Black Mountains History

Short pieces from the Llanthony History Group





2020

LV&DHG was formed in 2015 with seed corn funding from the Landmark Trust, as part its Heritage Lottery Funding for the restoration of Llwyn Celyn. We are a working group for people interested in the history of the Llanthony Valley, and the adjacent area of the Black Mountains in South Wales. The Group organises regular evening meetings in Cwmyoy Memorial Hall throughout the winter; and runs a series of historical walks and explorations for members in the summer.

Committee 2020-21

Chairman: Douglas Wright

Secretary: Pip Bevan

Treasurer: Oliver Fairclough Events: Rosemary Russell

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Join the group at a meeting or walk, or contact Pip Bevan, the Secretary on 01873 890 609 or pbevan@mokoro.co.uk.

Individual membership is normally £7 a year (£4 to attend a single meeting). However, due to the uncertainties associated with the Covid-19 pandemic, there are no fees for the year from September 2020.

http://www.llanthonyhistory.wales/

http://llanthonyhistory.genesis-ds.com/

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Chair's introduction

This is the first collection of papers from the Llanthony History Group. We hope that it will become an annual record of our varied interests. Some are derived from recent talks by members to the Group, and others from members' own research. We hope that they will become a great record and resource for the future

They illustrate our lively approach to the work of our Group, and our determination to make the most of our lives in the Valley and District, particularly in this peculiar and difficult virus-ridden year.

This publication is free to all members, and will also become available on our website. It has been edited by Caroline Fairclough.

Douglas Wright

1. Florence Attwood Mathews at Llanfihangel Court

Oliver Fairclough

Florence Blakiston Attwood Mathews (1842-1923) might be compared with Constance Molyneux (1892-1981) of Trewyn – she was a widow and a colourful character who lived for many years in one of the area's few country houses. However unlike 'Mrs Moly' who was deeply involved in local life, Mrs Attwood Mathews is largely forgotten today, though Stanley Bayley has a vivid description of her in his memories of village life published in *Gwent Local History* in 1980. She was nevertheless a remarkable woman, an intrepid traveller and Egyptologist, a competent if pedestrian artist, and a romantic antiquarian and collector. Llanfihangel Court, built in the 16th and early 17th centuries, owes much of its present character, and perhaps even its survival, to her.



She was born in Bedford Square, London in 1842, the second daughter of a British Swedenborgian¹ writer and homeopathic doctor James John Garth Wilkinson

Florence Attwood Mathews on the front steps of Llanfihangel Court with one of her many pug dogs. There was a rack of small whips in the porch that visitors used to beat them off. From a photograph by H J Houlson Abergavenny, about 1910. Courtesy Julia Johnson.

(1812-1899). The author Henry James, whose own father was also a leading Swedenborgian, was a contemporary and family friend. In 1860 she married Benjamin St John Attwood Mathews (1830-1903), who came from a wealthy family of Midland iron-masters and

bankers. Her husband had been one the founders of the Alpine Club in 1857, and when he retired from business in his forties, the couple made their home at

¹ The Swedenborgians were a <u>new religious group</u>, influenced by the writings of scientist and <u>Swedish Lutheran</u> theologian <u>Emanuel Swedenborg</u> (1688–1772). Wilkinson was also a minor poet, and the editor of William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*

Pontrilas Court, where they were accepted into Herefordshire county society. They had no children, but travelled widely in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. Some of these travels were intrepid – they went up the Nile in January-March 1898, following the final offensive of the British-Egyptian forces on Mahdist Sudan. Florence recorded their journeys during the 1880s and 1890s in watercolours – there is a large group of these, mostly of Egyptian places and people, in Newport Museum and Art Gallery² She also painted a few portraits in oils, and made reliefs in embossed copper.

Pontrilas Court was held on a long lease, and in 1903 Mr and Mrs Attwood Mathews bought Llanfihangel Court for £16,000. He died just before the sale was completed, but she was to live at the Court until her death in October 1923. The house was probably then in poor condition. It had been a farmhouse during the 18th century, and although it had been repaired and modernised by its owner, the Hon. William Powell Rodney in the 1830s, it had been let to tenants after his death in 1878. When the last of these, Colonel Napier Sturt, died in 1901, the Llanfihangel estate was broken up and sold.

