



REMARKABLE WOMEN OF MERTHYR TYDFIL AND RHYMNEY



Labour  Llafur

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“There appears to be very little written about working class women in history, especially those in Wales who were politically active” (L M Powell).

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PREFACE



In May 2016 the people of Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney gave me the greatest honour of electing me as the first ever woman to represent them in either the Westminster or Welsh Parliaments. That well over a century had passed since the election of Keir Hardie MP to the House of Commons in 1900 makes a significant statement in itself. Yet it also provides a great reason for me to mark the occasion of the Merthyr Rising Festival 2018 with the publication of this pamphlet.

In doing so my hope is to prompt some fresh thinking about how best we should mark, or how we can better celebrate, the Remarkable Women of Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney.

Probably because I am involved in local politics I am reminded of the service of other women and thanks is given in memory of Janice Rowlands who was recognised as being the eyes and ears for Lord Ted Rowlands in the constituency. As no doubt were Margaret (Madge who died of cancer) and Sephora Davies during S O's long years of service as MP to the constituency.

The Merthyr Rising Festival of 2018 falls in the year in which we mark the centenary of women achieving the franchise. It may have been only partial but, nevertheless, it is an important milestone for women and our democracy. During the year we also mark the end of the First World War. That is another momentous event for which we should remember women, not only for their contribution to the war effort, but for also showing such great resilience to continue with their lives after the war. They helped to rebuild our communities, as they are called to do after all wars.

To be clear this pamphlet is based on secondary research. I have drawn upon the books, reports and significant research efforts of others to whom all the credit is due and are hopefully acknowledged in my sources. It must also be said that in the age of the internet a short research task of this sort is made much easier by sites such Old Merthyr Tydfil <http://www.alangeorge.co.uk/>; as were some visits to check texts at Merthyr Tydfil public library. This pamphlet can be downloaded from my website <http://www.dawnbowdenam.co.uk/>

My thanks to local historian Huw Williams for proof reading this booklet but rest assured any oversights or errors are mine, and mine alone. His wise counsel warmly assured me – if you get it wrong, it can always be corrected and re-printed! I know that in attempting such a project I am sure to have overlooked someone – so apologies in advance.

So happy Merthyr Rising 2018, enjoy yourselves, and it is my pleasure to play this small part in marking the festival by telling some of the stories of the Remarkable Women of Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney.

Dawn Bowden AM

Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney

INTRODUCTION

It is clear to me that the stories of the remarkable women of our community are largely untold.

This town, both of our valleys communities, of the Iron Masters, coal and industrial growth, of economic riches and social squalor, of constant waves of immigration, Dic Penderyn and the 1831 uprising, the town that elected Keir Hardie MP, that for so long kept faith in S.O.Davies MP, the town of the boxers, the footballers and growing success in rugby, has in reality made little space, or effort, to celebrate its remarkable women.

The town that is named after a woman, “Tudful”, from which the song “Myfanwy” originated and that gave support to the early Suffragettes like Rose Mary Crawshay, that gave a birthplace to Laura Ashley, somehow manages to keep the talent and contribution of its women largely hidden from public view. Is this an oversight or a more deliberate act?

In 2018 I feel a responsibility to help close this gap with a fresh eye and a new mission. When I started out on this project the questions running through my mind were:

Where are the women of Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney in these numerous and prolific local history books?

Why do we not find women on the walls of our public buildings or in the public art of our town?

What more can we do to tell the remarkable stories of these women?

Now beyond some basic research and preliminary conclusions I have not fully answered these questions as that involves more work especially on the Rhymney side of my constituency.

Yet as we consider what women have done in, and for, the area, when we consider the part they have played in the life of our communities, we can at least highlight a few stories to help us on the way to a new appreciation of the seemingly forgotten gender of local history. This pamphlet is not chronological. It is organised around themes and offers a short narrative to stimulate debate.

GENDER OR CLASS?

In setting the scene we can also usefully debate whether this failure to celebrate the achievements of women is a matter of gender or of class?

In Volume 26 of the Merthyr Historian Lisa Marie Powell writes on the subject of “Welsh women and liberation from the home: feminist or activist”. She wrote:

“There appears to be very little written about working class women in history, especially those in Wales who were politically active”.

She writes about the Welsh mam - ***“but she also had a job to do which involved anything from trade unions to campaigning for better conditions, both domestic and in the workplace”.***

As others before me have questioned, especially the Women's Archive of Wales, is it in fact the working class women of Wales whose story has been neglected and remains largely untold?

Perhaps in all likelihood it is both. Of course we find it easier to locate the legacy and to tell the story of the Crawshays and Guests as their wealth and social standing makes their history more apparent to us. We can find it in the structures the Ironmasters funded, the artefacts they gathered and the historical remains they left behind.

So this pamphlet in a small way looks to help turn that tide and seeks to make us look afresh, and to seek anew, the stories of some of the Remarkable Women of Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney – reflecting not just their gender, but in many cases also their class.

So let us discover afresh some of these women.

1. THE WOMEN OF THE MERTHYR RISING 1831

JOAN JENKINS AND MARGARET DAVIES

“Women had been very active in the riots, said the judge, and should not be spared because of their sex”. (The Merthyr Rising. Gwyn A Williams 1988).

An obvious question to me at the start of this process was to ask about the women of the uprising, and what we know of them?

We all know the name of Dic Penderyn and are familiar with the debate that now surrounds his role as he is, arguably, the most famous legacy of the uprising.

