'You must have resurrected this cheese!' This caused much laughter at the market, which attracted lots more potential customers for the new Trefenty 'Resurrection Cheese.' (Caws yr Atgwfodiad.)

YOUR HELP NEEDED:

As ever we welcome your comments, suggestions, and contributions for future newsletters. We would love to hear from you!

What we have been doing:

OGMORE VALE LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY (OVLHS)

The Bridgend valleys, Ogmore, Garw and Llynfi, each has its own heritage and history society, and we in the Garw Valley Heritage Society will go along to their events if we possibly can.

This year was the 20th anniversary of the start of the Ogmore Vale History Society, and we were delighted to be able to celebrate their achievements with them on November 9th. An Open day was held at which the Ogmore Ladies' Choir and the local Male Voice choir gave rousing renditions of both traditional and modern songs, followed by the Ogmore Silver Band's programme in the afternoon..



There was a splendid buffet all provided by volunteers, and the occasion much enjoyed by all who came, including some who had come quite a way to be there.

2019 saw the launch of their 20th annual Journal, which has its usual mix of articles and photographs taken in and around the Ogmore, both ancient and modern, and some fascinating life stories of local people. (We always buy a copy for our own archives!).

The occasion was held at Ogmore Primary School, in the main hall, where there is a constant reminder to the young pupils of the sacrifices made by many Ogmore miners over the years throughout the various disasters. There is a wall of slate plaques listing the names of all who had died as a result of a mining accident, a fitting way to remember these men, particularly at this time of year when we are all remembering

FUTURE PLANS FOR THE SOCIETY WILL BE SHOWN ON THE GVHS WEBSITE AND IN THE LOCAL PRESS AND FACEBOOK, BUT INCLUDE WORKING ON VARIOUS PROJECTS WITH OTHER LOCAL ORGANISATIONS.



Preparations for Christmas

Roasting a Swan - a recipe from 1738

Take 3 quarts of best vinegar, 1 quart of Lisbon wine, 3 large onions sliced. A handful of shallots, 4 bayleaves, some whole pepper, a little mace and cloves and a handful of salt.

Boil all this together then pour this pickle over your swan, leave for 12 hours, then put the swan into bake, basting it with the pickle.

Mince meat

A recipe dated 1850 belonging to the cook of the Duke of Devonshire. This was made every year at Windsor Castle, one month before Christmas. Note the amount of beef, which was an original ingredient of mincemeat.

240 lbs of raisins 400 lbs of currants 24 bushels of apples 30 lbs of cedret
200 lumps of sugar 3 lbs of cinnamon 3 lbs of mace 60 lbs orange peel
3 lbs of nutmeg 3 lbs of cloves 350 lbs of suet 240 lemons 3 lbs of allspice
300 lbs of beef 2 lbs of ginger 72 bottles of brandy 60 lbs of lemon peel

And to wash it down:

Sloe Gin

1 gallon of unsweetened gin, 4lbs of ripe sloes, 3 and a half lbs of sugar candy

Put the ingredients into a jar, tightly corked, and at intervals give it a good shake. Bottle in 6 months.

Dandelion Wine

3 quarts of dandelion flowers.

Pour over them 1 gallon of boiling water and let them stand for 24 hours well-covered. Strain, and to every gallon of liquid add 3lbs of lump sugar, 1 lemon, and 1 orange, sliced. Boli the mixture for half an hour and let it cool. Add a slice of toast covered with yeast and let the liquid ferment for 48 hours. Then bottle leaving the corks loose until fermentation has ceased, then cork tightly.

The recipes come from "Traditional Fare of England and Wales" published in 1948 by the National Federation of Women's Institutes.