Mrs Attwood Mathews was soon obsessed by house's history, ascribing the Spanish chestnuts of the avenue to the Armada, and largely inventing associations with Queen Elizabeth and King Charles I.³ She therefore set about restoring it, emphasising the Jacobean character of the interior, removing later



The Hall at Llanfihangel Court in about 1910, with its 'Jacobean' fireplace and ceiling, and with Sudanese weapons hung on the walls. From a photograph by H J Houlson Abergavenny, about 1910. Courtesy Julia Johnson.

² See https://www.peoplescollection.wales/discover/query/Attwood.

³ She displayed her own painting of the Queen on an easel in the hall, and probably designed the stained-glass window depicting her on the stairs. There was both a Queen's Room and a King's Room, the latter containing a bed on which Charles I was said to have slept.

work and introducing panelling, fireplaces and some of the moulded plasterwork. Photographs show dense typically Victorian arrangements of antique and contemporary furniture.

She remodelled the garden side of the house in 1905, building two massive bay windows, and a singlestorey extension as a museum room for her Egyptian collections. She also added a large bay window as an annexe to the dining room.⁴

The Egyptian Room added to Llanfihangel Court in 1905. Florence Attwood Mathews painted the hieroglyphics on the central column and coffered ceiling.

Courtesv Julia Johnson

Although she entertained at the Court, she was a childless widow



and unlike many Edwardian country house owners she had no need to enlarge the house with extra bedrooms. The 17th century service quarters also remained largely unchanged, perhaps because she claimed never to have been in them. The house was run by her German housekeeper Mrs Seegers, and prior to the First World War she employed eleven other indoor servants, together with a coachman, a groom, two gardeners, a woodman and a gamekeeper. She continued to travel, and was often in Egypt during the winter. When at the Court, she was very much the lady of the manor, dispensing charity to the village, presenting prizes to the Pandy Ploughing Society, and occupying a heavily-cushioned front pew in church. In reality she only owned a little over 400 acres of land between the Hereford and Grosmont roads, a quarter of the original estate, for as Oscar Wilde had made Lady Bracknell observe in 1895 'Land has ceased to be either a profit or a pleasure. It gives one position, and

⁴ It is unclear whether she had an architect. The bays of the garden front were said to have been designed by her late husband and that to the dining room inspired by the gallery at Raglan Castle.

prevents one from keeping it up.' Like everyone else, she also had to deal with the recently formed Abergavenny Rural District Council, which objected to the gates she put up in the lane below the church, and ordered that these should remain unlocked.

During the First World War Mrs Attwood Mathews supported Maindiff Red Cross Hospital, and the Victoria Cottage Hospital, and knitted socks for soldiers. She also housed Belgian refugees 'of the professional classes' at the Court. She was to die there following a heart attack and fall on 31 October 1923. The contents of the house were then sold and her additions to it were largely removed by its next owner, Edward Osborne Bennett.



Llanfihangel Court, 1916.

2. Snowed in: some memorable Black Mountains winters

Pip Bevan

Heavy snow in the Black Mountains has long affected farming, moving about, food, house temperatures, and relations with neighbours. The canons of Llanthony Priory would have shivered and gone hungry during the severe winters in the early 14th century, which were widely associated with hypothermia, livestock deaths, crop failure and famine. Farmers would have lost stock in the extreme winters of 1741 and 1840 while the Llanthony School log book (1908-57) shows that in 24 years out of 49 there were days and sometimes weeks when snow and ice stopped all children from getting to school. Memories of the winters of 1947 and 1963 have been recorded in Valley Views, the Voices of our Valley video project and in notes sent to me for the Dropbox archive. One theme is the way in which snowed-in neighbours helped each other.

In 1947 the first snowfall came on 22nd January. February was the coldest on record in many parts of the UK and the snow did not begin to thaw until the middle of March. Welsh farmers lost about 4 million sheep. The snow blocked roads and railways, low temperatures even froze coal, and four million were made redundant; Manny Shinwell, the Minister of Fuel and Power, received death threats. Here are some Llanthony Valley memories of that winter.