As for the women, well we can quickly establish the names of two of those involved Joan Jenkins and Margaret Davies as they are in the court proceedings alongside Dic Penderyn, and others charged after the uprising of 1831. This is only natural because women worked in a variety of roles in the ironworks and would have experienced the harsh working conditions of the workplace, as well as the desperate poverty of the home.

The punishment the judge gave for their role in the uprising was hard labour.

In the recent and excellent musical production - “My Lands Shore” I noticed the way in which this musical interpretation of the incidents surrounding the 1831 Rising were based around the women involved. (In passing I ask aloud why this musical does not have an annual ‘Merthyr season’, or indeed a Welsh language production?)

The character Rebecca sings:

*“I’ve loved you for all you are
I fought and starved and I lay in your bed
Do you think I’d have wed you if I did not worship the brave, honest fool That is you?”*

What caught my eye in the lyric, predominantly a statement of love, is the writer’s reference “**fought and starved**”. A recognition, in this musical at least that women were an integral part of the story of struggle and the uprising.

They were also involved as result of the rising because many were widowed on that day and then were left with responsibilities after the army crushed the forces of protest.

As for the records of that time we find that in his book Gwyn Alf Williams reports Joan Jenkins as being involved in reclaiming property after the iniquitous decisions by the Court of Requests. He describes it as “a planned insurrection” in which “*They first ‘enquired’, they identified and located goods which had been taken under legal process by the Court of Requests’. They then restored those goods to the original owners’.*”

He wrote “*Joan Jenkins, a woman of 62, took her two sons, Tom a labourer and Jenkin a smith, at the head of a crowd to Prothero’s place and seized a clock, a box, two tables and a chair’.*” He records that over a 100 houses and shops were visited in this way. Clearly the women reacted to the injustice alongside the men.

So here we have women at the centre of the practical reaction to local injustice. On 13th July 1831 the hearings in to those charged after the uprising began. After the trial of Richard Lewis on 14th July the judge stopped the trials, “*four were enough, he said; the remaining ten indictments were abandoned’.*”

I end with the remarks made by the judge which we should not forget – women were an active part of the uprising.

2. OUR WOMEN OF MYTH, OF MYSTERY AND OF MUSIC

TUDFUL

Most historians have at least managed this part of our history. We are a town named after a woman.

Indeed in 2018 we welcomed a new trails and footpaths venture in Merthyr Tydfil and the first of these, the new “Petticoat trail” opened on International Women’s Day 2018 and ends at St Tydfil’s church.

Tudful was of course one of 25 daughters of Brychan Brycheinion and is reported to have come to a tragic end in this vicinity around 420-480. Thus the assumption that as a town we are named after the Martyr Tydful.

She was an early local convert to Christianity was pursued and murdered by a band of marauding Picts and Saxons travelling to Aberfan. Tudful was considered a martyr on her death in around 480. “Merthyr” reflects the term “Martyr” in English, and tradition holds that, when the town was founded, the name was chosen in her honour. The church was a point of pilgrimage for many.

MYFANWY

Another famous female name with strong links to our town is of course “Myfanwy” written by Merthyr composer Joseph Parry. Her fame has spread wide though I must accept she is a historical character in a song, but the lyrics speak strongly to love lost:

“Anghofia'r oll o'th addewidion
A wnest i rywun, 'ngeneth ddel,
A dyro'th law, Myfanwy dirion
I ddim ond dweud y gair.... "Ffarwél".

“Forget those idly broken pledges
That o'er my heart did cast their spell
Stretch forth thy hand my dear Myfanwy
That I might say one word ...Farewell”.

“Myfanwy” was not a woman of Merthyr, but I have to include her so I can mention Donny Osmond who I saw sing the song at Cyfarthfa Park on his visit and concert in the town in June 2007.

BETI JONES

Myfanwy is not the only character of myth and mystery. We can also find ‘Beti Jones’, the life of a local shepherd’s wife, as described in Tidy Tales for Welsh history telling of the story of “Dic Penderyn and the Merthyr Rising”.

This figure in a short children’s novel however speaks to a Merthyr Tydfil before the great industrial era and perhaps we should remember the women of that time as well, the rural farming community with their homes at the foot of the Brecon Mountains.

But enough of the women of music, myth and mystery.

3. WOMEN OF WEALTH WHO CARED

CRAWSHAY AND GUEST

It is easy to view these women of wealth in Merthyr Tydfil through contemporary eyes, therefore to be judgemental, and not to see them in the context and the conditions of that period. As their history is recorded in many places I am only going to make a passing reference to them both. The main debating issue which arises for me is that their history, recorded by splendid structures, collections of artefacts and good works are recorded due to their wealth, which is in stark contrast to the majority of women in our community.

ROSE MARY CRAWSHAY

She was known as a philanthropic person and following her marriage to the ironmaster R T Crawshay became known as the mistress of Cyfarthfa castle. The castle still contains material to remind us of her contribution. It is thought to be her influence that saw the Crawshay’s fund local schools and libraries and in providing books to read.

Of interest to this pamphlet Rose Mary Crawshay was a vocal early feminist “*and her name is one of the 26 women who gave Welsh addresses when they signed the first women’s Suffrage petition in 1866*”.

“*She was described by the Women’s Herald as ‘one of the most enlightened pioneers of women’s emancipation’.* (Western Mail 6th February 2018).

She served on education boards, visited every family who lost men in a pit disaster, and “prompted a scheme called ‘Lady Helps’ a scheme to get women jobs in wealthy homes”.

