

Black Mountains History



Short pieces from the
Llanthony History Group



2021

Llanthony Valley and District History Group was formed in 2015 with seed corn funding from the Landmark Trust, as part its Heritage Lottery Funding for the restoration of Llwyn Celyn, Cwmyoy. 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 2021-22

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Membership is £10 a year.

<http://www.llanthonyhistory.wales/>

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

The cover photograph shows

Mary Ellen Pugh (later James) feeding her hens at Llwynncelyn, Grwyne Fawr, about 1930.

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Contents

- p.4 The Carney above Capel-y-ffin: two notable residents
Pip Bevan
- p.9 Isabel McGraghan's Notebook
Rosemary Russell
- p.14 Walking over the mountain: the Baptist community of Olchon and Capel-y-ffin
Miriam Griffiths
- p.19 Partrishow in 1941: The National Farm Survey
Oliver Fairclough
- p.25 Sheep Sales at Court Farm
Douglas Wright's photographs
- p.26 Two of the Three Castles.
LV&DHG study visit

Errata in 2020 Black Mountains History

Page 14: The Forestry Commission was established in 1919

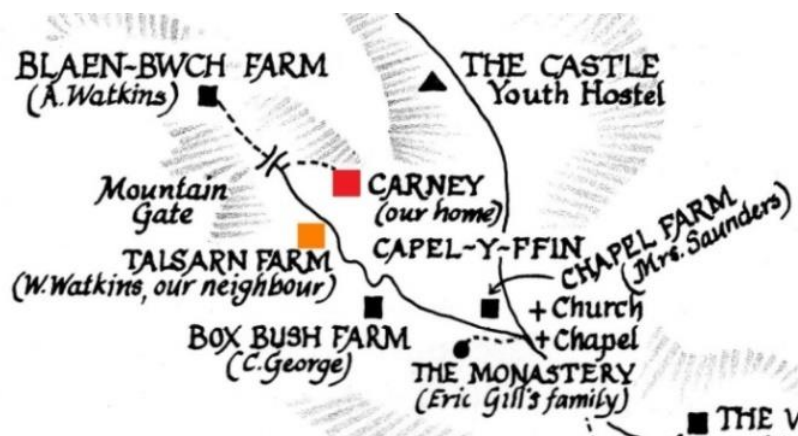
Page 20: Facey's not Pacey's Beers.

Many apologies

The Carney above Capel-y-ffin: two notable residents

Pip Bevan

The Carney was originally a one-up, one-down shepherd's cottage built at about 1,600 feet on the west side of Darren Lwyd. It looks down on the Glyn Bwch Valley, which lies north-west of Capel-y-ffin.



It is not clear when the house was built, but local researcher Isabel McGraghan found evidence that in 1802 John Nicholls of 'Carnau' was buried at the Baptist Chapel. In the censuses of 1841, 1851, 1881, 1891, 1901 and 1911 the cottage was occupied by Nicholls, but by 1939, when Reg and Betty Gammon arrived in Capel-y-ffin, the cottage was a ruin.

For eighty years the Carney was owned by two men whose lives are described in the books which inform this piece. *One Man's Furrow* is a collection of articles and illustrations by Reg Gammon. *Tom Maschler: Publisher* is a memoir. Gammon bought the house in 1940. Maschler owned it from 1962 until his death in 2020.



Reg Gammon: writer and illustrator, farmer, and artist

Reg Gammon was born in 1894. Discharged from the Army Service Corps in 1918, he began his career as a freelance writer and illustrator. By the 1930s he was well established, contributing weekly illustrated articles to the *News Chronicle* and *The Scout*, but in 1939 this work stopped. Financial problems forced the Gammons to leave Sussex. While camping at Chapel Farm Reg told Mrs Saunders he would like to live at Capel-y-ffin, and was taken to see 'a small, part roofless cottage and stone-roofed barn, almost completely hidden by nettles' (Gammon: 65). In 1940 they bought the cottage for £200 from William Watkins of Talsarn, the farm on the opposite side of the valley.



Mr Price of Velindre was employed as the builder. Reg and Price and his men worked on the building for eighteen months. They hauled the materials on a Welsh slide-car a mile up from Capel-y-ffin, through a ford, up a one-in-three lane to the mountaingate, and along the mountainside to Carney. Once ensconced in the house the couple reared chickens and pigs and sold goats' milk and honey. They attended the Baptist Chapel regularly; Reg joined the Home Guard and started a scout group and Betty was involved in the Sunday school.



In 1942 they bought Sychtre, a 40-acre farm about a mile up from Llanthony village. The artist Edgar Holloway and his wife Daisy Monica lived there for a while, then Reg's younger son Gordon moved in. He and Reg produced milk, grew wheat, barley, kale, oats and vetches for silage, potatoes, shallots and onions, carrots, plums, currants, and sometimes sold hazelnuts. Isabel M records that Charlie Morgan lived at the Sychtre from 1950 to 1980, and it is likely

that Gordon left for Somerset then and Reg stopped farming.

Alongside his farming Reg continued his work as an illustrator and writer contributing 'Reg Gammon's Nature Notes' to the monthly Cyclists' Touring Club Gazette and from 1957 until 1972 producing a weekly column called Country Corner for the *Signpost* the newspaper of British Nylon Spinners in Pontypool. The pieces Included descriptions of birds, animals and local farming events illustrated with his drawings.



Reg also painted his neighbours.



Dipping sheep: our neighbours David Griffiths, Reggie Williams, Trevor Rees and Jim Gwilliam



Ivor & Gordon Watkins mixing sheep dip at Talsarn



Mrs Saunders dressing ducks

One incident he described in *Country Corner* occurred on New Year's Eve 1961. *'(A)t 5.30 p.m. a knock on the door and there stood Eunice, breathless from hurrying through the snow to seek help. Ivor could not start his landrover and Joan was feeling bad and must be got into hospital...Slithering down the lane to the valley road, with a totally inadequate semi-circular patch of demisted glass to see the road, my mind concentrated on a case of a speedy journey plus what could be done if a 15-mile journey to Abergavenny took too long!'* Joan and Ivor Watkins' daughter was born 40 minutes after they reached the hospital.

In 1962 Reg and Betty moved to Somerset. Reg did some teaching and continued painting and exhibiting well into his nineties. Betty died in 1982 and Reg in 1997 aged 103.