The Hill, Beaufort March1947

Edith James (later Davies,) Treveddw

You couldn't see the hedges and the weight of frozen snow on the trees brought some of them down. We lost stock – sheep just stand, the snow goes over them and you have to dig them out.

Henri Collings, the Shack, Cwmyoy

There was no road to the shack and the lane was blocked for 6 weeks. They had 2 horses, goats which provided milk, and chickens all kept inside. They used snow for water and lived on what was stored in the house.

John Jasper at Llanthony

John, in his first year at Abergavenny Grammar School, was snowed in for most of the Spring term. The buses couldn't run and one Red and White bus was stuck half across the road between the Holly pitch and Henllan for several weeks. Early in March there was a two-day blizzard. 'There were six of us at home and we ran out of bread and mother tried to make some without yeast. I will never forget trying to eat that!!.' They couldn't feed the sheep and lost most of them. In the shed behind the Tithe barn at Llanthony he saw piles of dead sheep on the floor and in the mangers. As the snow thawed carcasses floated down the river. The government Agricultural Disaster Fund helped those who lost stock. He guessed that more than half the valley flock was lost.

The winter of 1962-3 was said to be the coldest since 1740. On 29th December



Drifts on the Blorenge above Gilwern, 1963

a two-day blizzard swept across Wales with snow drifting to over twenty feet in places, blocking roads, cutting off villages, bringing down power lines, freezing pipes and preventing farmers from reaching livestock with many starving to death. In near-freezing temperatures the snow cover lasted for over two months.

Bridget Barnes, The Neuadd, Forest Coalpit

The snow came on Boxing Day and stopped by March 10th. The roads were not cleared, the lanes were full of snow and their road was not dug out until April. The river froze solid. A pipe burst and they couldn't find the tap and the house was flooded; she watched her granny sweep the water out through the front door.

Tony Smith at the Darren

The snow level would sink and then more would come. At school in Abergavenny he heard that if the temperature dropped below a certain level the school would be closed. He put snow from the playground on the classroom thermometers and the school was closed and he didn't go back for weeks. The cattle were all inside and the sheep were eating ivy and holly.

Di Evans, the Youth Hostel

Di was expecting her first baby on 22nd February. Matron Phillips at the Cottage Hospital sent a message asking if she wanted a helicopter to take her to hospital but 'my only experiences of these was on TV seeing the wounded being flown out of Vietnam on stretchers – strapped underneath the helicopters. That was not for me.' On 15th February she and Jack walked the mile to Chapel Farm along a single track path worn through shoulder-high snow where Paul Pepler took her to town in his Renault 4. 'It was a bit like the Cresta Run, as after the snowblower had been through it had snowed and frozen again'. John Evans was born on 17th February.

There have been bad winter patches since 1963. When we were snowed in for a week at New House (Dol Alice) in early 1982 Trevor Passmore and some others drove a tractor down the valley to pick up supplies and delivered them door-to-door. We phoned Jim Graham up at Ty Cwm to ask if they needed anything urgently; luckily we had a bottle of sherry to spare.

Between the later 1980s and early 2000s winters were mostly mild with little snow; then low temperatures and significant snowfalls struck again in February

2009, December 2009-January 2010, and November-December 2010. While the years from 2011 to 2020 saw increasing average temperatures, record high temperatures for a number of months, and storms with heavy rain leading to flooding, in 2018 the 'Beast from the East' led to the coldest March day on record with a maximum of -4.7°C recorded at Tredegar.

Despite the warming climate the Met Office expects some cold spells in the next decade, but, unlike the canons, farmers and other residents who endured the memorable winters of the past, we have barns for sheep, modern snow ploughs, telephones and wifi, wood-burning stoves, central heating, and freezers full of food.

If anyone has a photograph of any of these winters in the Black Mountains, we would be very pleased to hear from you.

