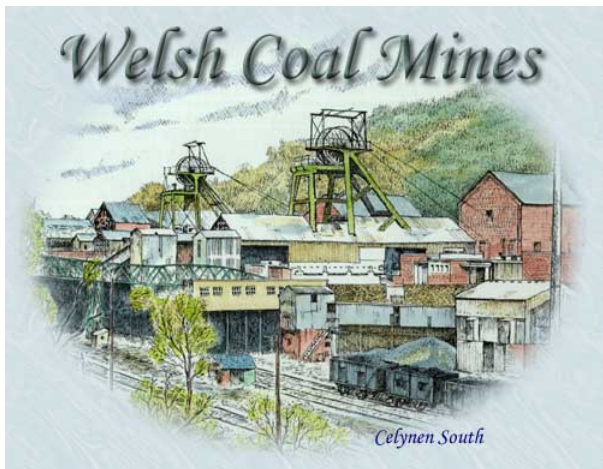




WALES, MALE CHOIRS and COAL

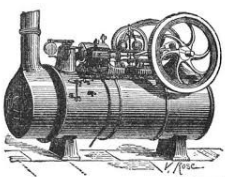


When the topic of Wales is brought up in conversation, it invariably includes Male Choirs and coal mining. Generally however, not a great deal is known about either of these subjects – especially coal mining!

LET'S TALK ABOUT COAL MINING

As in most countries of the world, there had been coal mining of some description in Wales for hundreds of years for fuel for cooking, warming and to a much lesser degree for smithy's furnaces and for industrial smelting. In fact there had been small-scale mining in Wales in the pre-Roman British Iron Age, but it was undertaken on an industrial scale under the Romans, who completed their conquest of Wales in AD 78. Substantial quantities of gold, copper, and lead were also mined, along with lesser amounts of zinc and silver. Mining would continue until the process was no longer practical or profitable, at which time the mine would be abandoned. The extensive excavations of the Roman operations at Dolaucothi provide a picture of the high level of Roman technology and the expertise of Roman engineering in the ancient era.

There is evidence of mining in the Blaenavon area going back to the 14th century, and there is evidence of mine workings at Mostyn as far back as AD126, but it is believed to have been practiced there as well in early Roman times. The coal mining industry burgeoned throughout the Industrial Revolution (1760 1990) and into the 19th century, when shafts were sunk to complement the open-cast mining and drift mining already exploiting the ample and obvious coal resources.



But what really caused the explosion of coal mining in Wales and the Industrial Revolution itself was the invention of the steam engine.

Inventive minds quickly created machinery that could be driven by steam engines to largely replace manual labour and perform manufacturing methods and achieve efficiency and quality levels never before possible. But steam engines required good quality steaming coal and Wales was found to possess

the finest steaming coal in Europe. The resultant demand for Welsh coal caused hundreds of mines to be opened together with their attendant headstocks and processing buildings, winding houses, etc., and of course the rail networks to transport the coal from the mines to the two shipping ports of Swansea and Barry. By 1913 Barry became the largest coal exporting port in the world with Cardiff second. These mines and their buildings,



mountains of overburden from tunneling and of stored coal, defaced and destroyed the beauty of the valleys and hills of Wales. Fortunately much has, and is being done now, to restore these hills and valleys to their former glory. The terraced miner's cottages remained and have grown to become some of the settled towns of Wales - Towns such as Treorchy and Aberdare.

During the first half of the nineteenth century mining was often at the centre of working-class discontent in Wales, and a number of uprisings such as the Merthyr Rising in 1831 against employers were characteristic of the Industrial Revolution in Wales, Dic Penderyn became a martyr to industrial workers. The Chartist movement and the 1839 Newport Rising showed the growing concerns and awareness of the work force of their value to the nation.



Although the Factory Acts of the 1830's and resultant Mines Act of 1842 were meant to prevent women and boys and girls under 10 years of age from working underground, it is believed they were widely ignored. To replace female and child labour the pit pony was more widely introduced. Much later, in the middle of the 20th century, mining was still a hazardous enterprise, resulting in many accidents and long term ill-health with many retired miners still suffering from silicosis and other mining related diseases.

Incorporating the existing Coity colliery and Kearsley's pit (sunk in 1860), the Big Pit opened in 1880 - so called because it was the first shaft in Wales large enough to allow two tramways. At the height of coal production, there were over 160 drift mines and over 30 shafts working the nine seams in the Blaenavon locality.

Big Pit alone employed some 1,300 men digging a quarter of a million tons of coal a year. Large amounts of coal were needed to supply the local ironworks, as it took 3 tons of coal to produce a ton of iron. Blaenavon 'steam' coal was of high quality and it was exported globally. Burning hotly while leaving minimum ash, it was ideal to power the steam engines that drove steamships, Dreadnoughts of the Royal Navy and steam locomotive railways across the world.

