

Abergavenny Local History Society



ABERGAVENNY TALES AND TRAILS

More stories from the past for children to share with adults

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Here is our second collection of stories from the past for children to read alone or share with an adult. They include lots of different things to do and to look up (if you want to) and places for you to visit, so you can see where some of the stories took place.

We hope you discover things about Abergavenny's past that you didn't know before and that the stories lead to questions and discussions about how the people in our town used to live. Some of the stories include difficult subjects and attitudes that show how sometimes people in the past thought in ways that we do not find acceptable now. If you find these things upsetting, do please find somebody you can talk to about them.

If you decide to write your own story, paint a picture, invent a game, or if you have simply enjoyed the stories and want to tell us, please email us at alhs@live.co.uk.

And don't forget, you can find a new tale every month on the children's page of the ALHS website <https://www.abergavennylocalhistorysociety.org.uk/young-ALHS-1/>

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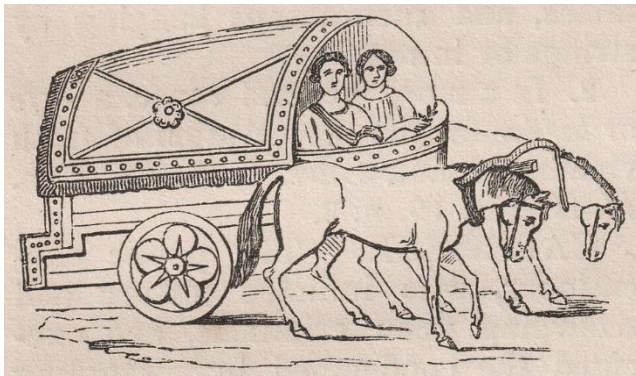
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THE CUP

This story takes place about 120 C.E. There are lots of things for you to look up about Roman times. Most of them are in italic letters.*

Whooooaaaa!!!

The *carpentum* creaked to a halt as the driver pulled the reins and stopped the mules. Aemilia unwrapped her *stola* from round her face (the road had been very dusty) and looked out of the window. She could see the gates of a fort, with a squad of soldiers on guard. She shook Rhiannon, who was huddled up beside her. “We’ve arrived! This is *Gobannium*!” Rhiannon unwrapped herself. “Thank every God there ever was”! she muttered. “My poor backside really couldn’t take any more bumping!”



A Roman Carpentum

The journey from *Isca* had taken all day (despite a short stop at *Burrium* to change mules and grab something to eat and drink) and although the *carpentum* had cushions, it had no springs. It was a rather up-market vehicle, and Aemilia and Rhiannon were only able to use it because Aemilia’s brother Lucius was *tribune* in charge of an *auxilliary cohort* of Spanish cavalry currently based at *Gobannium* and the carriage had to be

taken there anyway. All the same, Aemilia would rather have used her little pony, *Cursor*, who was back home in his field in *Venta Silurum*, but Rhiannon had said that it would not be ladylike to ride. And in any case, she refused to do any such thing at her time of life.

Not that Rhiannon was *very* old she was a little over thirty and very clever. She had been Aemilia’s mother’s slave and had been Aemilia’s nurse, carer, teacher and companion for almost 10 years. She had been given her freedom when Aemilia’s mother, *Claudia Flaviana*, had died of a summer fever three years ago, and so was now a *liberta*, but as a member of the *familia*, she still looked after the fast-growing girl. Aemilia was just over 11 years old and the youngest of the family. Her father, *Gaius Aemilius Constantius*, had been *Primus Pilus* of the Second Legion, based at *Isca*. He had retired five years ago and had been awarded *Equestrian* status, a large area of land and quite a lot of money. He was now leader of the civic council in *Venta Silurum*. He had been summoned to attend a meeting in *Eboracum* with the Emperor *Hadrian* about troubles in the North of *Brigantia*. His sister *Cornelia* lived near *Gobannium*, where Rhiannon also had relatives, so it was suggested that Aemilia should visit her aunt and uncle, accompanied by Rhiannon.

So! Here they were! Each picked up her *loculus* containing necessary bits and pieces and they got out of the *carpentum*. Suddenly, there was a shriek of “YooHoo!!!” and Aemilia saw her cousin *Laurentina* rushing across the road from the *canabae* opposite. Aemilia ran to her and they hugged – in the middle of a rather busy road! Both Rhiannon and Aunt *Cornelia* yelled at the same time “Get out of the road, you silly girls”. *Cornelia* had a *raeda* waiting nearby, and a slave collected their travel boxes and

carried them over to it. It was a bit less posh than the *carpentum*, but they wouldn't be in it very long.

Uncle Marcus Laurentius Scaevola and Aunt Cornelia lived a short way out of town, where they had a farm and villa – and a bathhouse. Aemilia, Rhiannon and Laurentina had lovely long wallow in the *caldarium*, and afterwards they joined Lucius, Cornelia and Uncle Marcus for a wonderful meal. Lucius said that next week, he would be leading a convoy to the gold mines at Dolaucothi, near Ymddyfri, far to the west, to take supplies and to bring back gold which had been mined there. Uncle Marcus was *Camp Prefect* at Gobannium, and was on standby in case Emperor Hadrian needed more troops in Brigantia.

The next morning was bright and beautiful. Lucius and Marcus went back to the camp. Rhiannon went off to visit some of her relatives, and Laurentia's *Silurian* friends Angharad and Epponina came to visit, riding small, shaggy British ponies and leading two others. "They're from my father's farm", said Angharad. "They're called Araf and Baris", said Epponina. "That means Slow and Greedy, and they live up to their names. Get dressed for riding, both of you. I thought we might go up the hill this morning, Laurentina. My dad and my brother are going up to check on the charcoal burners." The cousins didn't need asking twice, and rushed off to get changed. Soon they were all riding steadily up a well-used hillside track through a managed forest of *pollarded* trees. "They only cut off the branches to make charcoal", said Angharad, "they don't cut down whole trees, otherwise there would be none left".

They could see smoke ahead, and there was a strong smell of burning wood in the air and the sound of wood being chopped. "Soon be there" said Epponina to Aemilia. "My dad is a master ironsmith in the town, and they have a big contract for the legion. They need a lot of charcoal, so he'll be ordering some more."

As they turned a bend in the track, just ahead they could see two men digging a deep hole. "Are they charcoal makers?" asked Aemilia. "No way!" said Epponina. "That's Dylan and Rawn, two local layabouts. It's quite a surprise to see them doing any work at all – they're usually hanging around in the marketplace outside the fort. They obviously haven't seen us, or they would be over here begging for money."

When they reached the charcoal furnace it was like a human anthill. There were workers milling around everywhere, some building a new furnace, some stacking charcoal and some loading a huge four-wheeled *plaustrum*, pulled by four oxen. One of the charcoal men, who knew Angharad and Epponina, came over and brought the girls some grilled venison on sticks. Chewing happily, they walked over to meet Brân, Epponina's father, and Llew, her brother (who was an iron founder). Brân was a pleasant man and said that he and Llew would be tied up with the charcoal business for a couple of days, but suggested that Aemilia and the other girls might come into Gobannium the day after tomorrow to see the smithy at work.

Next day, they all walked down through the fields to the river Isca to see Angharad's father's fish traps (he had a big fish farm in the valley), then back to the villa to drink fruit juice and play *robbers* and *twelve lines*. Rhiannon joined in some of the games. None of the girls had more than a *dupondius* or two, but Rhiannon was quite clear that they shouldn't play for money. In any case, she was almost unbeatable at robbers and would have won it all easily.

By coincidence, it was in the middle of a game of robbers that a rider came with an urgent message for Uncle Marcus. Apparently, a rich landowner and his son had been robbed on the road about 5 miles out of town. They had been driving a *cisium*, taking some gold tableware to their home in *Magnis*. The road was blocked by a fallen tree and two robbers had rushed out and grabbed the man's purse and ring and the box of gold. They had even snatched the son's *bulla* from the gold chain round his neck, before riding off at speed. The *bulla* was a particular loss, because it was a family heirloom, a gold ball containing the gold ring the boy's great grandfather had been awarded when he had been promoted to equestrian status in the time of the emperor Domitian. Marcus contacted Lucius to ask him to send a cavalry patrol along the *Magnis* Road, but by the end of the day, there was still no sign of the robbers or the gold.

The next morning, after all this excitement, the girls got together again and rode into town to see Brân's ironworks. Llew showed them round. It was most impressive – and very noisy. There were big charcoal furnaces with bellows working away. Several workers were making spear tips. Brân was overseeing some men making soldiers' mail coats. This was very difficult work and worth a lot of money, so they didn't want to distract him too much and eventually walked down to the market area in front of the fort. Two rough-looking men were outside a *caupona* and seemed to be quite drunk. "That's Dylan and Rawn again" said Angharad. "I wonder where they got the money to be drinking so early in the day?"



Drinking in a Caupona

One of them had what looked like a spherical *bulla*, which might have been gold. It was held round his neck by a piece of rather grubby string. "Why is he wearing that *bulla*?" asked Epponina. "Our people only wear them when they are children. He's been married for years!" The other seemed to have a broad gold ring on his finger. "I don't think he ought to be wearing that ring," said Aemilia. "He's not entitled to it. He's not an equestrian, after all!" And then she suddenly realised! It was as if a lamp had lit up inside her head! "Come on, girls" she said, and rushed across the road to the gate of the fort, followed by the other three.

The sentry came out to her and asked what she wanted. "Please may I speak to Tribune Lucius Aemilius Constantius? It's very urgent! He's my brother, by the way." The sentry sent a man to the camp *praetorium*. Lucius soon came out and asked what on earth was the matter. "We think we've found your highway robbers", said Aemilia. She explained about the *bulla* and the ring and the hole up on the hill and then pointed to Dylan and Rawn, still drinking outside the *caupona*.

Lucius turned to the guard and called out "*Vexilatio ad signa: Intente!*" (*Squad form up! Attention!*) The guards formed up and stood to attention. He ordered the *optio* to take his squad and seize the two drinkers, who were dragged to the camp by the soldiers. "Lock them up!" He turned back to the girls, who were very impressed by the whole business. "What about this hole in the ground? Can you lead us to it?"

This was getting better and better! The girls collected their ponies and then led Lucius and a ten-man squad of cavalry up the hill to where they had seen Dylan and Rawn digging. It didn't take long to uncover a wooden box which contained metal plates and cups. Lucius picked a plate up and looked at it closely. Yes! Gold!



The Leopard Cup before conservation

Back in the villa, there was a special dinner for all of them that night - in the very best *triclinium*, even including wine (with lots of water, of course). And there were guests. The rich man from Magnis came, together with his son (who had been reunited with his precious bulla). Afterwards, the man gave each of the girls 100 *denarii* and he also gave Aemilia a beautiful bronze cup, with a handle shaped like a leopard with amber eyes.

And Dylan and Rawn? They were brought before Uncle Marcus, who found them guilty of highway robbery. They should have gone to the lions in the amphitheatre at Isca, but Lucius suggested "Well, if they are so fond of gold, they can come with me to Dolaucothi and be sentenced to spend their lives as mining slaves". Which they did!

Things to Do

Abergavenny Museum is a good place to start. There are no actual treasures, but a lot of interesting finds from local excavations.

The site of the Gobannium fort is near the museum, where there is now a car park.

Then there is the village of Caerleon (Isca Silurum), where you can visit the National Roman Legion Museum, as well as the bath house, the Amphitheatre and the legionary barracks. It's really a whole day trip, and very interesting.

The town of Caerwent (Venta Silurum) is also well worth a visit. It was a regional capital and still has some of the original Roman walls.