3. Pen-y-Gadair Fawr - the Highest Forest in the UK. Map Ref: SO 23343 28373

Shirley Rippin

At over 800m Pen-y-Gadair Fawr is one of the highest points of the Brecon Beacons, visible for miles around, especially in winter when its summit is capped



Distant summit of Pen Y Gadair Fawr with remaining lower block of Sitka Spruce on sky-line

in snow. A short distance below the summit a high area of forest can also be seen detached from the main afforested area lower down. This exceptionally high forest is all that remains of experimental forest trials planted in 1961 as Britain, after the 2nd World War, worked towards becoming a more self-gradually sufficient and productive nation. Agricultural and horticultural research and experimental establishments were being established in many regions to study new and improved methods of food crop production, and the Forestry Commission, established in 1929, was already creating new forests nationwide for home-grown timber. In the Grwyne Fawr Valley land was being acquired from local estate owners, which at the time displaced many tenant farmers and cottagers, leaving their abandoned and now ruinous buildings in the present forest.

Early tree planting commenced in the valley around 1933, plantations being mainly in lower accessible areas bordering the river. As plantations moved

higher up the mountainside it became necessary to provide local accommodation for more foresters. The earliest were the two bungalows at Ffawydden which replaced an existing house. These were built by Charlie Blackwell, who came to the area originally to work on the preliminary preparations for building the Grwyne Fawr Reservoir but stayed on and became a well-known local builder. In the 1940's he built two semi-detached forestry



View from the summit of Pen y Gadair Fawr looking back towards all that remains of the plantation blocks.

houses at Ty Hir and the two dormer bungalows near the main forestry depot and house at Nant-y-bedd. Watching these houses being built provided an exciting pastime for local children who went to watch the builders at work after school.

During the war Land Girls replaced men away in the army and foresters were told they must, in addition to their own work, help farmers needing labour for growing potatoes and vegetables. Later, returning soldiers were employed as foresters. One man returning to the valley recalls felling the ancient beech trees after which the Ffwddog Valley is named, to clear the area for replanting with Larch to provide pit props for the coal industry. With the increase in foresters, more houses were needed and in 1956 five of the crescent of eight built at Bryn Arw, were allocated for foresters and agricultural workers. Of the semi-detached houses near Llanthony dated 1954, one is still the home of a lifetime forester who in 1961 was planting trees on the mountainside below Pen-y-Gadair Fawr.

It was around then that most of the available area of the Grwyne Fawr was afforested as high as it could go, leaving only the very exposed open expanse of mountain above. It was at that high location, on the relatively gentle slopes of the mountain below the summit of Pen-y-Gadair Fawr, that an experimental site was ploughed and laid out in a number of square blocks where a wide range of coniferous species were planted, to establish which species could be grown commercially at that height. The young transplants were planted on the plough ridges and depending on the state of the ground a man would usually plant 600 - 800 a day - occasionally 1000. At that height the peaty black soil supports little but rough tufted grass, cotton grass and various mosses. But it was a hostile place to work with conditions often extremely cold, wet, windy, foggy or snowy. Foresters were driven to the site on newly constructed forest roads and were also responsible for erecting and maintaining fences to keep out sheep and ponies. At various stages of growth, trees were cut down and slices of trunks removed to study growth rings, while others were dug up to examine the state of health of root systems. Species not thriving were removed and replaced by new species. Regular visits were made by the head forester to check temperature, rainfall, and the speed and direction of wind, indicated by flags erected in the area.

Those plantations were then and are still, the highest in the UK, although only the lowest block of Sitka Spruce now remains. The highest blocks all felled, are still clearly defined by rows of stumps with only a scattering of self-seeded specimens struggling to survive in their high exposed location.



A closer look at the western end of the remains of the highest plantation with gorse and a single self-sown tree.

4. The Case of Jacob Watkins' Will, 1861.

Dick Vigers

In the National Archives in Kew, London there is one manila envelope amongst all the other weighty records of state that is concerned with a small farm at the top of the Llanthony valley. These documents were kept as a future reference for lawyers dealing with the often knotty and difficult legal cases involving wills. The envelope contains the drafts, affidavits, pleas, calculations and bills relating to the will of Jacob Watkins of Tŷ Gwyn or the White House farm near Capel-y-ffin. Jacob died in 1860 and the following year a dispute over the authenticity of his last will was heard before a judge and jury at Monmouth Assizes. The questions raised in the case were considered of sufficient importance for the will to be selected as part of the 7% statistical sample of 'Contentious Probate Case Files and Papers in the Principal Probate Registry'i.