However after World War 1, both economics and politics took their toll resulting in a general strike. The 1930s Depression and later Nationalisation and the miners' strike of 1984-1985 took their toll as well, and all the smaller pits were either abandoned or swallowed into Big Pit's encroaching search for new seams. Finally in February 1980 the coal ran out and even the Big Pit, then the oldest mine in Wales, had to close. There are still nine headstocks remaining in Wales, including Big Pit (the metal frame was erected in 1921 during the Miners' Strike of that year, to replace a wooden structure).



There is a well-known mining song, part in Welsh and part in English.

*I am a little collier and gweithio underground
The raff will never torri when I go up and down
It's bara when I'm hungry
And cwrw when I'm dry
It's gwely when I'm tired
And nefoedd when I die.*

The complete English translation is as follows:-

*I am a little collier and working underground
The rope will never break when I go up and down
It's bread when I'm hungry
And beer when I'm dry
It's bed when I'm tired
And heaven when I die.*

COAL OUTPUT & EMPLOYMENT

Steady increases in output and manpower meant that the early 20th century gave Wales its peak production figures.

No less than 57million tons of coal was produced in 1913, by 232,000 men working in 620 mines. The largest number of men ever to work in the Welsh coal mines was 271,000 in 1920.

Wales during these times had almost total employment with most of the people, men, women and children, employed in mining or mine related activities. Most of the men who went off to fight in WW1 were therefore miners or men employed in the mining industry, and so the effect on output was quite severe. This attracted workers from Italy, Spain, and many other countries to help boost production, resulting in a multi-cultural environment in Welsh mining areas.

Post war, there was a recession in the coal market, due to a combination of a move to oil power by shipping and the rapid development of coal industries in overseas countries and the cessation of manufacturing for the "war effort".

The monologue that introduces the Welsh song "**Come Home Rhondda Boy**" relates to this situation and describes the effect that it had on the people and the resulting migration of the unemployed and their families:-

"At the end of the 1914 – 18 War the weary men returned home from the battlefields of Europe to a land fit for heroes. But somehow things didn't turn-out quite that way. In just a few years, the mine owners of South Wales, told their miners "You'll work longer hours for less wages". But in the streets of Porth in the Rhodda Valley, the battle cry rose:-

"Not a penny off our pay and not a minute on our day!" –

and the miners went on strike – It was a long and bitter fight. Times were hard and children went hungry, and many families left the valleys to seek a better life in big cities all over the world".

NB: Porth - in 1841 Richard Lewis joined Coffin in trying to exploit this region with his level mine built at Cymmer. This resulted in the construction of around fifty miner's cottages, several of which were located in Porth. In 1844 Lewis Edwards of Newport and George Gethin of Penygraig opened a small level mine at Nyth-bran on the eastern borders of

Porth, the village's first coal mine. This was followed in 1845 by the sinking of the Porth Colliery by David James of Merthyr, the success of which saw him build the Llwynycelyn Colliery in 1951, also in Porth. By 1850 the Taff Vale Railway had been extended to Cymmer replacing the tramline, allowing direct access between the lower Rhondda and the ports of Barry and Cardiff.

In the Post World War 1 period and up to 1936, the decline in demand for Welsh coal, caused over 140,000 miners to be laid-off. South Wales lost 241 mines in the same period.

World War Two didn't buck the trend in terms of production, but indirectly it had the effect of instilling some optimism. The Labour government of 1945 - the *Welfare State government* - nationalised the coal industry on 1 January 1947, taking it out of the hands of private firms. It was thought that this move would safeguard jobs and mines, as the government would be less likely than private owners to cut and run or make a quick sale.

At the time, there were still 135 collieries operating with over 250 workers each and although exports through Cardiff had fallen from 25 million tons in 1913 to 750,000 tons in 1947! Much needed modernisation was put in place together with vestment. Investment meant better and more machinery and a greater emphasis on safety, but it couldn't safeguard the coal industry in Wales.

The rise of the oil industry and other factors meant that 50 collieries closed in South Wales between 1957 and 1964. Although there was some respite in the 1970s due to the oil crisis, by the 1980s it was almost all over for the coal industry in Wales and the rest of the UK. A last gasp of industrial action, the 1984 miners' strike, was not enough to prevent the death of an industry that was once the biggest single employer in Wales and held the most powerful workforce.

WELSH MALE CHOIRS

Of course you are familiar with Welsh Choirs – you have attended our concerts and enjoyed the benefit of a choir that has built on the traditions and musicality of generations of Welsh choirs before us. We have been acclaimed by Dr. Alwyn Humphreys, our Patron and former Music Director of the World famous Morriston Orpheus Choir, to be, "*as good as Wales has to Offer*".