Her legacy includes a literary prize still awarded today to a female author of a piece of English literature. She was a remarkable woman of Merthyr Tydfil.

CHARLOTTE GUEST

History notes one of her acts as the first publisher in modern print of the Mabinogion. It is recorded that on her arrival in Wales following marriage to ironmaster John Josiah Guest she spoke seven languages and then also learned Welsh.

Chartism influenced her actions and the need to provide improved facilities for the workforce and an education. It is noted that Lady Charlotte was dedicated in this work and routinely visited schools, especially Dowlais School. She also saw that a library was built.

Upon the death of J J Guest she ran the company, negotiated with the workforce and sustained the business until the time her son was old enough to take over.

In spite of the huge disparities of wealth during those times (we might ask has much changed?) it was quoted about Lady Guest:

“beyond all, she has visited the widow of the fatherless, and fed the poor and the needy”.

I am not adding more to the story of these two remarkable women as their position in society means their story is well told and readily available.

4. MERTHYR WOMEN AND THE SUFFRAGETTE MOVEMENT

JESSICA (“Jessie”) ARSCOTT (1882 -??)

No piece on Merthyr Tydfil’s history would be complete without a contribution from local historian Huw Williams. Can I thank Huw for his contribution on Jessie Arscott.

Here is one of Merthyr Tydfil’s unsung heroines: a locally born Suffragette who went to prison for her belief in the cause of granting women the vote. At spring 1907, as the twenty five year old fourth daughter of James Arscott, who ran a grocery business on Hanover Street off the Brecon Road where she worked as a shop assistant, she ventured to a meeting held at the Ruskin Institute in town, addressed by among others, Adela Pankhurst, one of Emmeline’s daughters.

Jessie was so inspired that with her friend, Mrs Amy Jenkins, wife of a Nantyllyon insurance agent, a Maesteg Suffragette campaigner and secretary of her local branch and with a Miss Watkins also from Maesteg, they travelled to London, the latter two representing their branch. What precisely were Jessie’s motives for this journey are not clear; one newspaper reference (*Western Mail*) has her as a South Wales representative for the women’s movement. But as the local press – *Western Mail*, *Merthyr Guardian* and *Merthyr Express* stated - she was an ardent supporter of the Suffragette cause and her brother Frank was a Labour activist, a member of the Merthyr Tydfil Board of Guardians and a friend of Keir Hardie. The three women

were detained by the police for disorderly behaviour and resisting arrest after a demonstration outside the Houses of Parliament and took the option of fourteen days at Holloway Prison rather than pay the statutory 20 shillings fine.

Jessie was visited there by her MP Keir Hardie and on her release at the beginning of April she stated that she would be disappointed if there would not be a large increase from Merthyr Tydfil at the next demonstration! She was quoted in the *Merthyr Express* (April 6 1907): "*I am going on with it stronger than ever, though it is sure to be a month next time. Fourteen days have made me more determined. The great hardship was the food... The officials were very decent on the whole... We could not get used to be confined in a cell and found the lack of fresh air a great hardship. We only had about an hour daily walking around the yard.*"

Amy Jenkins was quoted by *The Times* (who referred to the two as "twopenny martyrs") as saying: "*We have had an eye-opener. The food and the lack of fresh air especially need amendment. After we have got votes we shall have to alter the prison system. There are many things for women to reform.*" By 1912 force-feeding in prison was the brutal policy of the Liberal Government in response to the increasing militancy of the Suffragette campaigns.

There is a striking portrait of "Miss Arscott" (*Western Mail*, March 22 1907). And the last known reference locally to Jessie finds her married, as listed at the 1911 census, to John Jones, an insurance agent, living at 3 Fothergill Street and with one daughter. Clearly there is more local research to be done on this colourful, brave woman of Merthyr Tydfil. There are occasional anomalies in this story; for example at both 1901 and 1911 census dates, Jessie's father is listed as a coalminer! Here again, this is work in progress!

(Huw is grateful to his colleague Dr Ryland Wallace for several references in the South Wales and national press and at the census dates. His book *The Women's Suffrage Movement In Wales 1866-1928* (University of Wales Press, Cardiff 2009) is required reading and is finally due in paperback format sometime this year The "Arscott" name remains locally, for example at Aberfan, to this day).

5. WOMEN IN CIVIC LIFE

MAYORS OF THE BOROUGH

There was a significant struggle to establish the municipal authority in Merthyr Tydfil, achieved in 1905. It is a tradition the town has defended proudly through the thick and thin of changes in local government administrative arrangements.

In the years since the Council was created I calculate that fourteen women have held the position of Mayor and let us acknowledge them in this paper:

1927/28	Mary Ann Edmunds
1943/44	Mary Thomas
1957/58	Mary McPhall
1962/63	Gwyneth Williams
1967/68	Alice Evans
1977/78	Linda Haines Foster

1978/79	Mary John
1981/82	Mona Shankland
1986/87	Glenys Evans
1989/90	Catherine Rogers
1991/92	Catherine (Kitty) Evans
1993/94	Linda Mathews
2012/13	Lisa Mytton
2016/17	Margaret (Mags) Davies

In this list the name of Mrs Mary Ann Edmunds inevitably catches the eye as she became the first Lady Mayor exactly 90 years ago.