Jacob had married twice but there were no children and thus the disposal of Tŷ Gwynⁱⁱ on his death was not straightforward. Jacob, whose grave can be seen in the churchyard of Capel-y-ffin, died at 90 and conscious of his unusual longevity for that time, he had been making wills for at least ten years before he finally breathed his last. Wills naming as principal heir his wife (1851), his niece (1855), and his infant great-nephew (March 1860) had been made but following the sudden death of this child, Jacob insisted that his will should be altered again. His last will of May 1860 was signed at the house of his neighbour James Lewis Penyworlod, where William Thomas Nantycarney, Thomas Pritchard Tynyronen and David Pritchard Garn Fawr witnessed it.

The authenticity of the will was disputed jointly by Blanch Griffiths of Llanellen who claimed to be Jacob's 'only legal descendant' but received nothing in the will and James Watkins Sychtre who had been an executor and residuary legatee but was replaced in May 1860. The possible gains for the defendants were sufficient to warrant the high legal costs entailed, since all probate cases were begun in Westminster at this time and both plaintiff and defendants had to conduct their business through paid proxies in the London court. Blanch was a widow in straitened circumstances since her husband, Thomas Griffiths of the Gare, Ffwthog had committed suicide on losing his money when the Crickhowell Bank collapsed in 1856. James Watkins would have benefitted from the money remaining from Jacob's estate after his bequests were made. Griffiths and Watkins claimed that Jacob's will had been tampered with by James Lewis and David Pritchard to their advantage and that Jacob was not sufficiently fluent in English to understand how his wishes had been altered when the will was read to him.

In order to settle the legitimacy of the will James Lewis brought the case against Griffiths and Watkins. His co-executor, David Pritchard, was not involved nor even summoned as a witness even though Blanch Griffiths claimed 'that this Will

was prepared from instructions given not by the deceased but by David Pritchard'. The plaintiff asserted that Jacob had told his wife in Welsh what he wanted in his will and she had passed it on to David Pritchard to draw it up in English. The documents in the National Archives comprise the legal process of bringing the case to court but greater detail of the proceedings emerges from the coverage in local newspapers. They reveal that language was at the heart of the cross-examinations in the courtroom and the case offers a valuable insight into a community as it transitioned from a largely Welsh-speaking society to a bilingual one and for the youngest generation a predominantly English world. All of Jacob's neighbours were asked whether they used Welsh or English with him and with David Pritchard to establish whether he could have understood the will. The irony was that it was not illegal to write a will in Welsh although, in South Wales at least, wills in English were the norm.

The defence mustered a number of witnesses who claimed that Jacob was unaware of the changes to the will. Watkins Sychtre said that he had asked Jacob why he had been replaced by David Pritchard and Jacob had replied that 'if this were so he would make another will'. William Lewis Tyndrain asserted that Jacob had complained that the contents of the will 'were quite contrary'. William Watkins Cillonow, also reported an exchange with Jacob in which he said he knew nothing of the changes. Clearly, the contents of Jacob's will were the subject of intense interest in the community and, moreover, people felt able to confront Jacob directly about them.

Despite these claims the jury found that the will of May 1860 was legitimate and no undue influence was exercised. On 18th January 1862, James Lewis was granted probate on oath to administer Jacob's will but 'power being reserved of making the like Grant to David Pritchard the other executor' suggesting that some element of doubt lurked in the judge's mind over the role of David Pritchard in the affair.

National Archives: ASSI 1/63 Minute book of civil actions Lent 1861-Summer 1864; National Archives: J 121 1858-1960 Court of Probate and Supreme Court of Judicature, High Court of Justice, Probate, Divorce and Admiralty Division: Principal Probate Registry: Contentious Probate Case Files and Papers: J 121/521 - Testator: Watkins, Jacob Case: Lewis v. Griffiths.