Tom Maschler: publisher

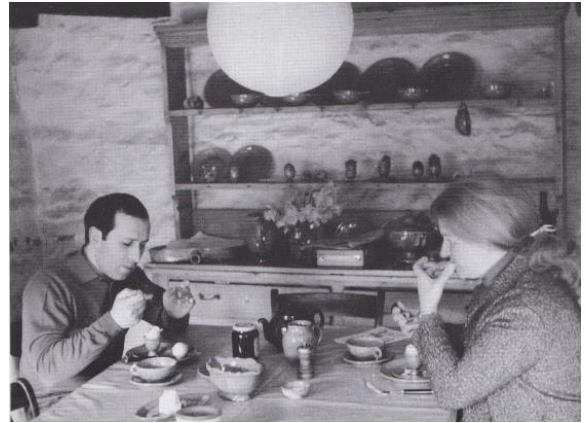
Tom Maschler was born in Berlin in 1933 and, with his Jewish parents, left Vienna for England in 1938. He started his publishing career in 1955 joining Jonathan Cape in 1960. He was involved in publishing the works of many famous authors including Ernest Hemingway, Joseph Heller (*Catch-22*), Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Doris Lessing, John Lennon, and Desmond Morris. He persuaded Roald Dahl to work with Quentin Blake as illustrator, and was one of the main figures responsible for creating the Booker Prize in 1969. In Liz Thomson's obituary he was described as a *'glamorous, perma-tanned figure with aquiline features and unruly hair'*. He had *'enormous energy, imagination and drive'* but *'rarely offered authors a proper lunch'* and in his memoir the *'guiding mantra appeared to be "when in doubt claim credit"'*. *'A late-life diagnosis of manic depression perhaps accounts for his egomaniacal style..'*



His story about his purchase of the Carney involves some fiction. *'I was 24 when I bought Carney, a remote stone cottage in the Black Mountains on the Welsh border. Maschler was 24 in 1957 and claimed to have bought the house from a couple in their 80s who had lived there since 1927 and were moving to Portsmouth to be near their daughter (p272). Actually he must have bought it in 1962 from the Gammons who were moving to Somerset to be near their sons.*

Arnold and Dusty Wesker – breakfast at Carney

Maschler invited a number of Cape's authors to the Carney. One, reportedly, was Doris Lessing who won the Nobel prize for literature in 2007. Maschler wrote *'During my Penguin period Doris and I continued to see each other regularly, We felt an enormous affection for each other that has lasted a lifetime. Indeed there is no one in my life I value more. Going back to the late fifties, it was Doris I drove to the Black Mountains the day I came to take possession of my beloved cottage, Carney.'* (p71).



Bruce Chatwin worked on his novel *On the Black Hill* while staying at the Carney, and Tom invited Arnold Wesker the playwright and his wife to the cottage. They eventually became his neighbours, although, following Tom's refusal to publish one of Wesker's plays before it was performed they did not speak for 25 years (pp77-8).

Len Deighton, writer of thrillers including the *Ipcress* file, went to the Carney. *'One day I was having dinner...in London...with Len and the fashion photographer Duffy. We finished dinner at about 11 pm and Len took it into his head that it would be fun to drive to my cottage in the Black Mountains.. The four, including a girl 'Len had in tow' ..'arrived at*

2am.. consumed 3 bottles of wine and went to sleep.. There was nothing to eat for breakfast so we sat on the grass outside the cottage and then we drove back to London' (pp143-4).



Edna O'Brien and John Fowles at Carney



At Carney, with l – r, Tom Wiseman, John Fowles, Frederic Raphael



In 1967 Maschler took Allen Ginsberg to the Carney where, under the influence of acid, he wrote the poem *Wales Visitation*. 'I first met Allen Ginsberg in Cuba.. On Allen's subsequent trip to England I took him to Carney in the Black Mountains. He fell in love with the place...' He persuaded Tom to take LSD with him 'Some 3 or 4 hours after we had taken the pills Allen proposed we go for a walk up the mountain. .. He was immensely moved by the landscape and in the afternoon, still heavily under the influence of the drug, he began to write a poem called 'Wales

Extracts from Wales Visitation

All the Valley quivered, one extended motion,

wind

undulating on mossy hills

a giant wash that sank white fog delicately down red runnels

on the mountainside....

A solid mass of Heaven, mist-infused, ebbs thru the vale,

a wavelet of Immensity, lapping gigantic through Llanthony Valley....

Airs wavering thru antlered green fern

drawn in my navel, same breath as breathes thru Capel-Y-Ffin...

A contrasting pair of 'Incomers': as a child Reg Gammon spent a lot of time at his grandfather's farm in Hampshire and, when he needed to make a living in the Valley, he bought and worked a local farm; he settled for 23 years, fully participating in the life of the Valley. Tom Maschler used the Carney as an occasional retreat and a place to take Cape writers for brief visits.

Since the 1930s Capel-y-ffin and, more generally, the Llanthony Valley has attracted many incomers with a variety of agendas. At one extreme there are the 'Regs', keen to interact with the locals and participate in community life, and at the other the 'Toms', who may love the place but make little effort to connect with the community.

References Reg Gammon (compiled by Enid Fairhead): *One Man's Furrow: Ninety Years of Country Living*, Webb and Bower: Exeter, 1990

Tom Maschler: *Tom Maschler: Publisher*, Picador: Basingstoke & Oxford, 2005
Liz Thomson: 'Tom Maschler Obituary', *The Guardian* 16 October 2020.

Isabel McGraghan's Notebook

Rosemary Russell

When I joined Cwmyoy WI in 1995, I was astonished when a fellow member presented me with a complete account of all the people who had lived in my house on the Ffwddog from the 1830s. This precious gift was my introduction to Isabel McGraghan, a remarkable researcher and local historian. This draws on a notebook in which she left a lively account of life amongst her neighbours while living, between 1955 and 1993, at the end of the Grwyne Fawr in the house called Blaenycwm.



Isabel McGraghan

The house when she found it was empty and 'in a terrible state'. It belonged to the Williams family of Llandewi Rhydderch, owners for more than 100 years, but leased to Charlie Morgan of Sychtre, Llanthony, his family having been tenants of Blaenycwm since the 1870s. Grandfather Morgan had been 'the last person to be carried over the mountain in his coffin as the road was not created until 1910....From the house there is a steep ascent of 1000ft on a slight diagonal and a steeper descent of 1000ft on the other side into the Llanthony valley as there are cliffs either side of the path. Each man bearing the coffin could only struggle for a few yards before another man took his place...' She continues 'By the time I had lived at Blaenycwm for 38 years I had accumulated 122 years of Morgan experience of the area, the boundaries, how to manage the land which was confirmed as ancient pasture, the names of fields, how to control the water....I am grateful to all the Morgans for integrating me into the community and contributing to the deep feeling I formed for the house, the land and the whole valley.'