Aemilia's prize leopard cup was excavated at Llantilio Pertholey, near Abergavenny, in 2005. It's now in the National Museum of Wales, St. Fagans, near Cardiff.

A really exciting long-distance trip is to the Roman gold mines at Dolaucothi, Pumsaint, Llanwrda, Carmarthenshire, SA19 8US. You can even pan for gold!

* *C.E. (Current Era) and B.C.E. (Before Current Era) is a way used nowadays to write dates instead of A.D. and B.C. But the dates themselves are exactly the same as dates written as A.D. or B.C.*

The Visit of King Charles 1st

This story is set in 1645, during the Civil War



Owain and I thought the traveller was going to shout at Mother when she asked him to move out of his room (the best in the inn) and share with another man so the newly arrived couple could have a room to themselves. But when the traveller looked up to see who these interlopers were, he saw a gentleman and a lady. As the lady turned sideways she showed her swollen belly.

“Mercy!” cried the traveller, “She looks ready to drop that babe at any moment!” Mother murmured that she had been told it wasn’t due for several weeks and she really hoped that she wouldn’t need to send out for a midwife in the middle of the night. She thought it might be twins. She knows all about that as Owain and I are twins, nine years old. We live in the Golden Lion Inn in Frogmore Street, just outside the North Gate, with our parents. Our father is the landlord and famous for his excellent ales. He rents the inn from Mr Thomas Watkins.

The traveller leaned towards his manservant and said “Tomos, move our belongings into whatever room our good landlady suggests.” Tomos went to the bottom of the stairs where Betsi the maid was waiting with a candle. As she showed him upstairs he could hear the newcomer’s chests being carried up after him. He quickly moved their travel bags into the next room. They would have to share with only one other man and his servant so it could have been a lot worse. On our busiest nights it can be three to a bed. In the best room the servants were already putting the sheets that they had brought with them on to the bed. Back downstairs Tomos told his master that they were sharing with the rather swarthy man sitting over in the far corner. Betsi had told him that the swarthy man was a regular customer and would not cause them any problems. Owain and I had already had to move out of the bedroom we use when we can, as we always have to sleep elsewhere when the inn is busy. I usually take my bed into our parent’s room but Owain prefers to sleep in the kitchen. Mother won’t let us sleep on our flock beds in the kitchen as she says we will get grease on them. So we have to use the straw beds. I don’t like to do that as there are always sharp bits sticking into me in the night.

Owain and I went out to the stables to see the new horses. It was very full out here with the pack horses, a fine chestnut stallion with a white forefoot, and a lovely white mare. Joseph, the stableman was rubbing down the stallion and muttering about it having a slight limp. Owain was rubbing down the mare. I took another cloth and started rubbing down one of the pack horses. The white mare nuzzled me in a friendly way while I worked. We heard in the morning that the gentleman had come down to check the horses late in the evening and was pleased that Joseph was looking after them so well. Joseph had rubbed some of his special liniment on the stallion’s leg so the gentleman was really impressed that Joseph had noticed the limp and treated it.

The night passed without any alarms and in the morning I found Owain washing himself under the pump (I use a bowl of water upstairs, like Mother does). Joseph had found out a lot about the gentleman and lady. He said they were on their way to Raglan as the King is expected to arrive at Raglan Castle very soon. The gentleman was hoping

to get the King's attention and win his favour so he could become part of the King's entourage. Soon the chests were packed and loaded on to the horses and Joseph was grinning broadly as the gentleman had given him a generous reward for his treatment of the stallion. The lady was hauled up on to her horse where she seemed to balance unsteadily. But she still managed to look elegant and like a gentlewoman. Betsi had been told she was riding because she found a carriage too bouncy and uncomfortable. We all watched them head off towards the Raglan road.

After that things were quiet for a few days. Then the next excitement was that we heard that the King had arrived at Raglan having travelled from Hereford. The royal party stayed at Raglan Castle for about three weeks and we heard that they played bowls a lot. We hoped that our gentleman and lady had been received kindly by the King.

Then suddenly the whole town was buzzing with the news that the King was coming here, to Abergavenny! He was to stay with the Gunters at the Priory and we were told that Mistress Gunter had sent out to all the farms and provisioners to get the best possible supplies. We saw ducks being herded up the road and a man carrying rabbits, all heading towards the Priory. James Gunter has the biggest and most richly furnished house in town. It is said that he owns several carpets and that he even has an armchair with the seat, back and arms all padded with horsehair and flock, and covered in rich Turkey fabric. I would love to see that.

One day we heard shouts and cheers coming from across the town and Owain shouted, "Come on, Sybyl, it must be the King arriving." I grabbed a handful of my skirts and we both ran at full tilt all around the town on the path beside the Cibi, to the Priory. James Gunter had ridden out on the Raglan road to meet the King and escort him back to the Priory and after a while we saw the horses appear. All the riders were wearing cloaks as it was raining a bit, so it was difficult to see which one was the King. Owain was disappointed that he wasn't wearing a crown, but one gentleman had more feathers in his hat so we thought that must be him. We could see Mistress Gunter waiting outside the Priory door and James Gunter jumped from his horse even before it had stopped and rushed to present his wife to the King. Mistress Gunter gave a very deep curtsy then courteously drew the royal party inside while the horses were led away. Owain pointed out the chestnut stallion with the white forefoot so we knew that our gentleman had won the favour he'd been seeking and joined the King's entourage. We felt very pleased for him. Perhaps he was good at playing bowls. We ran back to the Golden Lion to tell Father, Mother and Betsi all about what we'd seen.

The next day we heard that the King had sent out to all the local gentry to meet him the following day to show their support. Then the King went up to inspect the garrison at the Castle. It isn't a proper garrison as there are too few soldiers there, but we call it that. Once again Owain could hear distant cheering and this time we ran at full tilt through the North Gate then up Rother Street and Tidder Street to the Castle. There were lots of people already waiting and we saw William the cripple boy trying to get somewhere near to where the King would pass. He'd been badly hurt when a cart ran over his leg a year ago. He told us that he'd been told that if he could touch the King's clothing he would be cured and be able to walk again. We didn't think that was very likely but felt we had to help him. We squeezed and elbowed our way through the crowd to help William get to the front. The King's party rode by, but very fast and they rode straight through the Castle gates and the soldiers stopped the people from going in. William was in tears. We waited a very long time while the King carried out his

inspection and the crowds grew thicker. We had difficulty keeping our place at the front but Owain has sharp elbows. Eventually the gates opened and the King came out – on foot! He waved and acknowledged the crowd.

As the King drew closer Owain suddenly shouted out, very loudly, “Over here, your Majesty!” and pointed to William on the ground at our feet. The King came over and patted William on the head and waved a hand at a servant behind him. William quickly grabbed a bit of the King’s cloak as it swished past him. Then the servant dropped a silver penny into Williams hand. We were all so excited and cheered like madmen and Owain and I jumped up and down and William waved his arms about. Then we took William back to the Golden Lion and gave him some ale in front of the kitchen fire while he calmed down after all his excitement. “I touched the King’s cloak!” he kept repeating, “I’ll be able to walk again soon.”



In 1645, William’s silver penny would have looked much less worn than this one! It is about 1cm wide.

The next day the King went out to receive all the gentry he had called together. We weren’t sure where they were meeting but the King’s party did not come by the Golden Lion so we think it was probably at the Bryn. We heard that all the local gentry swore their allegiance and were told they weren’t in any trouble with the King, although some of them had not been very supportive before. After that the King left the town to go on to Monmouth. We heard that he had given orders for our garrison to leave and for the Castle to be slighted so that if the Parliamentarians came they could not use it. But the soldiers we had met had all said the Castle was in such poor condition that no other army would want to use it, so there was no reason to damage it more. They were really glad to go as they would be happier sleeping in a field!

William is still a cripple. He wanted to get a hole made in his silver penny and wear it on a string round his neck as a reminder of the day he met the King. But Father persuaded him to give the penny to Richard Kerby the joiner, who made William a beautiful pair of crutches. So now he can run a few errands for people in the town and earn some money.

We never heard whether the gentleman and his lady had twins or even if they survived the war. And it wasn’t until the following year that the Roundheads arrived in Abergavenny, but that is another story....

Why don’t you:

Visit Abergavenny Castle and look at the panel showing King Charles’ visit.

Visit the Tithe Barn and find out about Richard Symonds Civil War diary.

Visit Gunter Mansion to learn about the Gunters and 17th Century Abergavenny.

Find out where the Gates in the Town Wall used to be.

The Golden Lion used to be on the corner of Frogmore Street and Lion Street, where the vape shop is now. Try to imagine what the area might have looked like in 1645.

References:

The Diary of Sir Henry Slingsby,

<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=lKpCAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>

The Legend of Guto Nyth Brân or Gruffydd Morgan

The famous 18th Century runner had many legends to his name

My name is Ioan, I am 11 years old and live in Abergavenny. I want to share with you the legend of Guto Nyth Brân and the Nos Galan Road Race. A legend is an old and well-known story or stories told by people a long time ago about a special person or place.

Just before Christmas my dad's friend Dafydd came to stay with us for a few days. He is a marathon runner and this year he will run the Nos Galan Road Race in Mountain Ash. 'What is the Nos Galan Road Race?' I asked. Dafydd told me that the Nos Galan Road Race has been run every year on New Year's Eve since 1958, well except between 1973 and 1984 when it was banned because of traffic clogging up the road. Dafydd went on to tell me that in 1950 Bernard Baldwin a PE, games and music teacher at Mill Street Secondary School in Pontypridd had discovered the legend of Guto Nyth Brân, an incredibly fast runner in the 1700s. Being a runner himself, Bernard wanted to celebrate Guto's life and achievements and so set up the Nos Galan Road Race. 'Who was Guto Nyth Brân?' I thought. My curiosity was awakened, so Dafydd and I started to explore the legend.

Guto Nyth Brân, whose real name was Gruffydd (Griffith) Morgan, was born in 1700 in Llwyncelyn, now part of the village of Porth in Rhondda Cynon Taf. At a young age he and his family moved to Nyth Brân Farm, (meaning Crow's Nest), from which he gets his famous name. During his short lifetime (for Guto died in 1737, aged 37, as we shall discover later), it is believed he performed many amazing running feats. The tales (which form the legend) from many people are told here. I wonder how many of these I can really believe? As a young boy Guto was said to run so fast he could catch young sheep, or a low flying bird. One story said his mother sent him on an errand to Pontypridd (about 11.3 km/7 miles) as she started to prepare breakfast, but he arrived home before the kettle on the fire had boiled. On another occasion Guto's mother asked him to deliver a message in Aberdare (a trip there and back of about 25.7 km/16 miles), while she met up with friends. However, to her surprise Guto was already home when she returned to prepare his dinner. Her completed request proved to her that the message had been delivered. Another story involved his father asking Guto to bring the sheep down from the mountain into the farmyard with the help of the sheep dogs. It is said Guto refused to take the dogs and brought the sheep down into the yard in a short space of time, also chasing and catching a hare on the way.