 $^{^2}$ Tŷ Gwyn/White House was rebuilt by Fr. Ignatius (Joseph Leycester Lyne) for his mother to live in and it was renamed Plas Genevieve after her. When sold in 1915, Ty Gwynne was still given as an alternative name for Plas Genevieve. Now part of The Grange Trekking Centre.

³ Blanch Griffiths' affidavit cost 2s 6d to submit when agricultural wages were between 8s 6d and 15s for men a week. (Purdy, Frederick (1860) 'On the Earnings of Agricultural Labourers in England and Wales' *Journal of the Statistical Society of London*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (Sep., 1861), pp. 328-373.p 339.

⁴ Monmouthshire Merlin, 10/8/1861; Hereford Journal, 7/8/1861; Hereford Times, 10/8/1861 and 15/2/1862; Illustrated Usk Observer and Raglan Herald, 10/8/1861; Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian Monmouth and Brecon Gazette, 10/8/1861.

⁵ Two similar cases of challenges to wills written in English for Welsh speakers occurred in Craswall, a few miles from Capely-ffin, 100 years earlier, at a similar time of language change (National Archives BR/1746/15 X6 and BR/1749/14/X3).

5. Christine Olsen's Photographs of the Llanthony Valley, 1950 - 55

Caroline Fairclough

Christine Olsen, her husband Gene and 4 year-old daughter Caroline (both seen right) moved from Surrey to the Llanthony Valley in 1950. She knew the Valley from before the war, and thought that Gene (full name Bryce Eugene Norman Olsen) who had



served in tanks during WW2, 'might like to try a bit of farming'. Contrary to local



legend, he was not blown up in a tank, but knocked down by one which broke his jaw.

Christine was largely brought up by her grandparents. Her grandfather, a surgeon, was a keen amateur photographer, and is granddaughter inherited his skill

The Olsen family rented several properties in the

Llanthony Valley before settling at The Pant, Forest Coalpit, in 1955. Their first

home was Ty Shores, (middle and bottom) a very basic 1½ storey cottage where cooking was done over an open fire with a pot crane. The family took baths at The Monastery. After a short while at The Grange (formerly Father Ignatius's mother's home), they



moved down the valley to Ty Cwm. Here there was a bath, in the kitchen, with a wooden cover.



Two photographs of Ty Cwm show its position, and also the distinctive car parked outside.



Christine took photographs of a number of recognisable places in the Valley. They nearly always included Caroline, which is helpful with dating! Here she is aged 5 or so outside the Half Moon pub in Llanthony. The sign has gone, but the advertisement for Pacey's Beers can still be faintly seen.



The distinctive Olsen family car, a 1932 Wolsey Hornet, with modified wheels



for country use, features in this photograph of St Mary's Church, Capel y Ffin. It shows the road up to Gospel Pass before it was surfaced. The photograph of

Chapel Farm, Capel y Ffin on the front cover may have been taken at the same time. The road there is unsurfaced, and the phone box has not yet arrived.

Another Capel y Ffin photograph shows a young Caroline 'helping' with the sheep in the snow. The picture was taken on the road up to the Monastery and



then on to Blaen Bwlch.



Llanthony School was an extension St David's to Church. It had one room and two teachers. Lit by oil lamps, there was no running water in the school. 'The Sanitary offices are about thirty yards distant from the School and are of the bucket

type' (Inspection Report March 1953). The school closed at Christmas 1957, when the 7 remaining children were moved to Cwmyoy School.



These photographs show the children outside, where they spent much time. In the top picture the big girls are playing with the little ones inside the ruins in

front of the bar of the Abbey.

The one on the right is from the same viewpoint as the top picture, with mothers included. The bottom photograph shows what may be a PE lesson, in very low sunlight!





With many thanks to Caroline Olsen for the use of her mother's photographs

Llanthony Valley and District History Group Publications

Oliver Fairclough The Llanthony Valley: A Borderland (Landmark

Trust 2018)

LV&DHG History Walks in the Llanthony Valley & Environs

(Landmark Trust 2020)

• All Around the Gaer

• Capel y Ffin

• Llanthony

Cwmyoy

Black Mountains History: Short pieces from the Llanthony History Group 2020

Publications are available locally or from the Secretary on 01873 890 609