Isabel stayed on the land in a caravan until she was able to buy the house for £350 in 1962, and with her husband Leo, some friends, and with help from the Morgans, set about restoring it. Water was 'a spring coming out of an old pipe thrust into a rock at the bottom of the cliff. We also used the old lavatory 'Ty Bach Twt', conveniently, if not hygienically, placed over a stream which dried in summer'...'There was no electricity and we were told there never would be..most people cooked on calor gas cookers. We also used candles and tiny oil lamps, and a Tilley when a bright light was needed. We had just got organised when they said, "You can have electricity now." It took time to wire the house as we had to drive through 27" walls, but we were ready when it arrived in the spring of 1966.'

The house, a drystone structure, is at the far end of the valley, at 1200ft in a catchment area of 60" of rain. *'In its heyday Blaenycwm was 100 acres, the largest holding in the valley on the principle that the higher you are the more land you need to subsist. Originally the meadows ran down to the river but the railway for the reservoir was near the water and enclosed by walls on both sides built about 1912 by James Thomas...the ancient bridleway was further back across the top meadow...the route taken by Gerald Cambriensis in 1188'.* Farms were originally approached from the old track above, there being no continuous road along the bottom of the valley. Around 1910 a railway and then road were built lower down to service the dam and reservoir which were created at the end of the valley.

In Isabel's top meadow was a small building, Marged's house, (demolished later for the car park,) which she believed was *'almost certainly a Hafod or summer dwelling with a cool larder mostly underground to store dairy products. The Welsh practised transhumance, taking cattle to the hills for the summer where the young people herded and milked and made cheese and butter to take home for the winter.'* This 'hafod', she thought, was probably superseded by a longhouse for *'permanent, high level farming, with the beast house at the lower end, the remains of which constitute a barn and stables. About 1900 Stanley Morgan assisted in converting the beast house into a dipping place. A tank was constructed in the lower floor where the sheep were thrown in...a stream runs down the back of the house and a pipe was laid underground. When the tank required filling a turf dam was built to direct water into the pipe.'*

'From the front of the existing house there was a wide path up to the Old House or Cefn Coed Ewyas. I could take the Land Rover up with drums of sheep dip until 1976 when torrential rain brought down landslides which broke the path. This went through the pens used at gathering time when the sheep came down for lambing and went back after shearing. At the top there were two gates for losing them onto the common. After they had gone the grass grew in the meadows and was cut for hay'

Isabel writes of the excitements the weather could bring to a cottage at 1200 feet. *'The house is in a position similar to the narrow part of an hour glass with a cliff on either side and the valley opening out in both directions. Lying on a deckchair looking up, sometimes there was cloud over Blaenycwm with blue all round and at other times a hole would open above us in an otherwise cloudy sky. When it was windy it sounded like a train approaching and I have seen twisters take bracken and hay up in the air. Cold and windy weather made a good fire. It only smoked in muggy weather when there was a downdraught. Rain could be torrential and had an instant effect on the rivers. The rubbish brought down in winter floods was caught in the trees above the level of my head and large boulders were moved downstream...In June, when there were thunderstorms, sheet lightning would set off a display of glow worms that was bright enough to read a book by.'*

'In 1963..it began to snow on Boxing night. We had locked the house up for the winter, and we did not get through again until February 24th. By then the snow was level with the tops of walls and hedges and we had to dig a hole to find the keyhole. A friend who was expecting her first baby had to walk a mile to a place where she was given a lift on a tractor for another two miles before she could get a car to take her to hospital.'

'In the 38 years I was there, there were earthquakes. The first occurred at 7.50am I was eating breakfast in bed when the bedhead hit me in the back. One is always taken by surprise and cannot remember exactly what happened but I am left with the impression that it was accompanied by a loud noise. The second occurred as I was sitting one Monday afternoon at the table doing a jigsaw puzzle when the whole house shook like a wet dog. I put the radio on and it was reported that Wales had suffered an earthquake centred on Wrexham. The house murmured and ticked for several weeks...The area is geologically unstable with layers of mud and rock which slide across each other.'

Weather also determines the growing season, which is short at 1200 feet.' Everything is a month late in spring and a month early in autumn and I usually had a frost before the end of August. I could not grow apples or runner beans but I could grow plums, potatoes and strawberries. There were plenty of raspberries and blackberries growing wild and sometimes mushrooms.. I had a little dog who loved fruit...we ate together, me above and she below. There were crab-apples, sloes and hazelnuts, but the squirrels always got there first and wasted more than they ate.

Interest in finding out more about her house led Isabel to explore the census and electoral registers. 'I spent one evening a week for four years looking at absolutely everything in the reference library. I was also given access to parish records without charge.. this was before the present boom in family history research ' She was unable to discover anything definite about the house from this research , but she concluded that 'Blaenycwm is a relatively young house, the age based on observation and an 18C penny found in the wall...Fashion had done away with the longhouse principle and replaced it with a Georgian style where the house was placed along the contour, not across it, and the beast house removed to a detached position...it was revolutionary to build at the lowest level. In the Grwyne Valley the traffic had always flowed on a shelf at about 1500 feet and access was usually downwards.'

Apart from the construction of the dam, the other great impact on the valley was the establishment of extensive forest in 1933.This led to 'massive depopulation as the Forestry Commission bought a great deal of land.' The result was that 'of about 100 houses and buildings in the Grwyne Fawr only 25% are modernised and inhabited'. The existence of the abandoned houses, some within the forestry, led Isabel to widen the scope of her research and attempt to trace their history and that of all the families who had lived or were living, in the valley. She was joined in this by Christopher Hodges, then working on a PhD about the area. She later included the Llanthony valley in her

explorations; Cwmyoy parish, that was her focus, extended over the two valleys. 'By 1989 I began to extend my history ...beginning at Capel Y Ffin and working down the valley almost to Bryn Arw before I had to stop.'