Guto was much admired when he ran about 85.3km/53 miles with the Llanwynno hunt, chasing a fox all the way to Llanwrtyd in Cardiganshire (now called Ceredigion). By the time they reached a man's house at dusk, Guto and the hounds were too tired to catch the fox. Other stories state Guto caught the fox by the tip of its tail. There are also stories that Guto won a race against the same man's horse, winning a lot of money for himself and winning back the money this man had lost on a bet. Some stories reported that Guto prepared for his races by sleeping on a pile of warm horse manure in front of the stable, where the natural heat helped to relax his limbs and muscles. Other people believed that Guto was able to blow out a candle and get into bed before it went dark. His amazing talent was recognised by Guto's friend Siân o'r Siop (meaning Sian from the Shop) who became his manager and trainer. Guto's first competitive race, organised by Siân, was against an English Army Captain, who was

stationed at Hirwaun. Guto easily won the 6.4km/4-mile race on Hirwaun Common, his winnings amounting to £400 or £500 (over £76,000 or over £96,000 today), depending on which story you read. This was a huge amount of money in the 1700s. It was said that Siân and Guto fell in love as he won more and more races and prize money. As he became so successful at winning his races it became more and more difficult to find a suitable opponent, so before Guto was 30 years old the couple decided to retire from racing, until 1737 that is, when Guto was 37 years old.

In 1737 Siân persuaded Guto to run one more race against a younger runner called Prince of Bedwas. The race of about 19 km/12 miles started at St Woolos Church, Newport and finished at St Barrwg's Church in Bedwas which was on top of a steep hill. At the start Guto trailed behind Prince, but he chose his moment to move, and raced ahead up the hill it is said 'like a deer' to win the race in 53 minutes and collect the 1000 guineas (or £1050, around £200,100 today) prize money. Others, and especially Siân, who had bet on the race won even larger amounts of money. But Guto was not to celebrate his win, for the story goes that a very excited Siân thumped him on the back and Guto died in her arms, possibly due to a heart attack caused by the tough race.

He was buried in St Gwynno's Church in Llanwonno, Pontypridd and a flat slab engraved with his name, year of death, age and a heart was placed over the grave. In 1866, 129 years after Guto's death, an upright headstone was bought and erected by Evan Thomas and others. The inscription was written in Welsh by Gwilym Glanffrwd and Meudwy Glan Elai. Both men were poets and were involved in the local and national Eisteddfodau. A translation by Bryn Evans reads:

IN MEMORY
OF GRIFFITH MORGAN
of Nythbran in this Parish who
died in the year 1737
at 37 years of age.

He was a great runner
He defeated one called PRINCE of
Bedwas Parish in a race
of 12 Miles which he completed in
7 minutes within the hour.

An active runner and brave –
a giant who always won
was Gruffydd, and his praise shall be
Glorious man, everlasting (GWILYM GLANFFRWD).

This stone and wording were placed to signify love
On his dust by his countrymen
To do justice to his memory (MEUDWY GLAN ELAI)
EVAN THOMAS, Nantddyrus,
Llanwyno with the aid of
charitable friends raised this
memorial in the year 1866.



*Grave of Guto Nyth Brân at
St Gwynno's Church
with permission from Hywel George*

So having found out about Guto's life and death it's time to get back to the Nos Galan Road Race, which honours Guto. Before the race can begin a ritual is carried out, starting with a church service at St Gwynno's church, then a mystery runner lays a wreath on Guto Nyth Brân's grave. The mystery runner, representing Guto's spirit, then runs the 6.4 km/4 miles to Mountain Ash, the same distance Guto ran in his first competitive race, carrying a lighted torch. The Nos Galan Beacon is then lit from the torch which signals the start of the race. The first race was held on 31 December 1958 with 101 runners taking part. The mystery runner was Thomas Richards who won a silver medal in the marathon at the 1948 Olympic Games. Eight hundred runners took part in 2009. By 2016, the number of runners had risen to 1,600 and in 2017, 1700 runners took part and so on during the following years until the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021.

I was 7 years old then and remember having my school lessons at home. I couldn't meet up with my friends or my grandparents because of the government rules to stop the virus spreading. It was a very difficult time for everyone. But the Nos Galan Race was still run during those times. Dafydd told me that a Virtual Race was organised in 2020. 'What is a Virtual Race'? I wondered. Dafydd explained that the competitors were allowed to run the race in sections over the whole of December, either outside following the government rules or indoors on a treadmill. The race had to be filmed or photographed, which then had to be uploaded to the Nos Galan website <https://www.rctcbc.gov.uk/EN/Events/NosGalan/NosGalanRoadRace.aspx>. The medals and T-shirts were still awarded. In 2020 over 2,600 people booked a place to run the race, but there was no mystery runner and 1,500 people took part in 2021. Last year, on 31 December 2024, almost 1,350 runners ran the race. There are now six separate races with different distances for different age groups. The races raise money for the Rhondda Cynon Taf Mayor's chosen charity or charities.

The mystery runner for 2024 was Lauren Price MBE, Wales's first female champion boxer and Olympic Gold medallist. Over recent years many famous people have been the mystery runners including Nigel Owens MBE, the international rugby union referee (2019), the Paralympian Dame Tanni Grey Thompson (2021), rugby players George North (2022) and Gareth Thomas CBE and footballer Laura McAllister CBE (both in 2023). Every year the race is supported by thousands of spectators who come to encourage and cheer the runners on. The race has changed since 1958 though. The first race was planned to finish at midnight on New Year's Day, but now the race finishes at 9pm to allow everyone to celebrate and enjoy the evening. Guto's legend lives on through poems and songs from the Mountain Ash Eisteddfod in 1859. There is a blue plaque at St Gwynno's church, a slate plaque at St Barrwg's church in Bedwas and a Memorial Trail through St Gwynno's Forest. A bronze statue of Guto Nyth Brân was unveiled in Oxford Street, Mountain Ash in 1990. Now if I have to do a school project about Guto, I have all the information from my dad's friend. I won't need to use an app or the teaching aids from school!

However, as Dafydd explained these stories were written in Welsh in a book called *Glanffrwd Hanes Plywf Llanwonno* (Glanffrwd's History of Llanwonno) by Gwilyn Glanffrwd, the name on the headstone and the bardic name of the Reverend William Thomas, a long time ago in 1888. These stories may have changed or been elaborated over the years (like the game Chinese Whispers) or in translations from 'old' to modern Welsh and from Welsh into English. But what do you think about the stories? Are they



Statue of Guto Nyth Brân in Mountain Ash
With permission from: Hywel George, Cynon

believable? Is there enough information in the stories? For instance, taking the story of the kettle, we don't know the size of the kettle, how much water was in it, or how hot the fire was, all things that would affect how fast the water boiled. Was the horse Guto raced against old or young, a horse working on the farm, or a highly bred horse used for racing? How near to the bed was the candle? Does his death tell us to respect life more than money? What about his statue? How do we know what Guto Nyth Brân looked like? There were no cameras or mobile phones in the 1700s. Despite these doubts, Guto certainly existed and was an incredible athlete it seems for people to talk and write about him all those years ago.

Perhaps I will enter the Nos Galan Road Race next year! I certainly want to see Guto's statue, visit St Gwynno's church to see his grave and perhaps walk the Trail. I hope you will be inspired by my story to do the same.

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A LIFE ON NARROWBOATS

What's the difference between a narrowboat and a barge? This is not the start of a hopeless joke. But it may be the start of an interesting story of life on a boat on a canal.

I discovered that a narrowboat is usually less than 7 feet wide (2.13 metres). A barge is always more than seven feet wide¹. In the early years of canal transport, it would have been considered very insulting to call a narrowboat “a barge”. Today, the image of a narrowboat, with its decorations and brightly coloured paint sounds better than the image of a barge, which conjures up a picture of a large open “bath” shaped metal object, open to the elements and probably slightly rusting. The maximum length of a narrowboat is 72 feet (21.95 metres). The length and width of a narrowboat was made deliberately – someone clever worked out that this was the biggest size that could safely go through the many locks on our canals - not just here in Monmouthshire, but throughout Britain.

Of course they were originally built to carry cargo rather than people – especially coal and limestone. The lime was especially needed for the increased building work. You can see still the remains of lime kilns on our Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal – there are some near Goytre Wharf and some more in Llangattock near Crickhowell. If you look inside (and outside) a canal boat today, it is very easy to forget why the narrowboat was built in the first place. The original design of a narrowboat is generally thought to have been ‘invented’ by James Brindley. Mr Brindley was an engineer who lived in Derbyshire in the 18th century and he was kept busy working on the design and routes of canals that were being built across Britain at that time. He was also in charge of building the very first lock, near the present-day city of Liverpool. The size of that first lock set the size of the narrowboat.

The earliest narrowboats were made of wood. They did not have engines, but were pulled by horses. No-one would have imagined people using the towpaths for walking or cycling. They were made for work and the horses pulled the boats along behind them. Sometimes the youngest member of the crew would be in charge of guiding the horse on the path. Try to imagine someone of about your age, leading a horse on a wet muddy path, trying to encourage the horse to keep moving and not be tempted by a nice large clump of grass growing nearby.

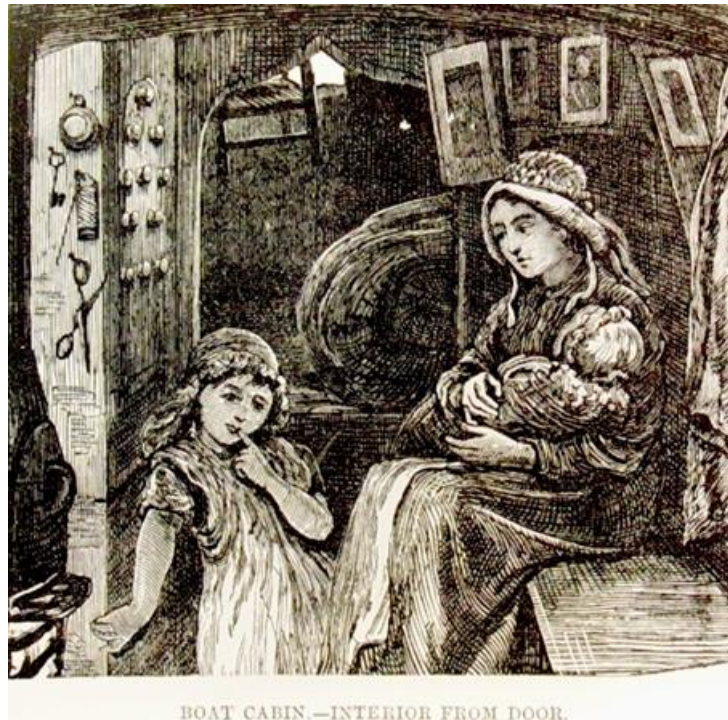


This black and white photo from around the beginning of 20th century shows a child leading a horse and the horse is pulling the boat. Behind the long narrowboat is a smaller, loaded barge as well. A lot of weight for “one horsepower”

By the 19th century, the boats were built of iron and steel, although traditional wooden ones were made into the 20th century and a few are still afloat today².

So who lived in a boat like this? In the early 19th century, it would only have been the “skipper” or boatman. The rest of the family lived in a cottage near the canal. It was hard work, long days and there was little money to spare. A big change came when narrowboats were powered by steam in the late 19th century. Then about 100 years’ ago, in the 1920’s, steam was replaced by diesel engines³. Horses were no longer needed and we want to believe they had a lovely retirement in a sunny field. The boat owner and his family no longer had to worry about keeping and feeding the horse or walking for miles on the towpath in all weathers.

Inside and outside, the boats would be painted in bright colours and filled with all the things needed to make it feel like a home. Traditional decorations included pictures of castles and roses, both inside and outside. These can still sometimes be seen in today’s narrowboats. If you are visiting the canal, look out for any boats that may have pictures painted on them. Meanwhile, the inside of the boat is often shown with a warm stove, a steaming kettle, gleaming brass, lace and decorated plates and other household items⁴.



BOAT CABIN.—INTERIOR FROM DOOR.

An interesting way to keep things - there are scissors, a key, and other items, hanging on nails.

Engraving of a woman with her baby little girl. What is the child thinking about? What is her mother thinking about?