MARY ANN EDMUNDS

She was elected Mayor at the same time, in 1928, that Parliament passed the Equal Franchise Act and gave women equal voting rights with men. All women aged over 21 can now vote in elections. Fifteen million women are eligible. There is a picture of her on the *Old Merthyr Tydfil* website

http://www.alangeorge.co.uk/mayor_MaryAnnEdmunds.htm;

In spite of this remarkable achievement there seems little other recognition of the contribution of Mrs Edmunds to the life of Merthyr Tydfil. Huw Williams summarised as follows:

“the town’s first female mayor, 1927-28, the town’s first female councillor and chair of several committees, she represented Plymouth Ward from 1901 until 1932. Such was Mrs Edmunds’ influence and impact that it was not until after the Second World War that another woman mayor graced the county borough”.

She was deserving of more research for this pamphlet and, thankfully, the “Merthyr Historian” volume 15 came to the rescue. In this volume Mary Patricia Jones provides a chapter on the life of Mary Ann Edmunds “Merthyr Tydfil’s First Lady Mayor”. M P Jones records that *“history has given us many pioneering women, women who have stepped out of the traditional role in life as a wife, mother and housekeeper. One of these is certainly Mary Ann Edmunds, JP, the First Lady Chairman of the Board of Guardians and the first lady Mayor of Merthyr Tydfil”*. She continues:

“To be elected as Mayor in 1927 was an exceptional achievement especially as women did not have the right to vote until after the First World War, and then only those over the age of 30”. It is of course this centenary we are marking this year.

“Although it was 1927, Victorian values still prevailed with its containment of women, patriarchal society where the majority of women were considered intellectually inferior, subservient to their husband’s wishes and fit only to be concerned with domestic or ‘drawing room.’ affairs”.

Mary Ann Edmunds entered public after the death of her father, a respected councillor who came from the managerial class of the ironworks and became manager of the Plymouth works and collieries. He became Mayor and High Sheriff

and was “*considered a kind man with much compassion for the poor*”. Upon his death in 1911 Mary Ann Edmunds assumed his duties.

So we can see, and probably interpret that here was a daughter of the middle class of that period, highly placed in the local industry, serving a liberal interest in alleviating the situation of the poor.

Mary Ann Edmunds married David Edmunds in 1892 and they lived at Plas-y-Coed in Troedyrhiw. This property features strongly in her life and her role in the community. She was widowed after nine years of marriage and it would appear she then committed even more to public service.

“There is no doubt that Mary Ann Edmunds was one of society’s special women, a pioneer of her time”. The article notes, almost to highlight this, that at this same time *“the Western Mail argued that barristers were impeded by the presence of women in the jury box”*.

An article published at the time of Mary Ann’s election states *“women came into their own, legislature has made them the equal of men in the state”*. Perhaps more optimistically (we can now reflect) it stated:

“Moreover she will soon become the dominant civil owner in the country when the new enfranchisement of these at the age of 21 comes in to force”. (Merthyr Express 12th November 1927).

Again the article notes that the Merthyr Express recorded in August 16th 1919 *“there was never a greater need than at present for the fusion into our public life of the humanising influence of woman”*.

Mary Ann Edmunds was First Lady justice of the peace. Then in 1927 after serving for many years as the only female member and chairman of the council, Mrs Mary Ann Edmunds was unanimously elected as the First Lady Mayor of the Borough of Merthyr Tydfil. There was a large gathering for the ceremony.

MONA SHANKLAND

The other name to pick out from the list is Mona Shankland who became not only Mayor but also leader of Merthyr Tydfil Borough Council.

THE COUNCIL CHAMBER TODAY

Now when I look at the local Merthyr Tydfil CBC council chamber in 2018 - I wonder how much progress has truly been made after this early pioneer!

Sadly after the 2017 council elections – our council chamber in Merthyr Tydfil is a somewhat poor reflection of the gender balance of the community but we record that the following four women currently serve in our County Borough: Rhonda Braithwaite (Gurnos), Sherelle Jago (Bedlinog), Lisa Mytton (Vaynor) and Tanya Skinner (Park).

In the Council Chamber of Caerphilly CBC the Upper Rhymney valley has the following women as representatives: Eluned Stenner (New Tredegar) and Gaynor Oliver (Pontlottyn).

6. WOMEN OF WORK

WORKING WOMEN IN OUR HISTORY

It was useful to review Joe England's book "Merthyr The Crucible of Modern Wales" with women in mind.

We find a description about Merthyr in the late 18th century we find "*the women rearing a family on inadequate incomes, coping with disease and sickness and unnecessary incursions of dust and dirt*".

The collective fight against poverty saw the formation of many Friendly Societies, indeed between 1796-1848 England reports "*there were 21 formed to help women in confinement, females and to provide modest burials*".

England notes "*reliable data for the number of females in employment before 1851 does not exist. After that date numerous detailed problems exist with the way persons and jobs were classified from one census to the next*". However he writes "*The data for 1851 revealed that 4894 females were in paid employment in Merthyr Tydfil, 23.3 per cent of the total number of females aged ten years and over, and 12.7 per cent of the total occupied labour force*". England records the occupations as Dressmaking, Mines and Quarries, Metals, Machines etc., Food, drink, lodging Agriculture and professional occupations.

In 1850 he notes a report that of "*6,000 employed at Dowlais only 180 were females, of 5,000 at Cyfarthfa 150 were females, and at Plymouth only 175 out of 2750*". England notes that this report in the Morning Chronicle put total the number of "*females employed in the manufacture of iron in Merthyr and Dowlais at 625 out of almost 16,000 male and female employees*".

