

## The Brynmawr Swimming Baths.

### Building the Baths

As far back as 1876, Cardinal Manning had mentioned the importance of swimming being taught at the meeting to consider building new schools in Brynmawr. Well, we had to wait around 50 years before a swimming pool finally appeared in the town and that was thanks to the Quaker movement and their attempts to help the unemployed men of the town. One of the many schemes put forward was a swimming pool and a paddling pool set in a landscaped area of gardens and woodlands.

Generously, the Duke of Beaufort donated eight acres of what was a rubbish tip. You could consider this to be among the first environmental improvement scheme in Brynmawr. The work would be carried out by the unemployed men though there was a fear that if they did take part in the work they would forfeit what little dole or benefit they were getting. Thankfully a test case was put forward and the decision made was: if three conditions were met the men would not lose their benefit payments. Those conditions were as follows:

- 1) There should be no contract of service.
- 2) The men would always be available for work.
- 3) Any meals must be as gratuity and not as remuneration.

This self help scheme was opposed by the local council and by some of the political parties' active in the town. The work was hard, no JCB's in those days, just shovels, picks and wheel barrows and for two and a half years the band of volunteers worked hard to transform the area. It became quite obvious that more help was needed. News of what was going on at Brynmawr spread and it inspired others to start helping themselves. Among the outside bodies inspired were the Welsh Students Self Help Council and the Student Christian Movement. It was the latter group that informed Peter Scott, the leader of the Brynmawr Society of Friends that a voluntary work movement had formed around Jean Inebnit at Leeds University.

Peter Scott wrote to Leeds University and soon Jean Inebnit and Pierre Ceresole of the *Service Civil Voluntaire Internationale* were conferring with the Brynmawr committee on the work to be carried out at the site of the Brynmawr Swimming Baths and to set up domestic arrangements for a work camp to open on June 30<sup>th</sup> 1931.

Jean and Pierre contacted their many friends by letter and telephone throughout Europe and they found a willing response wherever they tried. For twelve weeks throughout that summer volunteers from many countries came to Brynmawr. From Switzerland came Klarley, Paul came from Leeds University, Dorothy Pfeiffer came from Germany, Maud Hale all the way from Nant y Glô, Dan Minton from Blaina and Gwyn Jones from Brynmawr. All worked long and hard clearing rubbish, burying it under top soil, laying paths and lawns,

carving out the area for the swimming pool from bare rock and always under the guidance of the unemployed miners and building trade workers.

During the three month camp, a total of 116 volunteers worked at the site, 42 of them from abroad. They gave in total 4,796 days free of charge except for food and accommodation. The latter consisted of straw mattresses on the floor of a large room for the men while the women had similar facilities until a local friend provided them with a house and beds of their own.

The daily routine was as follows:

6.30am. Breakfast.

7.00am. Work began.

9.30 to 10.00am, Tea break.

12.15 to 1.15pm. Meal break.

1.15 to 5.30pm. Afternoon work.

Evenings though were a time to relax and many night were spent singing and dancing together and an opportunity to exchange songs and dances. Some evenings were also spent relaxing and socialising with local people. The work at Brynmawr was a true example of internationalism. The volunteers came from eight other countries besides Britain including Belgium, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Switzerland, France, Germany, Norway and the United States.

This was the first project carried out by what became known as the International voluntary Service (I.V.S.) and today it has become the V.S.O. the Voluntary Service Overseas.

### **The opening of the Baths.**

(Taken verbatim from the Merthyr Express, Saturday July 9<sup>th</sup> 1932).

It was a proud day on Wednesday for Brynmawr, the afflicted town which will not die and which is rising phoenix-like from its own ashes. It was the occasion of what was described as a "dream" which many people thought fantastic, the opening of a splendid open air swimming baths and paddling pool, constructed in charming, rustic surroundings on a site which was formerly repellently ugly and consisting of coal tips and which by dint of much labour and courage has been turned into a beauty spot.

The work which has been in progress for about two years has been done entirely by volunteer labour mainly by unemployed men and is a striking example of what can be achieved by self-sacrifice. In addition to giving the community valuable amenities, it provides an interest for men who are out of work and helps to keep them physically fit and ready for paid work when the opportunity presents itself. About 25 to 50 unemployed men gave their services each day without pay with only a mid-day meal provided for them.

Last summer the local workers were reinforced by a number of students of ten different nationalities, who spent their vacation in the work under the auspices of the International Voluntary Service Committee. Another party has come down this year and are engaged in the work of laying out the surroundings of the swimming bath. Thanks to the local unemployed men and the students, the Brynmawr community now possess an up-to-date swimming bath and pleasure ground which had it been constructed by paid labour would have cost them something like £8.000 or £10.000. which would be far beyond the financial capabilities of the town.