The story of a working narrowboat goes downhill from here. With the invention of railways, there could only be one winner. The new steam trains could go faster and carry much bigger loads. For a while, canal boats attempted much longer journeys to try to compete with the railways. Now if the family wanted to stay together, they all had to live on the boat. The boatman – who was the only member of the family earning money – had to be away from

This old photograph shows an amazing amount of hanging plates, photographs and other decorations. The baby seems to be neatly stored on a shelf as well.



home sometimes for many weeks. Having the whole family together in the narrowboat became the only way to be able to continue making a living from the canal. This may sound exciting, but it was a very small space to live in, to cook and eat and to sleep. Because they did not stay in one place, the children were unable to go to school and they would often grow up being unable to read or write³. A large family squeezed into this space, sleeping in one tiny cabin after a long working day, would not have been easy nor as much fun as the old paintings or photographs sometimes like to show us.

A photograph from 1950 – A Woman in Narrowboat Cabin/kitchen.

She doesn't look very happy – not surprising with so little space to keep things.

The narrowboats you see on our canal today may look like the working boats of the 19th century. But only on the outside. Inside they are very different. The best boats have central heating, proper flush toilets, showers and all the kitchen fittings you will find in your own home. The traditional narrowboat, that was once a hard place to live and work, is now a comfortable space to enjoy a holiday and watch the world of today's canals go by.



A very different kitchen/cabin in a modern boat.

Photo with kind permission of Beacon Park Boats Llangattock

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A Spoke in the Wheel

Clever thinking by a young worker on the Abergavenny to Hereford Tramway

“Short one for you today, Dai”, said Jac Gruffydd the Bailey’s Warehouse loading clerk, looking at his order book. “Two drams: one of coal and a ton of pig iron for the smithy at Llanfihangel.” Dai Morgan looked up from signing the docket. “What does Dewi Williams want with all that iron? That’s a lot of horseshoes, bytty!!!” Jac smiled. “The Jones boys are taking another load as well today, and there’s a lot more for you as well, if you want to take it. It’s something to do with the new steam railway they’re building from Newport to Hereford”.

Jac turned to face a young lad standing just behind Dai. “Hear that, boyo? I don’t think it will be too long before the trains will be running. You’re going to need another job before you’re much older!” Jac’s brother Ianto was 13 years old and had left school last year to become an apprentice tram driver. He looked at the two men and said “Perhaps I’ll get to drive one of those steam engines?” “Well, maybe in a few years’ time, but it’s horses today, bach!”, said his brother. “So just you get down to the dram yard and get our Bryn harnessed up.”

By the time Ianto reached the dram yard, the Jones brothers were already on their way, their horse Dan plodding steadily along the plateway. Tomos and Sion were a friendly, happy-go-lucky pair, but their horse was old and shaggy, and their gear was not well looked after. And many of the other tram men thought they were a bit too fond of a drink to be really safe.



A Typical Dram

Ianto took off Bryn’s nosebag and carefully secured the towing harness. All the leather work was well oiled and the brasswork gleamed in the early morning sun. Bryn’s coat shone almost as much as the brass, and the horse looked fit and ready to start. Dai came over and called out “Dewch i ni fynd!” and they clip-clopped away along the iron plateway. The rails were just over 4 feet apart and held in place by metal bars fixed to rocks bedded into a firm track which gave a good grip to Bryn’s hooves. The tramway was mostly level, though there were a few slopes.

They crossed the bridge over the Usk at Llanffwyst and travelled steadily round the North of Abergavenny to Croesonnen. They were making good time now and Ianto thought they should be back home in Gofilon tonight, rather than camping up by Hereford as they often had to do on the longer trips.

Every so often, they pulled into passing places to make room for drams headed south. Many of these had taken coal to Hereford, and some were now coming back loaded with sacks of barley and hops for Facey’s new brewery in Abergavenny. Dai was an elder in Llanwenarth Baptist Chapel, and was strictly teetotal. So he didn’t really approve of that at all. But he was friends with most of the drivers, and whenever they

stopped for a short chat and to give the horses a rest, Ianto and the other apprentices had a laugh about Jac and Sion Jones and their ramshackle equipment.



*The tramway near Werngifford.
Photo © Alan Bowring*

They were making good time now, and as they went along the tramway past Triley Mill, Ianto and Dai could see signs of work going on beside the track. There were surveyors with their shining brass instruments, marking the line of the new track, whilst gangs of labourers with enormous wheelbarrows were clearing and levelling the land. “Looks as if the Irish navvies have found a lot of new work now the canals are done”, said Dai. “They’re building steam railways all over the country. I’ve heard tell in the chapel that the track between Newport and Abergavenny will soon be finished. And so will we be if we can’t find new business. Old Jac was only partly joking about that!”

For some weeks past, they had been working on Crawshay Bailey’s tramway up the Clydach Gorge to NantyGlo, and now, as they were drawing into Llanfihangel Crucorney, they could see big changes from their last visit. There was a new dram yard in a field near the Skirrid Inn with piles of coal and stacks of pig iron. The old smithy had grown and sparks flew as the smiths worked away. “Wow!”, said Ianto. “Will you look at that? Old Dewi must be rolling in money!” “It’s not Dewi any more”, Dai answered. “That sign over there says it’s the Newport, Abergavenny and Hereford Railway now”.

As they turned off towards the dram yard, they could see other trams still travelling along the main tramway, but the Jones brothers had also turned off ahead of them. They had already unharnessed Bryn and taken him to a small pasture beside the yard. Their drams were still full and just standing unattended in the yard. The track wasn’t very level there and sloped up a little, so one of them had jammed a rock under a wheel while they both headed for the inn.

Dai and Ianto stopped their load in a reasonably level place. They unharnessed Bryn and while Ianto took him off to the pasture, Dai rammed two large wooden wedges under the wheels of the rearmost dram. It wasn’t going anywhere! They would unload after eating their bread and cheese lunch, but meanwhile Dai went off to the temporary office beside the inn to get the delivery receipts signed and to see if there were any new loads for them.

As he walked back, Ianto looked round. A group of children were playing on the line near the Jones’s drams, but they didn’t seem to be doing any harm, so he just watched them. They seemed to be searching for interesting pebbles among the stone ballast of the line, and he remembered what fun that was when he was small.

Suddenly, he realised that the loaded drams were beginning to roll towards the children. The stone under the wheel had either been crushed or had slipped off. Ianto called out. The children looked up and then ran off the track when they saw the drams moving. But one little boy fell, and the drams were now dangerously close to him. Ianto

grabbed Dai's big stick and ran over to the moving drams. He ran alongside and looked carefully and pushed the stick into a space between the spokes of one of the wheels. The stick whizzed round, throwing Ianto to one side, and then jammed in to stop the wheel. The drams slithered to a halt.

A well-dressed man seemed to appear from nowhere. He ran and picked up the child, who was crying with fright, and then came over to Ianto, who was still on the ground, a bit grazed and bloody, but fortunately not seriously hurt. "Thank you, lad – that was good thinking. My son George shouldn't have been there at all, but you almost certainly saved his life". Ianto picked himself up and looked at the gentleman, saying "I had to do something, sir. I'd read there was a saying about putting a spoke in someone's wheel, so I tried it and it worked!"

Just then, Dai came back from the office and saw what had happened. "Are you hurt, Ianto bach?" Ianto just shook his head and said "but your stave will never be the same again, though!" The gentleman turned towards Dai. "Are you his father?" "No! He's my clever little brother", said Dai. The gentleman laughed, then reached in his pocket and took out a business card, which he gave to Dai. It said Robert Williams Esq., Chartered Surveyor and gave an address in Nevill Street, Abergavenny. He said "It's Market Day tomorrow, so I'll be in my office. Bring your brother and we'll see about finding you jobs with a bit of a future to them."

Which is exactly what happened. Mr Williams recommended Dai for a job delivering goods from the new railway station in Abergavenny to farms in the area. Ianto became a chain-man for Tom Evans, Mr Williams' new assistant, and began to be trained as an apprentice surveyor. Eventually, he qualified and worked on railways and roads all over Britain and even as far away as Canada.

But he never did drive a steam train.

Why Don't You

Look at the track of the tramway in the Cassini Old Series 1830-1833 Historical Map of the Black Mountains, (based on OS Landranger 161). You can buy a copy from www.cassinimaps.com

Visit Crawshay Bailey's Warehouse beside the canal on Govilon Wharf

See two actual (but slightly smaller) drams near Llanfoist Wharf

Look where the tramway bridge used to cross the Usk at Llanfoist. You can still see the bases of the pillars in the river upstream of the road bridge.

See the historic Skirrid Inn in Llanfihangel Crucorney. (You probably can't go in, but the village shop has sweets and ice creams!)

Walk along the surviving stretch of tramway near Werngifford, from Offa's Dyke Path (SO336217) to the A465 (SO331211)

Going to the Workhouse

This story is based on the records of Abergavenny Workhouse. They are in Gwent Archives.

Megan was near to tears too. Mam had tears running down her face and was muttering about Dad again. “Why did he do it?...What are we going to do without him?...” Her Dad was going to be sent to Australia. He had been caught driving some sheep down a road near their house at night, someone else’s sheep. Dad was a butcher, or she supposed he *had been* a butcher, and had thought to make a bit of extra money because then, the baby had been nearly due. Now Dad was in prison after the court case waiting to be sent away, transported.

Mam had gone to her sister’s house, taking Megan, and Tomas who was two years younger than her at just seven years old. Now they had a little baby, Gareth, too. But Mam said they couldn’t stay at her sister’s now she’d had the baby. There wasn’t room and there was no money.

The man from the Workhouse had come to see them; he said he was the ‘Relieving Officer’. Then he had come back with the ticket that her Mam had to take to the Workhouse. They had packed up the few things they had brought with them and given them to her auntie to keep. You couldn’t take a doll to the Workhouse, Mam said, or anything else. Anyway, her cloth dolly was old and battered, one of its legs was half hanging off, but she packed it up with her spare clothes, just in case. Then they were off, walking to the Workhouse, Mam carrying the baby in a shawl.

They seemed to walk a long way up a hill past the Market Hall, then along another road, down a hill and she could just see the river bridge there to the left and the meadows. They stopped several times and sat on a wall here and there. Tomas was whining that his legs were tired, and he couldn’t walk any further, but Mam said she couldn’t carry him *and* the baby and started crying again. Megan poked Tomas and said, ‘Just shut up, things are bad enough without you going on too.’ Then she felt awful when she saw he was crying too. They walked on.

Then they were there. A great big building going up to the sky and wide – Megan couldn’t see how far it went to the sides. It looked bigger than the Market Hall. By an open door, a big man sat in a wooden chair. He looked them up and down. Mam handed him the ticket and he turned it over in his big rough hands. He stood up, frowned at the two



This is what the workhouse building looks like today

children and said, "I'm the Porter. I'm in charge here. You must do what I tell you to do. Understand?" He bent forward looking into the faces of the two children. Then he softened a bit, and turning to Mam holding the baby, he pulled the shawl away from Gareth's face. "What we got here, then? Boy or a girl?" "His name's Gareth," said Tomas boldly. He wiped his face, which was grimy already, on his sleeve, and gave a big sniff, as though to say, "No more tears."