The book records that women were found working in the ironworks as: 'poll-girls', 'coke girls', 'limestone girls', 'tippers', 'pilars' and in manufacturing fire bricks. On this last job England records "*a more humiliating and uncongenial occupation for the sex is hardly to be found through the entire range of our industrial economy*".

England also notes "*The Morning Chronicle correspondent recorded en passant that female domestic servants were prized as wives compared with those who laboured in the ironworks or brick works, because they knew 'middle class ways' and how to run a home*".

"The arduous, exhausting and essential housework of wives and mothers in industrial communities remains largely unrecorded". (England 2017).

This in turn reflects what Joe England reports as "*only certain people were allowed to acquire "skill" women and Irish were excluded*". (my emphasis)

Perhaps what Hilary Clinton in her recent book "What Happened", mostly called "emotional labor". It is a term she ascribes to more recent feminist thinking to "*describe all the unpaid, unaccounted, unseen work that people - overwhelmingly women perform to keep their families and workplaces humming along*".

Joe England also references the living and working conditions of shop assistants in 1911: "*filthy conditions, fleas and bugs, one water closet to share, one bathroom and infested with rats*".

England also records the changing patterns of employment over time. He notes that in 1911 "*Paid work in the borough remained overwhelmingly a man's world*". The two largest occupations were "*the same as those sixty years earlier*" "*but in the more arduous occupations there had been a dramatic decline*".

With that period of decline in the town, which reached a low point when in 1939 England reports the town was written off due to its economic situation. At that time it had a surplus of women but due to its isolation was then able to staff the munitions factories for the war and women were the centre of that effort.

So England records that, with this turnaround, in 1938 11 women in work for every man, when by 1965 it was 1 woman to 2 men.

EDITH GERTRUDE PHILLIPS

The Merthyr Girl-Collier (1901)

Old Merthyr Times helpfully captures one story from the start of the 20th century and records the story of Edith a fifteen year old girl found working as a boy in one of the Plymouth ironworks' collieries. She was subject to what we would now call child abuse at home so had left, cut her hair, put on boys clothes and walked to Dowlais to look for a job. That proved fruitless so she moved to Plymouth colliery and found work, took lodgings in Abercenaid, where she was then discovered and taken to the Infirmary.

The equivalent of the NSPCC intervened and a "Public Appeal" was made to raise funds for Edith "*to give her a good outfit in clothing, and to see that her elementary education is completed, and then to give her a fair start towards earning her own livelihood*".

Edith was briefly sent home before being removed to the Salvation Army in Cardiff. The report suggests that Edith later returned to Merthyr due to ill health. But we can finish on a brighter note as Old Merthyr Tydfil reports that Edith didn't die at the workhouse, she recovered and went on to work, in service at a house in Penydarren, and died in 1963 at the age of 77.

Edith's story is included here as it illustrates a time, not that long ago, but before our welfare state, in which girls and women had to labour hard, or depend on charity in order to survive.

LUCY THOMAS

Lucy Thomas (1781-1847) was one of the most remarkable people in the South Wales coalfield. She is considered to be the '*Mother of the Welsh steam coal trade*'. It was the coal from the Waun Wylt Colliery at Troedyrhiw opened by her husband Robert in 1824 that helped to establish the reputation of Welsh coal on the London market. This success is now commemorated by the fountain in Llys Janice Rowlands.

This fountain was a gift of Sir William Thomas Lewis, the Merthyr-born coal magnate and philanthropist, as a tribute to Robert and Lucy Thomas, his wife's grandparents.

The inscription reads: Erected by Sir William T Lewis and William Thomas Rees of Aberdare and presented to their native town in the commemoration of Robert and Lucy Thomas of Waunwyllt in this parish, the pioneers in 1828 of the South Wales steam coal trade.

LAURA ASHLEY

Although her Welsh parents lived in London, her mother returned home to allow Laura Mounthey to be born in Wales at her grandmother's home, 31 Station Terrace, in Dowlais, Merthyr Tydfil.

Born in the town, and founder of a hugely successful international business, we find little evidence of this in Merthyr Tydfil itself. I wonder whether this is a missed opportunity? If there was some exhibition of Laura Ashley products, designs and achievements would it not draw visitors in to the town?

MARION JONES – HOOVER

When we look at women in work we will also find women as trade union activists.

While a plaque has been given in memory of local man - Moss Evans - who became leader of the TGWU, the role of women in our trade unions is less recognised.

Marion Jones said she felt like a “millionaire” when she received £10 in her pay packet at Hoover, which was on the Pentrebach estate in Merthyr Tydfil, in 1963 – especially as she also had weekly, monthly and Christmas bonuses for her hard work.

By the early 1970s, Marion was already a union shop steward at the factory and she led an approach by the Hoover women to their employers with a request for equal pay with their male counterparts. The women were inspired by the famous Dagenham Ford women’s strike for equal pay.

When Hoover upped the Merthyr women’s wages, the male employees took their opposition to the picket line in an unofficial strike.

Marion said: *“We approached management and they said, ‘Well, we’ve got no qualms about the equality you know. It’s been brought in and we’re in agreement’.*

“But, of course, the [union] convenor stepped in then and said the women weren’t doing the work the same as the men.

“It started this animosity and the men decided to go on strike, although it was against the law.

“They were on strike for two days – they lost two days’ pay over it. But they had to give in in the end. It wasn’t a very pleasant time at all, not at all”.