Our aim is to continue with the traditions of male Welsh choir singing and in so doing, to continue to promote the "*language of Heaven!*"

Choral singing:

When people speak of Wales, they commonly think of male voice choirs. Many male choirs had their roots in the competitive choral singing and heavy industry of the 19th century. Often a group of miners working together would form a choir to enter a competition or eisteddfod and disband shortly after. Other choirs thrived and survived, such as the Treorchy and Morriston Orpheus choirs, that are now famous throughout the world. It is said that the womenfolk encouraged their men to join choirs to keep them out of the pubs! The irony of this statement is that after choir rehearsals



or concerts the choristers generally retire to a pub to “continue and confirm”, what they had learnt at rehearsal, or to celebrate a successful concert and of course for medicinal purposes relating to the whetting of their throats – a much needed medical requirement!

More recently there has been a resurgence of Welsh male choral singing. Tim Rhys-Evans, (the former musical director of the Welsh National Youth Opera and a classically trained singer) formed the popular & award winning choir - “Only Men Aloud!” followed by the “Only Boys Aloud! and “Only Kids Aloud!” choirs, helping to ensure that choirs have a future among the younger generation in Wales.

Although male choirs seem to be particularly associated with Wales, female and mixed choirs are equally popular and these days singing in a choir is increasingly recognised for its enjoyment, health and wellbeing benefits, particularly memory and lung health.

Choral Traditions:

Wales gained the reputation as the “land of song” in the 19th century, with Nonconformist choral singing and Eisteddfodau. The 18th century saw the rise of Methodist movement and singing hymns was an important part of the experience. Many of the hymns or their tunes written in Wales are familiar world wide today.

For example, William Williams wrote “Guide me, O Thou great Redeemer” to the tune of Cwm Rhondda. His words have been translated into 75 languages. Joseph Parry, born 1841 in Merthyr Tydfil is best known for his hymns Myfanwy and Aberystwyth, which are still sung today. Nkosi Sikelel’ Afrika is famous as an anthem of African unity and uses the tune of Aberystwyth.

Congregational singing gained momentum with the rise of the temperance movement in the early part of the 19th century, and annual festivals for singing were established.

Although there has been a decline in the number of people attending chapel, hymn singing remains popular in Wales. Hymns are also popular as “club songs” at rugby matches.

Often called “Bread of Heaven”, “Guide Me o Though Great Redeemer”, is known as the Welsh Rugby hymn and Max Boyce also captured the spirit of Rugby with his “Hymns and Arias” song. Today these songs are sung at many sporting events when ever/where ever a Welsh team is involved.

Gymanfa Ganu: (pronounced: Gumanva Garni)

A Gymanfa Ganu is a Welsh festival involving the singing of sacred hymns. It involves the congregation singing in four part harmony in Welsh and is conducted by a choral director or choir master. The annual Cymanfa Ganu is a key event at the National Eisteddfod of Wales. Wherever in the world Welsh people congregate, there is a good chance that a Gymanfa Ganu will take place.

The three Welsh Choirs of Melbourne and the Geelong Ladies Welsh Choir join together each year to celebrate St David’s Day with a Gymanfa Ganu. It is usually conducted by a guest conductor from Wales and all are welcome to attend

and join us in song. The Gymanfu Ganu event is particularly popular in North America.

This year our Gymanfa Ganu was held on Sunday, March 1, 2015 at 3pm in St Michael’s Uniting Church, 120 Collins Street, Melbourne. The guest conductor was Geraint Roberts and it was a huge success and enjoyed by all participating Welsh choirs and the congregation alike.

In each newsletter we will introduce one or two of the choristers who have recently joined our choir. In this newsletter we feature Brian Irvine and Paul Etherington. They will describe in their own words who they are and why they joined MWMC

MEET BRIAN IRVINE:

So . . . who is Brian Irvine and just why is he in the Melbourne Welsh Male Choir (MWMC)?



Well, one of the unfortunate realities of being 57, is that there are very few groups that you can join and be seen as a “fresh young face!” The choir does that in spades and also enables me to combine a love of singing with a sense of helping the community in keeping a bunch of old codgers off the streets on Wednesday nights and on the occasional Saturday or Sunday! Seriously though, I am exploring what I should have explored in my youth. I suspected I had a voice worthy of something better than singing in the shower, but well short of being in front of thousands of screaming/adoring fans. I was harassed to join the school choir but that was a seriously uncool thing to do at Christchurch (NZ) Boys High when it meant being in rehearsals instead of “going hard” in the playground. Unfortunately my efforts in the playground didn’t elevate me to the legend status I had created in the fertile recesses of my mind. The choir has enabled me to correct an error in judgement in my formative years and I am delighted about that!