A scene from the film "Ghosts of the Workhouse" depicting life at Llanfyllin Workhouse

"Right then," said the Porter. "In you come and we'll sort you out. Wait here while I gets the Matron." They waited in a passageway. It was quite gloomy as the Porter had shut the door while he went off. After a while a rather fat woman wearing a big almost white apron came bustling down the passageway. They all went into a little room, which she called the Office, and the Porter asked Mam questions, like their names and ages, and the Matron wrote them in a big book. Matron told them that they were expected as the Board of

Guardians had had to get special permission from London for them to come into the Workhouse. Then they had to wait again while the Matron went off. "What's a Board?" she asked Mam. It obviously wasn't a piece of wood. "It's the men in charge of this place." Mam said. "Big-wigs, people with money and important jobs. They make sure that only people who can't find any other way of living come in here. I'll have to work, and you two will go to school."

Then, if anything, things got worse. First, they all got cold washed in a tin bath, heads washed and inspected, Mam and the baby, first. Then Mam got dressed in a frock with a big apron over it, stockings and clogs which kept slipping off. Tomas and Megan got dried with rough feeling towels and dressed in some drab clothes while their clothes



A pair of child-size clogs from Abergavenny Workhouse

were bundled up. "What happens to our clothes?" she asked. Matron hesitated, then told her that they would be washed and stored for when they left. Megan looked down at herself. She was wearing a grey frock that was a bit big for her and an off-white pinafore over it. She had stockings which were also a bit big for her, all wrinkly on her legs and wooden clogs on her feet. Thomas was dressed in grey flannel trousers and an off-white long shirt that almost covered his trousers. His socks were falling down, and he had a pair of clogs too. The Matron was not rough really, just not careful and rather impatient.

"It's a good thing you came this morning; we can sort you out this afternoon with classes and that. I'll show you where you'll be sleeping. Now take notice, you'll need to find your way yourselves next time. If you stay here with the babbey," Matron turned to Mam, "I'll take the children and come back to show *you* where to go." Then she was off bustling along. Megan tried to look where they were going, but she was really tired after the long walk and the confused feelings she had and felt really muddled.

Then they were in a long room with straw pallets on wooden frames. Matron waved at Megan, "That will be yours at the end on the right here. You'll only need to share with one other girl because we're not full now." Then they were out of a door and across the space in the middle of the building, shadowed by the high walls. "Here's the boys' dormitory. What's your name again, boy?" Tomas looked at the floor but said firmly "Tomas." "You will call me Matron at all times, Tomas, do you understand?" Tomas still looked at the floor as though wishing everything around him might disappear. "Yes...Matron. My name is Tomas, Matron." She nodded, "Your bed is this one here. Do you understand?"

Then she was off again down a corridor, dim with doors opening off. A door opened into a big room where boys were sitting on benches at tables in rows. At the front was a thin young woman dressed very like the Matron but without the apron. "I've brought you another young one – Tomas. He'll be with George", Matron said to the woman. "George, you take this boy, Tomas, he's called. He's to go with you. He's sharing your pallet from now on. You must show him where to wash and everything too." Tomas, bewildered by it all, followed the pointing finger of the woman at the front and sat next to George, who turned his head away from the teacher, covered the side of his face that was towards her, stuck out his tongue and made a face. Tomas grinned a bit, but sensing this was to be hidden, sat on the bench next to George. A slate appeared in front of him and the teacher said, "Have you used one of these before?" He nodded. Then he noticed the stick in her hand as she rapped it on the desk. "What do you say? Tell him, George." George sat up and said solemnly, "Yes, Miss Shuttlesworth, I have used a slate before." The teacher glared at him before returning to the front, as Matron left at speed with Megan trailing behind her. Megan had seen it was boys only in this room.

No. 21.

Abergavenny

UNION.

ADMISSION AND

ADMITTED.

Day of the Month	Day of the Week	NAME	Calling, if any	Religious Formation	When Born	Class for Diet.*										No. of days in the Prisoner's Cell.	Parish from which admitted	By whose Order admitted	Date of Discharge or Admission
						1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10				
1879					Brought forward	54	5	3	1	21	8	4	41	5	17	101			
5	Friday	Matthew John	Labourer	Church of Eng	1850	1											Abergavenny	Quarantine	16
30	17 Sunday	David George	B	B	1827	1											London	St. Paul	17
	19 Monday	Thomas George	B	B	1829	1											B		
		William James	B	Roman Catholic	1821	1											B		19
		David Timothy	B	B	1819	1											B		19
	20 Sunday	England Clara Jane	None	Church of Eng	1856					1							B		
		Joshua W.		B	1877					1							B		
		Robert J. Gibson		B	1879												B		
5		Wells Maria		Independent	1816							1					Abergavenny	St. Martin	20
5	21 Monday	Richard Lelia		Roman Catholic	1819								1				B		
5	22 Tuesday	Robert Andrew	Labourer	B	1829	1											B		22
																11			
Dead & Discharged						64	5	3	9	22	10	6	14	8	20	153			
Remaining						1				2					1	2	6		
						64	5	3	9	20	10	6	14	7	18	146			

A page from Abergavenny Union Admission Book for 1879

They crossed the space open to the sky in the middle of the building again and into another corridor, and Megan was getting confused where she was. "Right, this side is for the girls and women. After your meal, you'll be doing sewing – can you do that, girl?" Megan nodded, then remembered what had just happened, "Yes, Matron, I'm good at sewing." Matron shot her a glance as though she thought she might be being cheeky, but Megan kept her face straight. Matron opened another door and a very similar room with rows of tables and benches appeared, this time with girls sitting at

them, but an almost identical teacher at the front. Two of the girls were giving out bowls and pieces of bread and looked startled by their appearance.

“Ellie?” Matron’s voice seemed to soften a little and a smile appeared. Megan thought that Matron must like Ellie. A girl at the end of the front row stood up and did a little bob to Matron. “Ellie, I want you to look after this new girl, she’s Megan. You know what to do. Make sure she knows where to go and what she’s to do. She says she’s good at sewing so perhaps we can get that batch of work all finished this afternoon?” Matron looked around and continued “You all know that it’s important to do clean neat work so that the Workhouse can get more work. The money it brings in helps to pay for your food as well as fuel in the winter, you know.” And she was off, out of the room.

Ellie looked along the line of girls in the front row. “Lizzie, you’re the tallest. Go and sit on the row behind. Everyone moved to let Lizzie out and then moved to the end of the row. “Sit here, Meg, next to me.” She turned back to the room, “Suzie, put that down and go and get another lot, tell them in the kitchen we’ve another mouth to feed.” She turned to Megan, “Is it just you? I heard tell you had a brother as well?” Megan said ‘Yes, Tomas is in the boys’ room.’ Lizzie turned back to the girl she had been sending off, “Tell them there’s an extra mouth to feed in the boy’s room too. They won’t think to do it.”

“How did you know about my brother?” asked Megan before she could stop herself. Lizzie smiled, “Oh, I knows what goes on here.” she said, smirking. “You’re a special case, with your Dad getting transported. The Board want that stopped, because then *they* must pay out money to keep you. They don’t think that’s right.” Then Lizzie realised everyone was listening and sat down, saying, “Get on with the food then, that broth’ll be cold by now.” There was a big sigh from the thin teacher at the front and she said, “I’ll leave you in charge, then shall I, Lizzie?” and without waiting for a reply, she walked out. The girl Lizzie had sent off returned with another bowl and chunk of bread and everyone finished quite quickly. Then they clustered round Megan, all asking questions until she thought she would burst into tears again. It brought all the dreadful last few months back, but all these girls just seemed interested, and their nodding heads and comments showed sympathy and knowledge about the difficulties and upsets, that she felt quite comforted in a way. Then Lizzie organised them to visit the privy, a row at a time, “Go now” she advised Megan, “You won’t be able to leave otherwise. There’s bowls in the room by there to wash your hands so that you’re all clean to sew.” Just as she got back, a trolley with piles of material was being brought in by one of the girls and Lizzie was straightway separating them out and handing out work, and the sewing equipment, needles, scissors, thread spindles, everything you would need to sew. She showed Megan some cut out aprons and said “Can you do hems all round and put the ties on the sides?” For the first time, Megan felt herself relax, “Oh yes”, she said, “No problem at all, I can do that for you.” Lizzie grinned at her and said, “We’ll get on fine if you can do a good job and quickly, too.”

Three hours later, Megan’s hands were sore, her behind was numb from sitting in the same position on the hard wooden bench, her shoulders and arms ached, her eyes were red and dry from peering at the tiny stiches she was using to hem, when there was a loud bell from outside. Everyone seemed to know what to do, and she watched as her work was put in a box on the trolley with her name of a piece of paper. “It’ll all be inspected for quality” said Lizzie importantly, “But I could see you know what you’re doing. Now, outside in the yard. You might see your Mam.” Megan almost ran outside

into the space between the buildings. But there were just them up this end and the boys down the other end. She said to Lizzie “Will it be alright if I see Tomas?” Lizzie looked at her for a moment, then said “Well, walk over, casual, and see if he wants to talk to you. We’re not really supposed to talk to the boys but it’s alright if it’s your brother. No talking to any of the other boys, mind!” Megan did as suggested, and went over, walking slowly, looking for Tomas. He saw her and came towards her, looking nervously at the boy he was with. “This is George” he said, “He’s putting me right about everything.” George looked her up and down, sniffed and left them together. “You alright?” whispered Megan, “I reckon so. We ain’t got no choice.” said Tomas. “What’ve you been doing? We had to do numbers and money.” Megan said “Huh! I had to make a pile of aprons.” They both stood there for a moment, then Tomas ran off towards where some of the boys were kicking a stone around, and Megan walked back to the girl’s end.

Later that night, Megan lay on her straw pallet, biting her lips to try to stop herself weeping. She thought, “Where’s Mam, is she alright? When will I see her?”, and “What about Tomas, will he manage not to get into trouble?” and, then allowing herself to think of herself, “What will happen, how will I get on in this strange place?” The tears just ran down her face and she was soon gasping in sharp breaths as she tried to stop. Lizzie touched her back and whispered in her ear, “Don’t worry, we all does it. It feels better to let it out. Try not to let anyone hear – you’ll start the lot of them off!” The thought of everyone dissolving into tears pulled Megan back from where her thoughts were taking her and she remembered how confident Lizzie seemed. If Lizzie could do it, then she could cope too. She wiped her face on her nightdress and tried to sleep.

What you could do:

See what books are in the library about Workhouses, especially Abergavenny Workhouse.

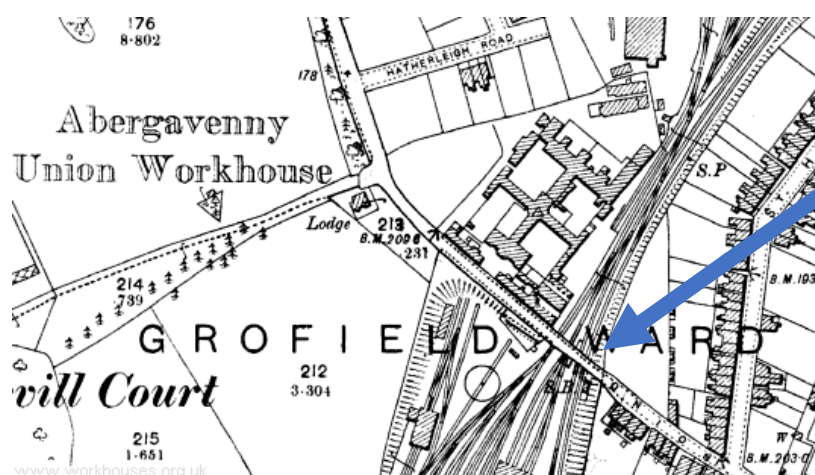
Find out what information there is online about Workhouses in Wales and elsewhere.

Walk the roads around the Abergavenny Workhouse with the plan and see if you can work out which part was which. If the businesses are open, you can have a look inside.

Write your own story of a day in the Workhouse.