“Once equal pay came in, they expected women to work on lines. I ended up on the tumble dryer line, horrible jobs, but the men used to come around and say, ‘Well, you’re having the same money, you’re expected to do the same job’.

“So they’d throw anything at us. The bad feeling lasted years.”

Years later, the kindred links between the Hoover and Dagenham women were seen by millions when film makers retold the Ford story in the ‘Made in Dagenham’ filmed in disused parts of the Hoover factory in Pentrebach as a film set.

"Once the equality (Equal Pay Act) came in you could feel the bitterness coming in with the men you know. They didn't want us to have equal pay, not by no means. They had to give in in the end... but it wasn't a very pleasant time ... not at all."

Thanks to women like Marion who stood up for equality and rights in the workplace.

7. THE WOMEN WHO TEACH

Women have always played a key role in education and have a strong track record in supporting our children to grow and develop. Many local history texts refer to women who served on the education boards in the 19th century.

URSULA MASSON

It might be misleading to so simply try and categorise Ursula Masson as she was a woman who made many things happen. She was proud to call herself a feminist, she was a fine scholar and an inspirational teacher whose passionate commitment to women and to politics was evident to everyone who knew her.

As a history lecturer at the then University of Glamorgan from 1994, she became a leading figure in the field of women’s history, especially Welsh women’s political history. Ursula was an early proponent of what is now called ‘Impact’. That is, she took historical research out of the academy and back out into the wider world. She was one of the founders of Archif Menywod Cymru/Women’s Archive of Wales. Their very successful women’s history roadshows were initially her idea and she was instrumental in pushing through the Heritage Lottery bid which gained the fund to support this campaign.

Her published work included two editions of women’s political writing for Honno Press: Elizabeth Andrews’ autobiography/memoir, *A Woman’s Work is Never Done* (2006), and *The Very Salt of Life: Welsh Women’s Political Writings from Chartism to Suffrage* (2007). She also produced an edition of the minute book of the Aberdare Women’s Liberal Association from 1891-1907, entitled: *‘Women’s Rights and Womanly Duties’* (2005). An active member of Llafur, the Welsh People’s History Society, she was also co-editor of their journal. And she was Chair of the West of England and South Wales Women’s History Network.

“She was born in Merthyr Tydfil, and was educated at Cyfarthfa Grammar School. After attending Cardiff University, Ursula then worked in Australia as a journalist on the Sydney Morning Herald from 1969 until 1972. Returning to the UK, she took an MA at the University of Keele, writing a dissertation on Irish immigration to Merthyr. After working in adult education in Swansea, Ursula joined the history department at the University of Glamorgan in the mid-1990s. Here she had a particular interest in women’s history and feminism, and she co-founded the Centre for Gender Studies in Wales with Professor Jane Aaron. Her PhD thesis, submitted in May 2007, examined Welsh women’s liberalism in the 19th century. Ursula was also co-editor of Llafur, the annual journal of the Welsh People’s History Society, a founding member of the

Women's Archive of Wales, and chairwoman of the West of England and South Wales Women's History Network".

She also set up, with Professor Jane Aaron, the Centre for Gender Studies in Wales at the University of South Wales, which hosts an annual lecture on International Women's Day in her memory.

LORRAINE BUCK

Lorraine was corporate director of people and performance on Merthyr Tydfil CBC. She helped deliver the education service out of 'special measures' by prioritising leadership and the quality of teaching in local schools. It is more recent a contribution that we should not forget.

TEACHERS TODAY

So can I also note that the current set of head teachers across our Boroughs includes:

Ms K Lock, Mrs J Edwards, Mrs R Williams, Mrs S Williams, Mrs J Brill, Mrs L Bibby, Mrs A Morris, Mrs J Rome, Mrs S Roden, Mrs J Jones, Mrs K Lewis, Mrs K Wathan, Ms A Sims and in Rhymney: Mrs S Pascoe, Mrs K D Thompson, Miss S King, Mrs S Davies.

8. WOMEN IN MEDICINE AND SCIENCE

DOROTHY GRATTON - "A FEMALE IN MEDICINE"

Volume 13 of Merthyr Historian brings us an autobiographical chapter by Dorothy Gratton. It sets out her role as the first woman consultant in Merthyr Tydfil and the first woman consultant obstetrician in Wales. She records how on her appointment to Merthyr the annual Christmas dinner was always a male only event, and the solution following her appointment was, for the first time, to invite their wives.

Her chapter tells us that on her arrival in Merthyr in 1964 there was no family planning nearer than Cardiff so large families were the norm. She notes that *"on wanting to include a family planning clinic in my work timetable I was told by the Regional Board, who employed me, that family planning was not part of my job"*.

So let us now applaud Dorothy's decision to then work part time and to start a clinic in Merthyr Tydfil under the auspices of the Family Planning Association.

Dorothy was clearly a remarkably skilled woman, but who understood the needs of women of that time, and took her own action to improve the situation for others.

LOUISE WALBY - NURSE OF THE YEAR

This year I had the great pleasure of meeting Louise Walby the RCN Nurse of the year whose work covers Merthyr. She received the accolade for her work in tackling some of the worst mortality rates from chronic lung disease in the UK.