She notes that although the population of the two valleys had once been roughly the same, the proportion of houses inhabited latterly in the Llanthony valley was about three times that in the Grwyne Fawr. 'The two valleys are very different due to the ice of the last ice age moulding the Honddu valley (into a u-shaped valley) while the mountain ridge at the top of the Grwyne valley prevented the ice from entering, though it had done so in an earlier ice age. Cwmyoy had had roads of a kind, and a flat valley floor suitable for arable farming.'

Over time she made friends among the foresters. 'Charlie Blackwell who lived at Stanton and ran the buses built houses for the foresters. There were single ones at Ty Issa, TyBach and Nantybedd and pairs of semis at TyHir, Ffawyddden and over in Llanthony. Reg Powell lived at Ty Bach with his wife Flo...and his brother Ernie was at Ffawyddden with Janet. The two brothers were brought up in The Forge at Fforest Coalpit, now called Brookside. Ernie was nice looking and Reg was ugly but they were both lovely men...The other semi in Ffawyddden was occupied by Frank Pritchard...another lovely man who always had supper with us when he worked at Blaenycwm... After he left the Forestry Commission he did fencing, lambing, shearing and repairs...

'John Lewis and his wife Diane were at Ty Issa from about 1966. She dressed like a townie with long straight hair that girls used to iron. John frightened me by tushing (dragging trees or logs) above Blaenycwm with two wheels of the tractor off the ground. At Ty Hir the Lewis' s were in one half and the Banners in another. The Banners were from Kent and had a TV but no electricity. Mr Banner made a hedge round a patch where he grew strawberries which the children sold at the roadside. The hedge is now 20 ft high. Mr Banner was left-handed and in those days the foresters weeded by hand with a sickle. One worker almost severed his thumb with the sickle and was sent for plastic surgery. In the other house were Dai Lewis and Edith. John David was the elder brother of Monty at PontEscob and Glyn at Upper House. Dai had a gentle face and gentle manners and it says on his gravestone: 'His busy hands are resting.'..After he died I got friendly with Edith...When she was four, her great aunt wanted to take one of the children to Patagonia. Edith hid under the table, hoping she was not the one, but she was and lived out there until she was 16.'

Jack Lewis was the head forester and came from the Forest of Dean. His wife May came from Carmarthen and was Welsh speaking. 'We met them soon after we had the caravan. It had rained all day, an inch an hour. When we set off in the car we found a small crowd outside Foresters House....the road was blocked by a landslide...When the railway line was cut they had to create a level section called the rock cutting, between the cliff and the river. A tree had been uprooted and in falling had brought down an avalanche of mud which filled the road up to the top of the wall...When the mud and loose rocks were cleared,

someone said it would last for 15 years, but 40 have passed without further trouble there! From then on we became more and more friendly with Jack and May. Jack took us round the forest in the Land rover and we made a film for schools of the work. At that time Jack was engaged mostly in growing trees, with sales of pit props to Big Pit, greenery to make stage sets and there was a small caravan village making fruit boxes for a man in Lancashire. The pit props were cut on a petrol driven bench and debarked by hand. May kept house and provided lunch for visiting F.C. officials and Miss Parry, the secretary, came in to eat her sandwiches by the fire.'

The forest plantations were clear cut every 15 years which gave Isabel a chance 'of seeing different areas of the forest bare, and that was my opportunity to get in and take photographs. And then when the foresters realised what I was doing, they came to tell me they had found a ruin somewhere and they would take me to it'. Her photographs of the buildings of the area 'form a unique record of the architectural and social histories of the valleys between the late 1950's and the first decade of the new millenium.' The collection of her research comprises files, photograph albums and scrapbooks...based on censuses, parish records and archival material from several libraries including the National Library at Aberystwyth. Added to this was a great deal of local knowledge, much of which came from talking to long-term residents of the valleys, most of whom have now passed away'. (C.Hodges)

Isabel lived at Blaenycwm until 1992, although she was widowed by then and in her eighties. And when she left to live in Abergavenny she continued her research until she was 92. She died in 2011 at the age of 95. These extracts are from autobiographical notes written in her '90s.



Samples of Isabel McGraghan's research records.
Left: Griffiths Family, Gare
Right Llwyn Brain, Grwyne Fawr
Below: Llwynycelyn Grwyne Fawr
Photographs of record by Grant Muter

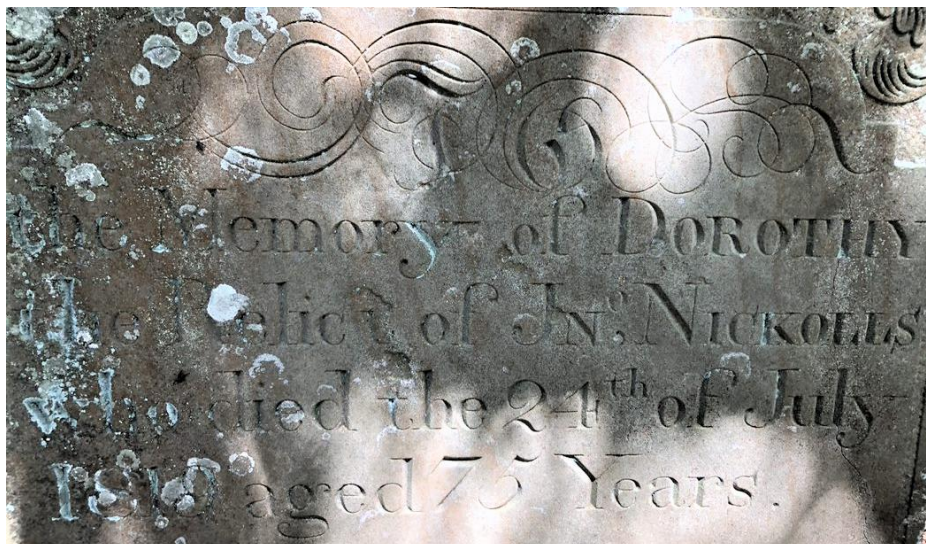
Walking over the mountain - the Baptist community of Olchon and Capel-y-ffin.

Miriam Griffiths

Dorothy's story

In October 1801 Dorothy Nicholls, a widow aged 48 who lived in the Olchon valley, was baptised in the River Honddu just below Capel-y-ffin Baptist chapel. (Adult) baptism of believers was a key tenet of the Baptist community that had straddled the mountain between the Llanthony and Olchon valleys for about 150 years before 1801. After her immersion she no doubt hurried up into the Chapel - perhaps a fire was lit in the Chapel's fireplace - to get warm and dry; in the 1990s local historian Isabel McGraghan noted people's recollections of this still happening into the 20th century. Afterwards, Dorothy would have walked back home over the mountain that separates the Olchon and Llanthony valleys to her home (now our house), Olchon Court farm in the Olchon valley.