Have a look at <https://workhousenetworkblog.wordpress.com/> and perhaps persuade your parents to arrange a visit to one. Llanfyllin Workhouse, near Shrewsbury, has bunkhouse accommodation, although it’s a lot better than the paupers would have had!

<https://www.llanfyllinworkhouse.org.uk/history-centre-the-workhouse/>



This is where the narrow Union Road goes over the main road. You can walk over it and look down on the remains of the Workhouse.

The railway lines are now the road that goes down to the roundabout and then Llanfoist bridge over the Usk.

The Pageant of Gwent

A story of what might have happened to one family at the 1913 Eisteddfod

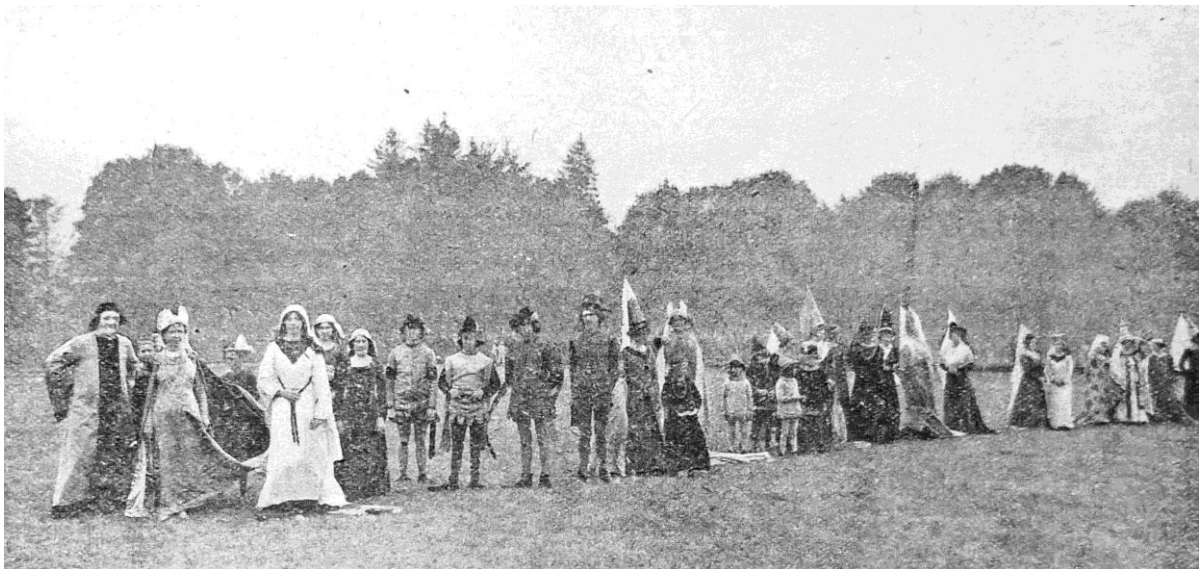
“Oh good, you’re back!” said Mother, laying down her book, “Was it a great success?” “No, it was a disaster.” grumbled Freddie, angrily swishing his sword dangerously near to the photographs on the piano.

“Oh it wasn’t that bad.” said Mary, following him in, “The second rehearsal went much better than the first.” The ribbons on her head-dress had gone all floppy and her long dress looked rather droopy too. It had rained, off and on, all day.

Arthur was next to arrive. “Our episode went quite well really, except that John nearly dropped his corner of the canopy on to the Queen’s head, but some of the episodes from the other towns obviously hadn’t been rehearsed enough.”

Father came in with Ruth and John. He had driven them all back from the rehearsal at Maindiff Court to their home on the Monmouth Road. The family were all there apart from Jessie who, being the youngest, was upstairs with Nannie. They had all become involved in the Pageant. This was part of the National Eisteddfod that was being held in Abergavenny in August of that year, 1913. Half the town seemed to be preparing for the Eisteddfod in one way or another and it had dominated most conversations since at least the beginning of the year. Today was the day of the two dress rehearsals with an audience, one in the morning and one in the afternoon.

Back in January, the Eisteddfod Committee had approved the application of the Misses Jackson to perform ‘The Pageant of Gwent’ showing episodes from history, at the cost of one hundred pounds. Almost immediately, fund-raising had begun and there was a dance, which Mary went to, and a Tableau which Father and Mother had attended. “What is a tableau?” Jessie had asked and Mother had explained that it was people dressed up in old-style clothing who arranged themselves to look like important events in history. Each time the curtains opened there would be a different event being performed, although they mostly stood still. Jessie thought this was very peculiar and Mother thought so too and had had great difficulty managing not to laugh during the performance, until Father nudged her with his elbow.



The pageant was divided into twelve periods from history, with people from different towns performing each episode. The Abergavenny episode was Number 8 and was in three parts: the Civic Reception of the Earl and Countess of Warwick in 1460: Sir Richard Herbert and the Harlech Prisoners in 1468: the Battle of Edgcote in 1469. Freddie, back from University in Aberystwyth for the summer, was playing a minor lord and his brother Arthur was his squire. They both had some words to learn. Mary was playing the Queen consort's lady in waiting and she had a few lines to learn too. Ruth had said that she would much prefer helping with making the costumes than playing a peasant woman and Miss Jackson was delighted about this because Ruth was noted for being a good needle-woman. Even John, who was only ten, had a part as a page-boy, but no lines to learn. Jessie hadn't liked being left out but she was very good at helping Ruth with the costumes by turning the sewing machine handle really fast to refill the bobbins with thread, and when Ruth was sewing the long straight seams of the peasant women's skirts.

Mother looked at her family and shooed them all upstairs to get out of their damp finery. "John, run down to the kitchen first and ask Nellie to bring up the tea things as soon as she can." In the kitchen Nellie the maid had already warned Leah the cook that they were all home and looked "half-starved". Leah had said that the oven was at just the right temperature so she'd pop a batch of scones in. She was famous for her ability to provide warm scones at just the right moments.

Ruth was back in the drawing room first as she'd only had to change her damp stockings. She had been at the rehearsal with her needle and thread, ready to do running repairs on the costumes. She was afraid that Miss Crawshay, who was playing a leading part would put her heel in the hem of her long skirt, again, and tear it.

"Was it really all that bad?" Mother asked.

"No" said Ruth "but it was hard work for everyone having to do it all twice. Particularly with so much waiting around until it was their turn to perform again. And the photographer took an absolute age to set up his camera and get everyone arranged for each photograph. I thought John was going to run away before his got done. And the Mayor and Mayoress took forever to be shown what to do. I hope they are not performing in the 'real' Pageant on Monday."

Soon the family were back, tea was poured and bread and butter wolfed down. Nellie arrived with a large plate of Leah's warm scones and was greeted with cheers. The children had got tickets for Nellie and Leah to go to the morning rehearsal and Nellie had come back saying they'd had a "grand" time and she'd had no idea before that Gwent had so much history, but it was a shame they couldn't hear all the words and that the poor lady playing the piano was getting so wet, even under an umbrella. Leah just muttered darkly, "Nymphs – too many nymphs. They never had nymphs in history when I was at school." Nanny had said she didn't mind missing the pageant and she would go to see the handcraft competitions on her afternoon off. She had already taken Jessie to see the enormous marquee in Bailey Park while it was being put up.

Mother watched the scones disappearing at high speed and said, "Didn't you get any lunch at Maindiff Court?"



"Oh yes," said Mary, "They had got caterers in and everyone seemed to get plenty to eat without having to wait too long, even though there were so many performers, as well as all the audience."

"I hope your costumes dry out well and don't need too much attention to get them looking good again," said Mother and Ruth agreed.

"I saw some pretty extraordinary headgear going by," said Father

"Oh those were the Knights of the Round Table's helmets," said Freddie, "I don't know why they had those enormous wings. It made them look like rejected Vikings."

"I wouldn't want to do too much sword fighting with one of those on my head," added Father.

"It was much worse than that, Father, they had lances not swords."

"Some of the chaps had no idea how to handle a lance," put in Arthur, "Mr Maddox nearly put Freddie's eye out with his! Shame we couldn't have a photograph of that."

"I had to hold hands with Lucy Gabb in my photo" grumbled John, "She's a horrible child." Nobody disagreed with him.

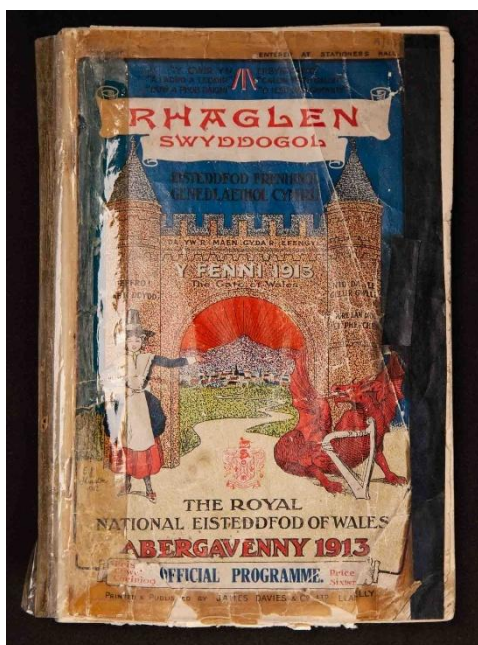
"All the handmaids looked sweetly pretty in their costumes," said Ruth.

"And John looked sweetly pretty in his page boy costume too", added Freddie, darting out a hand to grab the cushion that came flying in his direction.

"No throwing things in the drawing room!" said Mother sternly, but with a smile.

That had all happened on Friday and the real performance was on Monday, the first day of the Eisteddfod. Some people had said that Abergavenny was too English and that the whole Eisteddfod wouldn't be Welsh enough. Other people were predicting that the Suffragettes would cause problems. Monday turned out to be a fine day and the Pageant went smoothly enough to feel almost like an anticlimax, particularly as it was all so tiring. But Tuesday brought the excitement of the Gorsedd ceremony which started with the procession from the Town Hall, down Cross Street and all along the Monmouth Road to where the Gorsedd stones were set up on The Mount, at Plas Derwen. The family were able to stand outside their house to watch the procession go by although Mother said she'd rather watch from a window upstairs as the view would be better. Father secretly thought the real reason was so that the others couldn't see her laughing.

The procession started with the Eisteddfod maidens in flowing costumes with lots of flowers attached to their dresses and headdresses. A lot of children had come from the tenements in Mill Street to watch and they were a bit unruly. They cheered loudly and whistled. Next came vehicles carrying the bards in their long green gowns and white cloths on their heads. Their feet looked so odd coming out of the bottom of their gowns with their everyday trousers and shoes that Mother had to smile. Then, because it was market day, a number of farmer's carts had got mixed up in the procession and they trundled by to the cheers of the crowd and delight of the Mill Street children. Mother laughed out loud at that. When the procession has passed by, the family joined on to the end and walked along to watch the ceremony.



*The official programme of the 1913
National Eisteddfod*

The rest of the week was filled with all the Eisteddfod competitions and concerts and, of course, the Chaining of the Bard. The enormous marquee in Bailey Park was filled to capacity for most events but they heard that the evening concerts were poorly attended. Nobody complained about the lack of Welshness and the Suffragettes were not very noticeable apart from some leaflets thrown around by the main entrance to Bailey Park. The trouble expected during Mr Lloyd George's speech was avoided by arranging at the last minute for him to talk in the morning rather than the afternoon. Then there was great excitement as it was heard that the Suffragettes had set fire to the cricket pavilion. Arthur and John went to the Cricket Club the next day to inspect the scene of the crime. They said that only the front of the pavilion had been damaged and that the caretaker, who was sleeping there to prevent trouble, had been woken up by some neighbours in

time to escape without getting hurt. They thought the rest of the cricket season would be able to continue. A haystack at Red Barn Farm had been set alight too, but nobody seemed to think that really was the Suffragettes' work and a young man was arrested for the crime a few days later.