MARGARET STEWART TAYLOR

Vol 15 of Merthyr historian also introduces us to “Margaret Stewart Taylor M.A F.L.A A Notable Woman of Merthyr Tydfil”. The article reports that the librarian and curator of Cyfarthfa, “she can be regarded as one of the most remarkable women associated with the Borough”. It is noted “she admired Rose Mary Crawshay for her champions of women’s rights, and she shared her resentment that men kept all the best positions employment for themselves”. Originally a wartime appointee but due to her outstanding abilities as a librarian she was appointed to Merthyr in 1946. The article reports “*considering the prevailing attitudes of the time, it could be considered as a source of pride that the Local Authority in Merthyr Tydfil appointed an English woman to a top position, thus demonstrating an early non-sexist and liberal approach*”. Carolyn Jacob notes “*During council meetings Margaret Taylor was a woman in a male environment. Merthyr Tydfil Council was dominated by men, who had their ways of putting career women in their proper place, using comments about dress or hair, which would have been highly inappropriate when dealing with men*”.

We introduced the mobile library service in 1959 and a school library service. She “*established a local history room in the Museum*”, some 50 years before this became very fashionable.

Margaret Taylor was a writer of fiction and non-fiction and in her retirement travelled widely including in the early 70’s the Falklands, Iran and Belize.

Well respected in the town in March 1990 a chapel was dedicated in her name in St Tydfil’s hospital by the Soroptimists International Merthyr Tydfil. “She had been founder President of the local Soroptimists, a society for career women like herself”.

PROFESSOR JULIE WILLIAMS

A remarkable woman of our age is Professor Julie Williams who was Chief Scientific Adviser for Wales from September 2013 to September 2017. Julie also has a plaque in the ‘Heroes and Villains’ set on the walls of the Redhouse – Old Town Hall.

Julie is a world leading expert on Alzheimer’s.

As recorded in a Western Mail article in November 2012 “*As a child I had this burning interest in all things that weren’t fully understood and the idea of having insight into something no one else knew about really intrigued me,*” says the Cardiff-based 55-year-old who’s now one of the world’s leading figures in Alzheimer’s research, an achievement for which she was awarded a CBE in the Queen’s recent Birthday Honours list”. You can read more here:

<https://www.walesonline.co.uk/lifestyle/showbiz/how-professor-julie-williams-went-2017479;>

WELSH NHS AND SOCIAL CARE TODAY!

I am also very conscious, as a former UNISON official, that across our communities today there will be women delivering health and social care to many of our citizens.

They will be in Prince Charles hospital, in our integrated health centres, in the community undertaking many roles in primary medicine and care, while also carrying out vital roles in child care and protection.

Thanks to you all for your remarkable work.

9. THE WOMEN OF JOURNALISM

MELANIE DOLE

Though not inevitable, it is perhaps not remarkable that the journalist Melanie Dole reflected strongly the role of women in writing the book "Is it still raining in Aberfan?" A pit and its people". We can include Melanie in our list as she moved to Merthyr in 1976 and worked on the Merthyr Express. The book contains a number of stories that reflect local lives over time.

The book features Bet Carey speaking about tough economic times states "*I remember how whenever there was a knock on my door my mother would send me, as a small girl, to the door and like all the children I was trained to say "my father's not here, he's out trying for a job"*

Bet Carey's recollections of life in earlier times are only one of many in this book. During the 1926 strike Dole records the memory of Suzette Evans stating "*If we wanted to call a meeting or get the community together the women would go out into the street with tins and drums and spoons and bang them together until everyone came out*".

The book deals with the Aberfan disaster and also reflects the experience of Gaynor Madgewick. Gaynor's thoughts in this book are perhaps one component of another set of remarkable women in this area - **the Aberfan wives**.

As well as the toil, hardship and disasters of the coalfield communities this book also reminds us of other important aspects of the lives of women that arose from these communities of coal and iron.

CEINWEN STATTER

In preparing this pamphlet I was also guided by conversations with Ceinwen Statter and it is easy to overlook that Ceinwen herself was the first female sub-editor of the South Wales Echo. No mean achievement in its day and Ceinwen deserves recognition for this, and so many other contributions to the community of Merthyr Tydfil and beyond.

KATIE SANDS - JOURNALIST

I came across Katie when I was standing for election and then in the wake of the more recent local debate around the TV series "Valleys Cops". From Merthyr Tydfil, and now working for Media Wales, Katie was upset by the portrayal of her home town by the programme. Katie deserves a mention as a young woman who spoke up in defence of Merthyr Tydfil:

"Being a Merthyr girl through and through, you could say I'm pretty fond of the town. My parents and grandparents were all brought up in Merthyr and spent their lives there"

You can read her piece here:

<https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/there-plenty-people-hometown-doing-13765605>;

What strikes me is that the testimonies to recent good work featured in Katie's article are women:

local florist **Suzanne Edwards** who was behind the amazing bows for the Mia rainbow warrior fundraising campaign, and **Sarah Draper** of Inspire Fitness and organiser of the Merthyr Tydfil marathon and "Merthyr Girls Can".

Local women speaking up for, and delivering positive change in our community.

10. WOMEN AGAINST PIT CLOSURES

The rise of Women against pit closures was a force that helped to sustain the strikers, but became an enabling social force of change for women in its own right. Melanie Dole records the story of Maureen Hughes and Eunice Tovey stating "*The 1984/85 strike made many women more politically aware, at least for a while, as they fought to feed and clothe their families.*"

As a result more than a hundred women's support groups were formed in Wales with over 1000 active members".

Maureen Hughes records her memory of being on the picket line through the words of a striker:

"You were the woman on the picket line - you'll never know how much that boosted morale just seeing you there supporting us".