Whilst Dorothy's earlier rites of passage (eg her children's baptisms) were recorded in established Church registers in Radnorshire where she had lived previously, it seems - perhaps after moving to the Olchon - she decided to join the Baptist church. This term Baptist 'church' refers to the community of believers rather than a specific building. Dorothy was buried in 1819 at Capel-y-ffin Baptist Chapel; was her coffin carried over the mountain? Between her baptism and her burial her name appears a few times in surviving Chapel records.



The border between Wales and England ran and still runs along the Hatterall ridge which separates the two valleys. Stories of people walking over the steep-sided mountain for prayer meetings are well-established in local tradition. Looking for specific evidence of Olchon residents' names in the Chapel records, I have found just a few, including Llanveynoe resident James Price who was threatened with exclusion

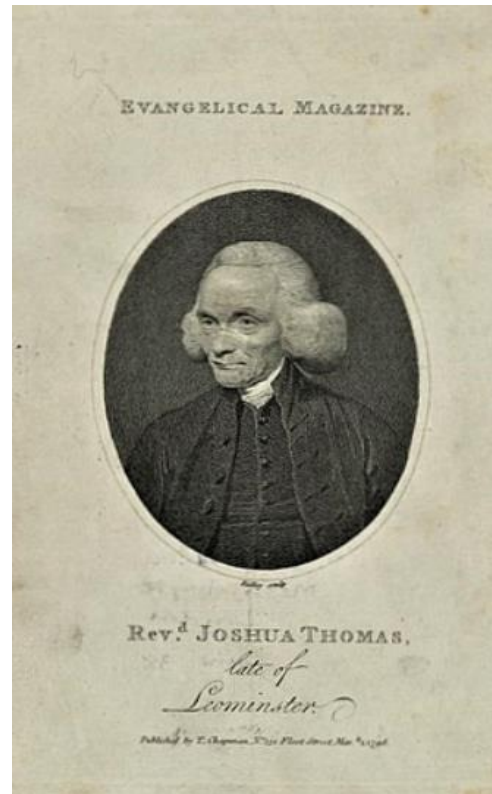
for non-attendance in 1801; and nearly 100 years later, Ann Price of The Castle farm (near Olchon's Black Darren, now a ruin) was buried at Capel -y-ffin in 1896. But they, like Dorothy, are 19th century people and the story of the Olchon / Capel-y-ffin Baptists goes much further back to an era when records and evidence are harder to find.

Joshua Thomas

The key source of information about the earliest Baptist history in the Olchon, Capel-y-ffin and Llanigon area is Joshua Thomas (1719-1797), a Baptist Minister and historian who wrote in both English and Welsh. In his accounts, which cover the history up to the 1790s, Thomas uses the terms the 'Olchon church' or just 'Olchon' as an umbrella name. Until the building of the Capel-y-ffin Chapel in the mid-18th century there had been no purpose-built meeting house in either valley, or the community met in people's homes, farm buildings or out of doors; the Chapel at Capel-y-ffin created a new focus for meetings and administration. Thomas observed (writing in 1790) that following the building of the Capel-y-ffin Chapel "...the old name *Olchon*, is now almost lost in this name of the Meeting house".

This helps us unravel some of the confusions that have arisen about the early history because some later writers using Thomas as their information source have assumed that everything Thomas mentioned happened in the Olchon valley. A booklet published in Abergavenny in 1919, directly derived from Thomas's writings, tried to clarify this in its title, 'The History of the Olchon Church otherwise known as Capel-y-ffin'.

While he was Baptist Minister at Hay on Wye between 1745 and 1754, Thomas preached in Welsh twice a month at Olchon (he says Welsh was the language of residents on the English side of the border at the time) and he gathered information about the history by collecting older peoples' memories and knowledge passed down to them from earlier generations. He concluded that this was one of the very earliest Baptist churches in Wales, originating in the late 1630s, and that the Olchon river had a special place in the early history of adult Believer's Baptism; the brook's name may derive from the Welsh word *golchi*, to dip or wash. Joshua Thomas's oral history research methods (as we would call them now) provide credible glimpses of local history. He also acknowledged many gaps in his account which he did fill with a bit of admitted guesswork.



Some aspects of Thomas' writing were highly speculative and romanticised; he strayed deep into supposition when he wrote about individuals whom he saw as early forerunners of religious dissent in the area; one example is Sir John Oldcastle who as a Lollard was hunted down as a traitor and religious law-breaker in the early 1400s. Thomas makes several erroneous assumptions about Oldcastle for which there is no evidence and convinces himself that Oldcastle hid out from his pursuers in the Olchon. Thomas was keen to establish a long tradition of Baptist beliefs pre-dating the actual emergence of those who identified as Baptists and reading his accounts one can see some emotional investment in imagining Olchon's role in the tracing of a deep-rooted Baptist past right back to St John the Baptist. These speculative aspects and unproven suggestions have found their way into many subsequent accounts of the early Olchon/Capel-y-ffin Baptists, leading to some mythologising. On the plus side this story gave us Raymond Williams' chapter in 'The People of the Black Mountains' entitled 'Oldcastle in Olchon'.

'The Persecuting Time'

For about 30 years between 1660 (restoration of King Charles II) and 1689 (Act of Toleration) religious practice outside the established Church was illegal and religious dissenters met secretly, risking severe punishments:

In the persecuting time they met to worship where they could, sometimes a friend's house secretly, and often out [of doors]. One day or night they would agree to assemble in one retired place on the Black Mountain, then in another. When they found that informers understood where they met; then they would slip to another place. A noted Rock they often frequented was called "Darren Ddu", the black rock. This is well known still on the west side of Olchon. A little below that ...a large wood was often then their place of worship.the good people there were often taken, beaten, battered, fined and imprisoned Thus they weathered on thro those days of trouble.....reduced to a narrow company, small in number, and low in circumstances. (Joshua Thomas, 1790.)

This poor, isolated 17th century farming community of strict Baptists, who followed firm rules such as separation of the sexes during meetings, was a cross border community on the outer fringes not only of England and Wales but also of three counties and three Dioceses; despite its isolation it did not avoid law enforcement. Thomas also identifies the Olchon valley house Beili Bach, belonging to the Gilberts, as a key clandestine meeting place during 'the persecuting time'. Olchon Court is said to have been another meeting place. I have so far found no evidence (though travellers from as far away as the USA have turned up in our garden looking for their Baptist roots); nor have I found records of secret locations used in Capel-y-ffin.