The whole week was felt to have been a big success although some of the shopkeepers complained that they lost a lot of trade through the visitors to the Eisteddfod not being allowed passes to go into the town during the day and get back into the park. The Pageant made a loss so to make it up, the Misses Jackson put on a combined Tableau and Dance at the Town Hall in November. Everyone in the family, except Freddie who was back in Aberystwyth, performed in that. The Eisteddfod made a total loss of four hundred pounds.

The family house on the Monmouth Road seemed very quiet for a while after it was all over, although Nellie and Leah said they weren't sorry that all that "declaiming" that the children's rehearsals involved, and which sounded just like shouting to them, was over.

Why don't you:

Visit the Gorsedd stones in Swan Meadows. They were moved there from The Mount in 2001.

Have you been involved in the Abergavenny Eisteddfod or the Urdd? If you have, why not write a story about what happened to you.

If you haven't been involved why not find out some more about Eisteddfodau.

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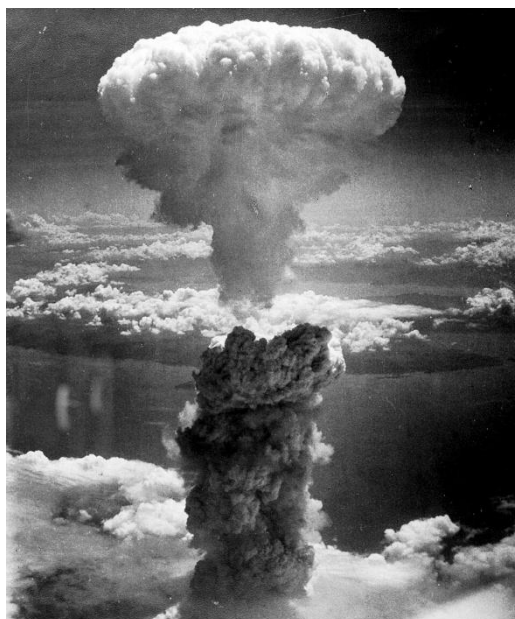
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Abergavenny Chronicle 8th August 1913

JOHN DAVIES REMEMBERS VJ DAY

This is a fictional account based on the experiences of the people of Abergavenny and surrounding areas during the Second World War.

I shall be 89 years old on 15th August 2025. For the last 80 years this day has also been known as VJ Day or Victory over Japan Day as the day that Japan surrendered at the end of the Second World War. I remember my 9th birthday in 1945 very well as there was much celebration in Abergavenny. I was a bit too tired to enjoy it though as I had been woken in the middle of the night by people who were celebrating in the streets until five o'clock in the morning. They also set off the siren at the police station to sound the 'all clear' which was very loud. Over the next few days there were lots of street parties like there had been for VE day with bonfires and fireworks. Someone rang the bell of Christ Church so enthusiastically that they broke the rope.¹

A few days earlier on 7th August mother had bought a copy of the Daily Mail with the headline 'Most terrifying weapon in history: Churchill's warning.' At first I could not understand how a single bomb could bring a war to an end but then mother told me it was an atomic bomb and showed me the photograph on the front page of the smoke above the ruins of Hiroshima. The paper said it rose 40,000 feet into the air! Two days later on 9th August a second bomb was dropped on Nagasaki. I now understand the devastation that was caused by these bombs with estimates of between 150,000 and 246,000 people killed, most of whom were civilians.² Thankfully, these are the only two times that a nuclear weapon has been used but I do get nervous when I hear about countries building up supplies of nuclear weapons now.



The atomic bomb explosion over Nagasaki 1945

Towards the end of August there was a big Victory parade through town with a grand carnival and mother entered the 'andy ankle' competition but did not win. I was a little upset as there was a gentleman there who had recently returned from being a prisoner of war in Germany and I couldn't understand why my father had not returned home yet.

Father did not come home until a few months later. Mother had warned me not to ask about his experience but I did one day when she was out. He told me that he had been fighting the Japanese in Burma which is now called Myanmar. He said he felt fortunate that he was fighting and had rations. I didn't understand what he meant but he went on to explain that many allied soldiers including men from Wales had been taken prisoner by the Japanese. These Prisoners of War (POWs) were often poorly treated by their captors. Many were put to work on the building of the Burma railway. This was a 258-mile-long railway which was built to supply troops and weapons for the Japanese in the Burma campaign. They suffered from malnutrition and tropical

diseases and in total over 12,000 POWs died in Burma and approximately half of them were from the UK and colonies. Father told me that other men from Abergavenny had also been prisoners of war in a place called Kimkaseki in Formosa which is now called Taiwan. They had had to work in a copper mine and were starved beaten and tortured by Japanese soldiers but were often reluctant to talk about their experiences.³ After the war father often read about the war crimes trials and he told me that there was some justice in that one hundred and eleven Japanese military officials were tried and thirty-two were sentenced to death.⁴ Many years later I discovered that my father had been with the South Wales Borderers and when he died I found his Burma star medal still in its original cardboard box.

I didn't really remember my father from before he went away to war and so was not able to tell how the war had affected him. Mother commented that he had lost a lot of weight and needed feeding up. When he put his old suit on you could see that it hung quite loosely on him. Fortunately, the local butcher used to slip mother a few extra sausages in with her weekly meat ration. She got quite angry with father when he complained about always having sausages for dinner.

Father was able to return to his job at the bank. He told me it was a little different as some of the ladies who had worked there while the men were at war were allowed to stay on. He said that they were actually quite good, especially at dealing with customers. Father used to help me with my arithmetic homework. He warned me that if I wanted to work in the bank in the future I would need to be good at my sums as he predicted there would be competition from both girls and boys when I applied for a job. Mother had to explain to him how things had changed during the war years and how a lot of women had had to take on the work of men. She told him about her friend Pam who had gone to work at the factory at Lang Pen making radiators for aircraft and how many women had been employed at the local ordnance factory.⁵ She asked him did he never think who was making all the ammunition he was fighting with but father admitted that he had not really thought about it. These women lost their jobs and income when Lang Pen and most of the ordnance factories closed after the war and others had to give up their jobs for returning soldiers. Mother was not able to work full time during the war because she had to look after me but she did some typing work for the War Department and said she quite enjoyed the independence and might look for a little job now father was home. At first he said that was not necessary now that he was home as the breadwinner but did later accept that times had changed in Abergavenny while he had been away at war.

Why don't you:

Find out where Myanmar and Taiwan are and calculate how far from Abergavenny they are.

See if you can find out what the Burma Star medal looks like.

Think if there are any jobs today that can only be done by a man.

References

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3 Butters, T. (2017) Ch. 3 *The Land of the Rising Sun* in Abergavenny's War

4 Burma Railway. Wikipedia

5 A Town Remembers : Memories of Wartime Abergavenny 1939-1945 : Abergavenny Local History Society. 2002. (Digital version 2025).

The Twinning of Abergavenny with Three Towns in Europe

Can you name the three European towns Abergavenny is twinned with? Most people know of the twinning of Abergavenny with Östringen in Germany and Beaupréau in France, but did you know Abergavenny is also twinned with Sarno in Italy?

What does twinning mean?

You have probably seen signs throughout your journeys across the UK, which say 'town twinned with', but what does this mean? The idea of twinning towns began in 1945 when the European mayors and citizens wanted to encourage healing and friendship after World War II. Each town set up a Town Twinning Association to communicate with each other. A Twinning Oath or Charter, which is not legally binding, was also produced. However, it wasn't until 1968 that the first town, Östringen, was twinned with Abergavenny, followed by Beaupréau (pronounced Bo-pray-o) in 1988 and Sarno in 1997.

The Twinning of Abergavenny with Östringen

Östringen is a town in the Karlsruhe state, south-west Germany. In 1968 Abergavenny and Östringen were twinned as part of the European Friendship Plan. To begin with relationships between the two towns were lukewarm, despite school exchanges and visits from councillors. By the 1970s the Burgermeister (mayor) of Östringen was upset by this and wrote to the Abergavenny Chronicle asking the people of Abergavenny to send any ideas to improve the situation to him. The answer came from Thursdays Football Club and the idea of a youth football programme was born, with the first match being played in Östringen in 1971.

The Twinning of Abergavenny with Beaupréau

Beaupréau is a small town in north-western France, dating back to medieval times. It is near the Puy de Fou Theme Park, not far from Nantes and Angiers. The area is known for making shoes and producing rosé wine and sweet white wine. In the spring of 1988, a French teacher visited Abergavenny and loved the town so much she proposed the twinning of the two towns when she returned home. In October 1988, council members visited Beaupréau to agree to the twinning. The first Charter between the two towns was signed in Abergavenny's Town Hall on 26 November 1988, followed by the signing of the Charter in the Mairie (Town Hall) in Beaupréau on 4 February 1989. Since then, many visits between the two towns have taken place, including school exchanges, cultural, sports and music events and celebrations to mark the twinning.

The Twinning of Abergavenny with Sarno

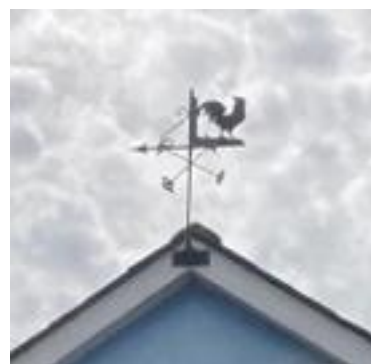
Sarno is a small town in the Campania region of southern Italy, located at the foot of Mount Vesuvius. Abergavenny and Sarno were twinned in September 1997. However, in May 1998 Sarno was devastated by severe flooding, resulting in many deaths, injuries and leaving many people homeless. Just two weeks before the floods, forty-eight people from Abergavenny had visited the town and on hearing of the disaster a relief fund was set up, which raised £10,000. A 4x4 vehicle was sent to Sarno to aid the search and rescue operation.

Twinning Celebrations in Abergavenny.

Throughout the years there have been many Twinning Celebrations, in which gifts were given to Abergavenny, for example in 1988, to celebrate 20 years of their twinning, Östringen gave Abergavenny a plate featuring their Town Hall, and in 2015 the town presented Abergavenny with a globe, which symbolises unity between the two towns. These are on display on a bookcase opposite the librarian's desk in the library. In 1998, Beaupréau gifted a weathervane in the form of a cockerel. You can see it on the roof of the building with the Millennium mural on the corner of St John's Road. Just above the window is a brass plaque explaining that this weathervane commemorates the 10th Twinning anniversary between the two towns. Photographs of these three gifts are shown below:



The Plate and Globe gifted from Östringen in 1988 and 2015 now displayed in Abergavenny Library



The Weathervane gifted by Beaupréau in 1998 on the corner of the High Street and St John's Road

During the 1990s Abergavenny marked the twinning with the three towns by naming three places after them. Two roads in a new housing estate built off the Old Monmouth Road are named Östringen Close and Beaupréau Place. The third place, Sarno Square, can be found further along the Old Monmouth Road at the old Pen-y-Fal Hospital. This closed in 1997 and was converted into apartments. In 1996 Beaupréau named a place called Square d'Abergavenny and Abergavenny presented the town with a red post box which stands outside the Mairie in Beaupréau.