As a number of you will know, I am, through a mix of design and error, a father of 5 – all to my lovely bride of 34 years – Michele. We have just finished a marathon 24 years of schooling the brood, not sure what that qualifies us for but must be something very important and we’ll be getting a reward soon? Maybe it is as simple as starting on a new journey of being “grandies” which is more than enough.

Being one of the few choristers to regularly arrive late for rehearsals mean that I must still be working? And according to the family CFO, that is a state that needs to be maintained for longer than Tony Abbot would ever commit me to! As long as it enables me to do some travelling, maybe get a bigger boat (Ssssshhh CFO doesn’t know about that one), spend more time fishing, keeping fit and learning to sing like a canary, then I am fine about that. Anyone who knows David Thodey (CEO of Testra) is welcome to confirm my unwavering loyalty and desire to be eventually pushed out of the front door on my Zimmer frame!

MEET PAUL ETHERINGTON



I am one of new members of the Choir and joined the 1st Tenors in March 2013. After a career in International Banking, working for the French Bank, Banque Nationale De Paris in Sydney and Melbourne and then as General



Manager of a large Commercial Architectural Practice in Melbourne, I moved to Tasmania for five years where I managed a Financial Planning Business. Travelling Overseas, marriage, four children, study [three Masters Degrees obtained in the USA, UK, and Australia, namely :-

- MBA** - Master of Business Administration
- M Prof Ethics** - Master of Professional Ethics
- MA (Theol)** - Master of Arts (Theology)],

and career demands restricted my involvement to singing in church choirs on Sundays. I was a boy soprano while at school and won the under twelve Christian Brothers Sydney Eisteddfod and I also sang in concerts and appeared as a soloist on Sydney television.

My first encounter with the Melbourne Welsh Choir was as a member of the audience in 2002 at the Judith Durham Concert and later when Aled Jones appeared with the choir. At the time, I remember saying to my wife, Joan, that I would like to sing with the choir, but alas I did not think my voice was good enough.

In 2012 we attended a concert at the Karralyka Theatre and later while working in my home office and listening to 98.1 Eastern FM Community Radio, I heard a conversation about the Choir and I decided to go along to Choir Practice on Wednesday night at 7pm. I have to confess, one of the reasons I did not join earlier was my fear of having to learn Welsh, as it took me ages to get a working knowledge of French, I despaired about learning another language. I can honestly say that hard work; repetition and help from longer serving choir members make the journey bearable. I settled in to the 1st Tenors quickly and when the choir went on tour to Salzburg and Vienna in 2014, I was fortunate to go with them. We had an absolutely wonderful time!

My only regret is not joining the choir earlier because Lucas, our dedicated and committed Choir Master, has taught me so much. I have just retired from full time work and I am now an author and a Wedding and Funeral Celebrant. The choir is a lot of fun, often challenging and demanding, but a great group of guys who enjoy singing and having fun.

UPCOMING EVENTS

- **Traralgon Concert – La Trobe Performing Arts Centre, March 21, 2015 at 2:00pm**

For Tickets for the Traralgon Concert on Sat, 21st March, please Telephone: 5176 3333

- **Till The Boys Come Home – Monday, 20th April, 2015 – Two special Morning Melodies Concerts :-**

Our choir has been invited by the Arts Centre to perform two concerts for Morning Melodies in the Hamer hall on Monday, 20th April, 2015, to commemorate the 100th Anniversary of the Gallipoli landing in 1915. It will be the opening event in a three-month exhibition at the Arts Centre on the theme of "Entertainment in Wartime" and we have chosen to entitle our concert "Till The Boys Come



Home", with a program featuring many numbers from our CD of that name.

We have given the Arts Centre approval to use the striking and symbolic cover design by Richard Yeates for their program and promotional purposes. We are fortunate to have the talented Lee Abrahamsen, our Singer of the Year

2013, as our guest artists for this event. She will be singing several numbers made famous by the "Forces Sweetheart", Vera Lynn, during WW!!

Morning Concert - at 11:00am, Hamer Hall, Melbourne.

Afternoon Concert - at 1:30pm, Hamer Hall, Melbourne

Tickets are available from the Arts Centre Box Office, Telephone: 1800 182 183

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THIS NEWSLETTER: The production of this newsletter is a joint effort. Contributions of all kinds are sought from members to keep the newsletter varied and interesting. We also welcome contributions from our supporters.

Editorial tasks, design, layout, printing and mail-out are by Brian Evans & Gwyn Harper. Opinions expressed by contributors do not necessarily reflect those of the choir. The MWMC Newsletter articles may be reproduced, but we do insist on acknowledgement as the source. All articles, sketches, photographs, etc., that are contributed by members are published on this condition. The choir will endeavour at all times to seek permission to reproduce material from other sources and/or acknowledge the source as appropriate.

Editor's References used in my construction of the "Wales, Male Choirs & Coal articles include:

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The Editor 12/1/2015