The 18th Century

From 1700 prayer meetings could take place legally. There was no money for purpose-built chapels and so meetings continued in people's houses, now openly rather than secretly. In the Olchon, Beili Bach continued to be a favoured venue; Joshua Thomas preached there during his time as Olchon's fortnightly pastor. The Olchon valley was not to get its (very short-lived) Baptist chapel for many years but as we've seen, in Capel-y-ffin this happened much sooner. William and David Prosser (whose grandfather was Thomas Watkins, one of Olchon's earlier pastors) encouraged regular Baptist meetings in their mother's home in Capel-y-ffin. Joshua Thomas tells us:

....it pleased God to afflict her [ie the mother] in body, so that she was not able to go out of the house. This happened about 1740. As the affliction continued, the son got ministers to preach in her dwelling house for the sake of his weak mother. The said mother died about 1756. The meeting place by that time was found so convenient that Mr William Prosser, and his brother David who lived with him, agreed to continue it on still. They had preaching there one part of the day, and over the hill in Olchon at Baily-bach the other part. Mr Prosser and Brother being batchelors, supposed that after his days the meeting could not be kept there. Therefore he gave the church about one acre of land for them to build upon it, when convenient. He did enclose and fence it properly .They executed a commodious Meeting house upon the spot, in his time, and he generously assisted to carry on the work. This was done in 1762. It is in a very convenient situation, a road to it, and an agreeable place in a brook to be baptised, without incommoding any neighbours.....

The stone tablet on the exterior of the Chapel commemorates the Prosser brothers (who are buried in the Chapel graveyard) and gives the start date for use of the chapel as 1737. However, if Thomas's dates are correct it seems more likely that the preaching took place in the Prossers' "dwelling house" for some time before the mother's death (he says, "about 1740") and after her death (he says "about 1756") and that subsequently the brothers donated a different plot of land and built the Chapel. Thomas says the Prossers' reason for doing this was because they could not guarantee the ongoing use of their home as a meeting place after their deaths; was this perhaps because as bachelors with no heirs they could not securely pass on their property rights or tenancy?

The 19th century

The records for the 1800s, although patchy, are unsurprisingly richer than the information about the earlier period. During the rapid growth of non-conformity, new chapels appeared; for example, Cwmyoy's Henllan meeting room was completed in 1838 while the Tabernacle Chapel in Fwddog opened in 1839. On the English side of

the border, Longtown's Salem Baptist Chapel opened in 1843; but Llanveynoe in the upper Olchon valley had no chapel until Longtown's Baptist Minister, John Howells, managed to get a chapel built by 1886 which lasted only a few years before it was converted into a house. Howells celebrated the opening by publishing a floridly written historical account magnifying some of Joshua Thomas's more speculative suggestions including asserting that Sir John Oldcastle had built a chapel in the Olchon valley over 400 years earlier - traces of which have been sought ever since.

Inevitably, these new localised chapels meant that walking over the mountain decreased, but Minister Howells can be found in Capel-y-ffin Chapel's records officiating in baptisms or burials in the 1870s, showing continuing strong links across the Hatterrall Ridge. Did he walk to and fro over the mountain or take a longer but less demanding lower route round by horse or cart? We may never know.



The Baptist Chapel at Capel yn Ffin, © Simon Powell

Partrishow in 1941: The National Farm Survey

Oliver Fairclough

Prior to 1939, the United Kingdom had been heavily dependent on imported food, and at the beginning of World War Two, Britain faced a severe food crisis. The Government immediately introduced rationing, but the area of land under cultivation had to be increased significantly and quickly. The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries responded by setting up War Agricultural Executive Committees in each county (known as the 'County War Ags'). These were given sweeping powers to expand production and to bring uncultivated land under the plough. They could 'organize land reclamation, inspect farm businesses, instruct farmers on agricultural practice, allocate certain farm requisites, mobilize and direct gangs of workers, commission farm repairs, and where necessary, dispossess farmers in instances of especially poor land management'. In April 1941 the County War Ags were ordered by the Ministry to carry out a nation-wide enquiry, known as the National Farm Survey. The records of the Survey (including those for Wales) are now in the National Archives in Kew. They comprise report forms for each farm in the country of more than five acres, completed by the farmers themselves and by teams of inspectors (National Archives record series MAF 32), and a set of Ordnance Survey maps for each county, showing farm boundaries (National Archives record series MAF 73). The National Farm Survey is a superb resource, telling us who owned and farmed each property in 1941, how much stock they had, what they grew, and the condition of their land and buildings. However, it can only be accessed at Kew, and as the Survey is so large, finding individual farm records can be time-consuming (see <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/national-farm-survey-england-wales-1941-1943/> for guidance). The maps and forms for the parish of Longtown can be found on the website of the Ewyas Lacy Study Group (http://www.ewyaslacy.org.uk/Longtown/Digital-Archive-National-Farm-Survey-Records-for-the-Parish-of-Longtown-Farm-Survey-Maps/1941-1942/rs_lon_0291). This article is a preliminary look¹ to the report forms for Partrishow (MAF 32/1287/29), and is intended to raise awareness of the Survey, sometimes called 'the New Domesday Book'.

MAF 32/1287/29 includes surveys of sixteen farms, though four of these, Penwyrllod, Ffawyddden, Llwyncelyn, and Fforddlas Fawr, are actually in the civil parish of Grwyne Fawr, while two others, Pontyspig and Craig-y-bwla, owned land on the southern edge of Partrishow, though the farm houses lay outside the parish. Of the ten farms in Partrishow, two were identified as amalgamated holdings, Llwynon with Penca² and The Coed with Neuaddwen. Several other small farms which had been included on

the tithe apportionment map of 1840, had disappeared completely, their land absorbed by larger neighbours. Eight of the sixteen properties were owner-occupied while the remainder were farmed by tenants. Although many of the occupants belonged to local families, there was little long-term continuity of occupation, and all the farms may have changed ownership by sale since 1840.² Two, Llwyn-y-brain and The Coed were part of the estate acquired by Richard Baker Gabb in the late-nineteenth century, while the Forestry Commission had bought the four properties in Grwyne Fawr Parish from Lord Glanusk in 1932. These had not yet been cleared for forestry, but it was noted that Llwyncelyn probably would be soon.