Maureen remained active after the strike and served Aberfan as a Labour councillor until 1991.

I find the Dole and Dunkerton book interesting as it draws upon the experiences of women. I wonder whether that is a result of the circumstance or gender of the author. It may even be because of both.

11. WOMEN OF CHARITY / COMMUNITY PROJECTS

In my role as Assembly member I frequently come across groups of women in our community who are carrying out modern day charitable work. Like those who were on charitable boards of early times these women contribute so much voluntary effort to making our life in our communities better: the Soroptimists, McMillan charity work, Inner Wheel and so forth. We also are familiar with the ongoing work of the Women's Institute and Merched Y Wawr (now in its 50th year). In previous times we find the Darby and Joan clubs such as those in Edwardsville featured on reharrisdistrict.co.uk.

In reviewing the work of many community groups it is often women who have led the way. The work that was carried out with Forsythia Youth by Geraldine Maddison, the work being carried out by the Gellideg Foundation, women who lead in the voluntary sector via Voluntary Action Merthyr Tydfil, the team in Merthyr and the Valleys Mind helping with mental health support in the community, dementia support, homelessness and supporting people projects. Dr Lesley Hodgson ran Focal Point and with colleagues like Judith Mulry (Equalities Manager at Merthyr College) organised Merthyr Global Village. Karen Dugate was a former Chief Executive at Merthyr Tydfil Housing Association and chair of the festival.

Women play leading roles in many of these community settings.

12. WOMEN OF SPORT

Our town of Merthyr Tydfil likes a boxer, and seems keen to put up statues to them!

But we should also celebrate the achievements of women in sport.

Women of course have a strong record in many sporting field with women teams at both Merthyr Tydfil FC and rugby clubs.

VENESSA HEAD

In 1984 we find Venessa Head of Edwardsville who represented Great Britain in the discus and shot at the Los Angeles Olympic Games.

SARAH DRAPER

Sarah leads Inspire Fitness who runs “Merthyr Girls Can” and transforms lives. She also organises the Merthyr Tydfil marathon and herself exceeds in running.

LATALIA BEVAN

Only recently Latalia Bevan from Merthyr Tydfil won a Commonwealth silver medal in gymnastics.

HELEN PHILIPS

Of course in the last few months the 2018 Welsh Commonwealth team was led by Helen Phillips of Merthyr Tydfil.

13. THE WOMEN SHAPING OUR TIMES

It is perhaps encouraging that in turning my thoughts to the current day it is far easier to identify the women who are now helping to shape our times.

Apart from myself as the Assembly Member we can quickly look across our public and private sectors to find so many women who play a vital role in leading organisations and within services that serve our communities of Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney. This includes – **this list is not exhaustive!!** :

- Victoria Winkler heading the Bevan Foundation,
- Christina Harray Chief Executive at Caerphilly County Borough Council,
- Allison Williams Chief Executive of Cwm Taf Health Board,
- Judith Paget Chief Executive Aneurin Bevan Local Health Board,
- Current Merthyr Tydfil and Caerphilly CB councillors listed earlier,
- Mags Davies Merthyr Trades Council,
- Julie Lydon, Vice Chancellor USW,
- Rhian Prosser Merthyr town centre manager,
- Belinda Davies, Chief Superintendent of Police who serves on the Cwm Taf LSB,
- Eirian Evans of NPS who serves on the Cwm Taf LSB,
- Nadia de Longhi of NRW who serves on the Cwm Taf LSB,
- Jean Harrington of Interlink who serves on the Cwm Taf LSB,
- Directors of Merthyr Leisure Trust Janet Morgan, Leanne Jones and Hannah Kester,

- Katie Howells making a mark on the Housing sector through Merthyr Valleys Homes alongside Director of Finance Lorraine Oates and Director of Operations Victoria Slade,
- Karen Courts and Delyth Evans, Chief Executive and Director at Merthyr Tydfil Housing Association,
- Val Williams who helps co-ordinate volunteers for the Merthyr Night shelter,
- Emma Saunders Cluster Manager (Rhymney), Caerphilly CBC,
- Faith leaders in our community including Charlotte Rushton,
- Lis McLean at Canolfan Soar achieving so much for the arts, culture and Welsh language in the town,
- The team at the Gellideg Foundation including Helen Buhaenko.

Please let me know who else we should add to this current day list as remarkable women of our time.

I hope to invite you all to an event later in the year as we celebrate remarkable women of Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney.

I know that this is a far from exhaustive list, but each is playing their part in shaping the current chapter of our community. I doubt whether our community has ever had such a significant number of women in leadership roles, though we must leave it to future historians who will, in due course, interpret and evaluate our contribution.

14. CONCLUSION

I ended up with a longer pamphlet than I expected. But in reality it took some extended research time in order to scan the books, and to read the articles with a fresh eye and a new mission. The stories of the Remarkable Women of Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney are clearly not as well told as the men.

So finally to **ALL the women** in our community, thank you for:

- what you achieved in helping to build Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney,
- leading the way today, while often balancing home and work and caring duties,
- carrying the burden of “emotional labor” that I referenced earlier in this piece.

I salute you all – the remarkable Women of Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney.

Corrections

As I said at the start the content of this pamphlet is all my responsibility. Thanks however go to my Senior Adviser Martin for research support.

If there are any corrections, additions or issues arising that I need to consider please email me: Dawn.bowden@assembly.wales or write to:

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(Promoted and printed by Dawn Bowden AM to be contacted at the above address).

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