There have also been two Twinning Celebrations more recently in Abergavenny involving the four towns. The first, called ‘The Festival of Twinning’, was held between Friday 11 and Sunday 13 of July 2008. About one hundred German and two hundred French visitors came to Abergavenny to celebrate 40 years of the twinning with Östringen, 20 years with Beaupréau and 10 years with Sarno. On Friday evening a concert with performances from all three towns was held in St Mary’s Church. Whilst the adults attended an official dinner in Abergavenny’s Leisure Centre, the younger people enjoyed a BBQ, disco and firework display at Thursdays Football Club in Pen-y-Pound. A Carnival was held on Saturday, when German and French dancers performed and a ceilidh took place on Sunday evening in the Market Hall. The celebrations also included a presentation of a monument to Abergavenny from Östringen. It was erected by the sculptor in Linda Vista Gardens, where it can be seen today, near the café. It is an upright concrete pillar showing Östringen on one side and Abergavenny on the other. On the narrow sides are the dates 1968 and 2008.



The Monument in Linda Vista Gardens showing Östringen on the left and Abergavenny on the right

A large mural showing the twinning of the four towns was also unveiled at the Town Hall. However, since the renovations at the Borough Theatre in 2022, the mural has stayed in storage. Sadly, since the floods in Sarno there has been little communication or interest in the twinning from Sarno, so no Italian visitors attended the Festival. It seems the twinning has ceased between Abergavenny and Sarno, much to the disappointment in Abergavenny.

The second event celebrating 30 years of the twinning of Abergavenny and Beaupréau was held between Friday 19 and Monday 22 April 2019, the Easter weekend. The whole weekend saw many exciting events. On Good Friday (19 April) evening both French and Welsh musicians took part in a musical evening in the Borough Theatre. A young French band called Burlesca played wind and percussion instruments, combining street art with circus acts, followed by the Junior section of AAODS (Abergavenny Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society) who delighted the audience with songs from *Oliver*. Synergy, a male voice choir sang unaccompanied. The French group Jabolique told the story of the twinning between the two towns through mime, comedy and opera

and the choir called Coup d'Choeur from the Beaupréau Music School closed the evening.

Saturday was another very busy day with music and entertainment around the town, whilst in Llanfoist football matches were played between the Young Rhinos and their French friends. In Gabb Square, the land alongside Baker Street Cinema, a sculpture was unveiled. It was sculpted from a large piece of slate that came from North Wales and paid for by a generous anonymous donation. The slate is mounted on an old millstone which has the wording '30 ans du jumelage 1988 ~ 2018' chiselled in English and French around its edge. Originally a metal red kite, Wales' national bird and a cockerel, the national bird of France, were attached to each side of the slate.



(Far left) The original sculpture showing the metal birds - by kind permission of Judith Vicary, Chair of the Abergavenny Twinning Town Association in 2019.

Regrettably, these beautiful birds were stolen but were replaced with ones painted by a local artist, as seen here in 2025 (near left).

In the evening a dinner was held in the Sports Hall at Abergavenny Leisure Centre. A ceilidh band ended the evening. On Easter Sunday morning, many more activities were organised. The footballers went to Cardiff to watch Cardiff City play Liverpool, which Liverpool won 2-0. Burlesca entertained the sightseers visiting Big Pit and the Coup d'Choeur sang to an audience in the Priory Centre after the morning service at St Mary's Church. The performance was filmed and seen on the ITV Wales evening news.



Also, during the celebrations Beaupréau gave Abergavenny a sculpture of a horse pulling a cart. The sculpture shows harness racing, which takes place at the Hippodrome de la Prée in Beaupréau. The sculpture, shown in the photograph below, can be found on the bookcase near the librarian's desk in the Library.

The harness racing sculpture in Abergavenny Library

During the Covid pandemic visits between Östringen, Beaupréau and Abergavenny were suspended. However, in August 2023, Abergavenny's Mayor, Anne Wilde, was invited to the 'Petite Angevine' (a similar festival to Abergavenny's Food Festival in September) in Beaupréau. Here it was decided to organise a Europiad sports competition between the towns. In April 2024 young people from Abergavenny, Vidreres (in Spain) and Münsingen (in Germany) competed in the event in Beaupréau. The Rhinos under 14s team won the Europiad, overcoming tough competition from the other teams. Since 2024 the Rhinos Football team, committee members and ten air cadets have visited Beaupréau and Münsingen, with a return visit to Abergavenny from students and teachers from a secondary school in Beaupréau. A Twinning Association sweatshirt and tee shirt have been designed and a website and Face Book page are being developed. There are also plans to combine another Europiad sports competition with celebrating 40 years of the twinning between Abergavenny and Beaupréau in Abergavenny in 2028.

Conclusion

Twinning towns across Europe is a way of bringing together different communities with the aim of developing friendship. Unfortunately, the twinning with Sarno has not been quite so successful. However, the future does look promising as Abergavenny, Östringen and Beaupréau work hard to exchange visits and enjoy many activities together.

You could:

Visit Linda Vista Gardens and find the Östringen monument. It can be found near the café on the path by the paving slab 'Flower Society Est 1962'.

Find the Beaupréau sculpture in Gabb Square outside the Baker Street Cinema.

Have a look at the weathervane and brass plaque on the corner of St John's Road and the High Street. You will need to look up above the window on the wall of the mural.

Find the plate, globe and sculpture of the harness racing in Abergavenny Library.

Find the roads named Östringen Close and Beaupréau Place. They can be found in the Gavenny Way housing estate, a turning off the Old Monmouth Road.

Sarno Square is off Sycamore Avenue, a turning further up the Old Monmouth Road.

If you are lucky enough to visit the Puy de Fou one day you might like to visit Beaupréau and find the Square d' Abergavenny and the red post box outside the Mairie.

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Pantomimes

Traditionally, by the end of the pantomime the villain has been defeated, true love has conquered all and everyone lives happily ever after

I am a big fan of pantomimes; I have been to most of the pantomimes in the Borough Theatre since 2004 when we moved here. The Abergavenny Pantomime Company, said to be the oldest in Wales, has very high standards, lots of the actors are well-known local characters that are happy to give up their time. Each year there is a different tale to tell. Stories are mainly based on fairy tales and nursery rhymes that children know well. With that tradition, however, come many others with which we are all familiar and which help create magic. Familiarity plays a big role in that - we know the stories and we know the format.



Audience participation is vital, booing and hissing are encouraged from the beginning and often you are told that “When the baddy appears you hiss”. Audiences often decide for themselves when is the right time to hiss, not always when the actors expect it. After the initial somewhat subdued boos and hisses we get right into it and are very loud. You are encouraged to argue with the Dame “Oh yes, it is” - “Oh no it isn’t” and to warn the Principal Boy of danger, “It’s behind you!” Sometimes the character turns the wrong way, and you become

incensed and shout all the louder. One of the joys of the pantomime is the total absorption of the audience.

Of course, the Dame is always played by a man as are the ugly sisters in Cinderella and the principal boy is always played by a girl in fishnet tights and high heels.

Slapstick comedy is also a vital part. I found out through going to the panto how that name came about. A slapstick is made of two thin pieces of wood joined together which makes a very loud noise when tapped together on somebody or something. Like a sponge policeman’s truncheon or the Dame’s frying pan on someone’s head.

In-jokes and topical references are an essential part. Often the scripts are written by local journalists. There are lots of silly colourful costumes (The Dame is always overdressed)

Double Entendre is a favourite pantomime tradition for adults in the audience. It walks a fine



line; too blue and the adults will feel embarrassed, not blue enough the children might understand.

Music is an important component and usually a well-known song is chosen, and the lyrics can be altered to fit the particular pantomime or town. The song sheet usually appears between the last act and the Grand finale. It is useful in that it gives most of the cast time to change into their sparkly costumes for the final scene. We love this bit, children are invited to join the actors on the stage, they are asked a couple of questions and then they can sing along with the cast members there is often a singing contest between boys and girls, parents and children or different parts of the theatre and then they get sweets as a reward for doing it. But throwing sweets into the audience is discouraged now.



People wearing animal costumes called skins are also part of the tradition Pantomime The role of a horse, cow, camel and donkey is usually performed by two people one in the front of the animal and one in the back. They are often given a strong personality trait Sometimes the animals are argumentative or stubborn or consider themselves superior to their owner or companion. Pantomime humour often comes in the names they are given - Cows: Cowpat, Coward, Moostache, Milk

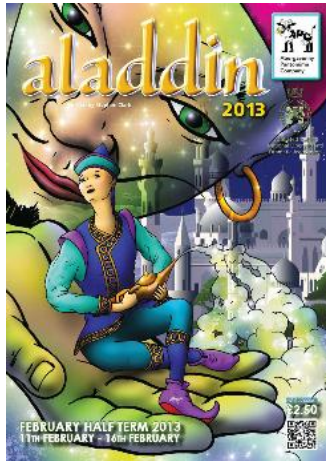
shake, Dunn Poo. For Camels: Humpty Dumpty, Camelber, Sandy, Camelot and for Horses: Nightmare, Usain Colt, Trot-a-Lot, Clippety Clop.

Of course, Abergavenny has featured many different animals in their pantomimes: some of them with one person animals like cats, rabbits and geese, others needing two people. I decided to get more involved in the pantomimes, so I volunteered. I am not a performer, but I love to help backstage, I do lots of things carrying props on and off the stage, moving scenery and helping with make-up and costumes. One of my favourite things to do is help the pantomime Horse/Camel/Cow get into their costume. Since the late nineties every performance at the Borough Theatre featured a four-legged animal. It has performed in over fifty live performances, been hired out to other local amateur societies, it has walked up and down the streets of Abergavenny promoting and publicising the annual production and featured many times in the Abergavenny Chronicle. It made its television debut on BBC Wales Today in 2007 as part of the 75th Anniversary Celebrations. It has also had various names such as Shergar, Flash, Strawberry, Daisy, Buttercup to name a few!

In 2011 the APC Committee felt it was time that the well-known four-legged performer needed to undergo a facelift. I must say that I completely agreed with that. I had had to do a lot of repairs and patch ups to keep it going.

It was decided that a new panto cow/horse should be designed and made So, no more reliance on the repairs and patches to the old worse for wear costume. To be fair this project just didn't happen overnight.

There were various fund-raising events until enough money was raised to make a start. It was designed by Derek Wallace and Sian Williams who felt that a new creation should be more flamboyant than the last one and decided in this digital age of high technology, that it should feature flashing colour changing electrical eyes, have the ability for smoke to pour through its nostrils and of course, squirting udders.



The poster for Aladdin where Dun Poo first appeared and the lady herself in rehearsal

These additions to the animal sound great, but there isn't much room in the costume so the controls are not that easy to use. A mechanism for creating smoke was hidden in the back of the costume as was the control for squirting the milk out of the udder so the person in the back of the costume was responsible for those actions and the person in front is in charge of the mechanism to open the mouth and turn on the flashing lights of the eyes. By 2013 it was ready to go. Aladdin was the first appearance of Dun Poo. I think the name is excellent! Getting the actors into this costume became a work of art, making sure that the smoke canister was ready to use, the udder was full, the batteries charged and the controls in the right places. I was well impressed with all the things the cow could do. I must say the flashing eyes were pretty frightening.

What keeps the Pantomime going is its ability to adapt and the audience participation. By the end of the pantomime, the villain has been defeated, true love has conquered all and everyone lives happily ever after. In Abergavenny we have a vibrant and active pantomime group of performers. In February 2025 they put on Dick Whittington and the Babes in the Wood – I wonder what it will be in 2026.

Acknowledgments:

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The Story-tellers

Marilyn Diosi
Irene Hofayz
David Smith
Gill Wakley

Bianca Emberson
Christina Maciejewski
Sue Smith

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