Partrishow is poor farming country. Henry Thomas Payne had written of the parish back in 1785:

..the place is certainly romantic, but it has little else to recommend it ... The Hills which on all sides surround you, are cold & sterile, affording a scanty maintenance to the few sheep which are scatter'd along the Sides & Tops of them. The Valley is ... very narrow ... The Land is altogether sidelong - & though cultivated as far as the nature of the soil will admit, is still barren & unthankful. The Farmers tell that sometimes they are blessed with a tolerable crop of Oats or Barley. Small however are the Encouragements to Agriculture, where the Profits but ill supply the industrious Peasant, with the hard-earned Morsel (National Library of Wales MS 4278 C).

The War Ag inspectors were equally unimpressed by what they saw in 1941, one hundred and fifty years later. In no case was the management of a farm rated more than adequate, and most of the land was graded fair or bad, rather than good, much of it being infested with bracken and other weeds. All the farms were working with horses as there were no tractors, and few other forms of motive power (machinery powered by water, steam or oil). Much the largest farm at 216 acres (30% of the land good) was Craig-y-bwla. Three more exceeded 100 acres, while the smallest were Pen-y-bair (25 acres) and Ffawyddden (10 acres). Every farm had cattle (the reports do not distinguish between beef and dairy) and a flock of sheep, and most also kept pigs and raised poultry. In the 1840s about a third of the enclosed land in the parish was arable, but in 1940 only about forty acres of oats, barley and wheat were grown in Partrishow. Many of the farm houses were in poor condition, and none had piped water, being reliant on a well, a spring or a stream. Farm buildings were also often in a poor state, and farmsteads 'inconveniently planned.

Each farm report contains a lot of information, for example, at Tyn-y-llwyn, the owner-occupier Evan Powell, was sixty-five years old, and semi-retired³. He had let most of his land to his neighbour Charles Price of Ty'r Ewen and to a Mr A Price of the Grange, Llantillio⁴ He had retained a quarter of an acre, on which he was growing potatoes, together with two acres of grass for hay, two and a quarter acres of permanent pasture, and a one and a quarter acre orchard. He kept a mare, two young

pigs and sixty-five poultry. The farm's soil was 30% medium, 70% light, and it had hill rights for four hundred sheep. 80% of the land was assessed as fair and the rest as bad. Field drainage was good, but only 60% of the fences were in even fair condition. None of the fields were actually derelict but many were infested with bracken and other weeds. No fertilisers were used. In 1940 3.8 acres of oats and 3.7 acres of potatoes had been grown. The house and outbuildings were all in bad condition, and water had to be carried from a stream.

How much was actually done to expand production is unclear without further work on the records of the Breconshire War Ag Committee. However, the Survey depicts Partrishow's farmers at a time of local, as well as national, crisis. They were poor, lacking in equipment, and demoralised. Another report wrote of the Eastern Black Mountains in 1943 'the pattern of land utilisation ... is a residual one. Here there is no aggressive search for improvements in living conditions ... but an enfeebled struggle to maintain that which is encumbered with the debris of a partial defeat extending over half a century'⁵. After the war a corner was to be turned. The Government prioritised food security. The Hill Farming Act of 1946 offered grants



for improvement of sheep farms, and the 1947 Agriculture Act introduced hill sheep and cattle subsidies. With more money coming in, land was improved, and buildings were gradually repaired and extended. More stock was kept, and tractor-ownership was almost universal by the mid-1950s.

Tyn-y-llwyn 1938, © National Museum of Wales

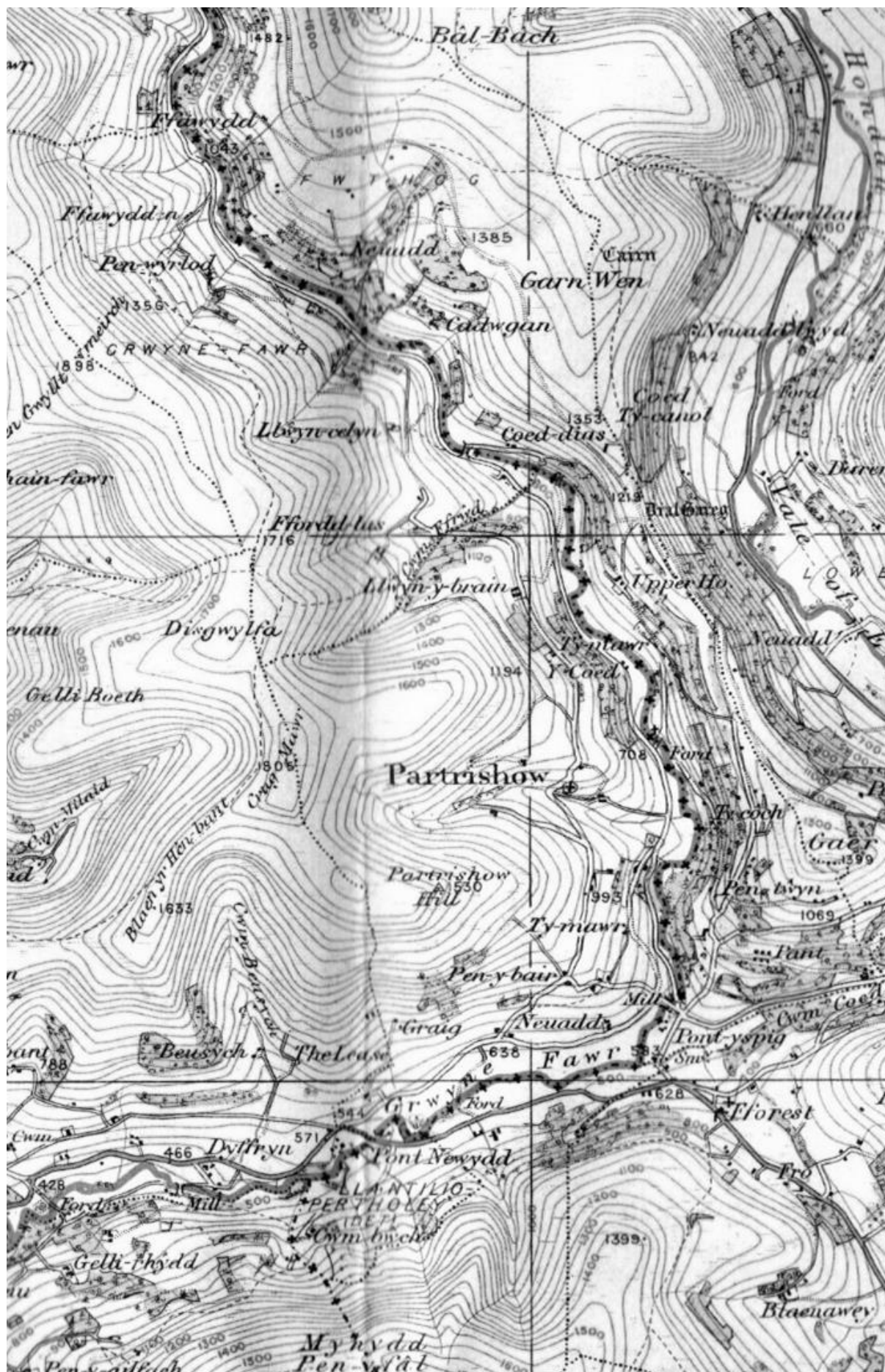
¹ In 2019. Covid has so far prevented a return.

² Unidentified, possibly Graig, abandoned in the 1850s and farmed with Llwynon.

³ Evan Powell at Tynyllwyn was a grandson of John Powell, the owner in 1840, but had bought the farm in 1927.

⁴ ? Grange Farm, Llantilio Crossenny.

⁵ L S McCaw and E J Howell 'The Black Mountains', *The Land of Britain: Report of the Land Utilisation Survey, Part 37*, Brecon, 1943, p.415



OS one inch to the mile. Sheet 91, 'Abergavenny and District,' 1919.

Author's Summary of MAF 32/1287/29

Ministry of Food, National Farm Survey, individual farm records, Breconshire: Parish No. 29: Partrishow

Farm Name	Occupier	Owner	Acre age	Stock	Arable	Inspector's comments
Gwernybustach	W B Bevan	Rev. Williams, Plas Genevieve	55	10 cattle, 103 sheep, 52 poultry	None	
Llwynon and Pencai	E C Powell	R & D Powell, Craig-y- bwla	77	13 cattle, 432 sheep, 4 pigs, 240 poultry, 3 horses	None	
Coed and Neuadd[wen]	D J Thomas	Miss Baker Gabb	123	15 cattle, 142 sheep, 2 pigs, 152 poultry, 6 horses	10 acres oats and wheat	
Pontyspig	John Lewis	John Lewis	93	13 cattle, 122 sheep, 2 horses	9 acres oats and wheat	Occupies some Gwernybustach land, condition of farmhouse fair
Blaennant	G Gwillim	Mr Price Trewysgoed	37	5 cattle, 78 sheep, 2 pigs, 34 poultry, 2 horses		
Neuadd	J A Marchant	J A Marchant	27	6 cattle, 73 sheep, 100 poultry, 1 horse		
Pen-y-bair	John Jones	John Jones	25	4 cattle, 57 sheep, 20 poultry, 1 horse		
Gellywelltog	Mrs Parsons	Mrs Parsons	42	7 cattle, 63 sheep, 50 poultry		Farmhouse etc. good

Tyroen [Ty'r ywen]	C J Price	C J Price	94 ½	28 cattle, 408 sheep, 2 pigs, 50 poultry, 2 horses	Some oats and barley grown	Also occupying Milaid Isaf and part Tyn-y-llwyn, 110 acres
Llwyn-y-brain	J Thomas	Miss Baker Gabb	98	7 cattle, 47 sheep, 2 pigs, 67 poultry, 2 horses		
Tyn-y-llwyn	1, Mr A Pugh 2. Evan Powell 3. C J Price	Evan Powell	100	Evan Powell had 2 pigs, 65 poultry, 1 horse on 6 acres		74 acres of Tyn-y-llwyn land occupied by C J Price of Tyroen. The rest by Mr A Pugh, of The Grange, Llantillio
Penwyrlod	John James	Forestry Commissio n	42	9 cattle, 47 sheep, 2 pigs, 67 poultry, 2 horses		Also farming Fawydd on the Ffwdog.
Llwyncelyn	Mr A Pugh	Forestry Commissio n	60	17 cattle, 188 sheep, 110 poultry, 4 horses		Will probably be planted by Forestry Commission soon
Ffawyddden	Mr E Powell	Forestry Commissio n	10	3 cattle, 24 sheep, 2 pigs, 50 poultry, 1 horse		Now divided – this tenant has 10 acres
Fforddlas Fawr	W W Williams	Forestry Commissio n	120	15 cattle, 139 sheep, 2 pigs, 50 poultry, 1 horse	3 acres of oats grown, 1941	Farmhouse good, well water; land fair to bad, infested with rats, mice, rooks

Sheep Sales at Court Farm

Douglas Wright photographed sheep sales for a number of years during the later 20th century. They are a reminder of a time that has changed dramatically.

These are two different sales, both held at Court Farm, Llanthony in the late 1970s or early 1980s. The well-known figure of the late John Games, Auctioneer, is very prominent in the lower photograph.



Russell James has identified many of those in the photographs, with where they had come from.



Top: amongst those admiring the Suffolk ewes, are Mike Lewis and his father-in-law Alfred from Llandewi Rhydderch, Mr Johnstone from Grosmont, Gordon Watkins from Tal Sarn and Mr Collins from Pandy.

Bottom: John Games in the centre, with Ted from The Vison on his right. His son Nick Games on his left, and Oliver Chandler, Skirrid, Mr Romsey, Abergavenny and Glyn Watkins Longton.

The hurdles were from Abergavenny Market.

Two of the Three Castles.

On 18th August 2021 members and friends visited the two very contrasting castles of White Castle and Grosmont. We were led by Wales's pre-eminent specialist in castles, Dr John Kenyon.

White Castle was built as part of the trio of castles (the third is Skenfrith) built by the Normans to exercise control in the Welsh Marches. It is a strongly fortified structure, rebuilt in the 13th century, and probably held most of the men and armaments based in the area.



top White Castle

Grosmont was also rebuilt in the 13th century, but was remodelled as a noble residence a century later, ironically the strength of White Castle was never tested, but Grosmont was besieged in 1404 and 1405 during Owain Glyndŵr's uprising. Both castles are now in the care of CADW

It was a delight to be able to get out and visit these sites after so much restriction owing to the pandemic.



Left and above Grosmont

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

01873 890 609



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