The opening ceremony on Wednesday was performed under the most favourable conditions. The town was bedecked with bunting and a huge crowd congregated within the enclosure and on the sloping banks surrounding the ground, making a very picturesque scene.

The ceremony was performed by Her Grace, the Duchess of Beaufort (the Duke of Beaufort being the donor of the site).#Mr. D. H. Herbert, chairman of the Brynmawr Development Committee, presided and in addition to the Duchess there were present Alderman Edgar Jones; the Mayor of Lagarde in France (Mons. Pierre Ceresole); Messers Peter Scott and Keith Sullivan (joint hon secretaries); J. M. Bowen (treasurer); C. Heal (engineer); Emrys Evans (director of education for Breconshire); Rev. Robert Lewis R. D. (vicar of Nant y Glô); Messers Denias Smith J. P. (chairman of Brynmawr Council; R. C. Griffith J. P.; W. Anthony C. C., James Edwards and J. Vaughan Williams (Beaufort Estate); and many other prominent townsmen and visitors.

In opening the proceedings the Chairman said that a few months ago it was his privilege to welcome on behalf of the Brynmawr Development Committee, his grace, the Duke of Beaufort and to thank him for his kindness to them through his agent, (Mr. Edwards) and his local office. The Duke had shewn the utmost consideration for the well-being of the scheme and they were grateful and very pleased that the Duchess had come along to them that day. Her presence was perhaps the greatest favour bestowed upon them. They were proud to have her with them on what to the committee was a great day. They were a company of idealist endeavouring to shape their ideals to come practical and in providing for their town what was a long-felt need for the younger generation – a swimming pool – and to turn a somewhat ugly spot into a place of beauty. They had not entirely reached their ideal but today found them well along the road towards realising what they had set out to accomplish. They had met with some honest opposition and some misunderstanding had occurred but they had plodded on steadily believing they were right. The progress that had been made justified this belief and he could only hope it would inspire everyone to lend a hand to finally complete the scheme as there was still much to be done.

Brynmawr, in many respects had been very fortunate and he wished on behalf of the development committee to thank publicly all those people and bodies from outside the town who helped to provide the necessary funds to procure the materials needed and he

would like to state that when the funds were urgently needed Brynmawr itself rose to the occasion and contributed at much sacrifice a considerable sum of money. They still needed funds to fully carry out the scheme and complete the task they had undertaken.

They had also to acknowledge the great help received from the International Student Movement and the Service Civil. They came along last summer, rolled up their sleeves and got down to the real hard work. They were proud that again they had with them a contingent of these movements who had gladly come along to render service and to do all that is possible to help.

Further he desired to pay tribute to the unemployed men of Brynmawr who had come forward to give of their labour freely and voluntarily. The work put into this scheme had been tremendous and he especially mentioned the great work of the engineer and supervisor of the work, Mr. C. B. Heal. He had not spared himself and was always ready at all times to give of his time and talent voluntarily. Many others too had given their services and he regretted that time would not permit of reading all their names but he asked all who had in any way contributed to the success of this work to accept the Department Committee's best thanks.

Alderman Edgar Jones supported the Chairman's welcome to the Duchess because he said she was the wife of a gentleman who had made it possible to make what was to some of them a dream into reality. They welcomed her Grace, not so much because she was the Duchess of Beaufort but because they believed she had something to do with the granting of the site which was one of the most ugly spots in Brynmawr but which had been made into one of the most beautiful in Brynmawr. Almost everyone who knew the spot exclaimed when the scheme was outlined that it was impossible but he was delighted that today the dream had largely become true. (Applause)

How had it been possible to accomplish this scheme which some people thought impossible? In the first place the site was given by the Duke of Beaufort. Then funds were needed and the nucleus came from a little French Village in the South of France named Lagarde. Later they built on that and started the project. They had assistance from all sorts and conditions of people from various parts of Europe – people of all creeds and no creeds, of all political faiths and no faiths and all denominations and no denominations. They had received goodwill from everywhere. They could not expect much financial assistance from their own town's people who had been under a cloud of depression for a long number of years but they gave what they had to give and that was their labour and they gave that freely, spontaneously and voluntarily and he wanted to take his hat off to those people. (Applause)

Alderman Jones said he was concerned about the future. There were still dreamers at Brynmawr. He loved his town and there could be nothing wrong with municipal pride and he asked himself: What of the future of their little town? Were they going to allow it to die or were they going to make one last desperate attempt to make it live and thrive in industry or in some other form and enable the people to exist in fairly comfortable conditions? The dreams for the future of Brynmawr might not be realised but they try and make them come true. If they had not shown an united front and made a community effort with support from all over Europe and from their own people they would not

have achieved what they had. But even if they had failed was any man, woman or child any the worst for the effort? It was better to try and fall than not to try at all. He appealed to the people of Brynmawr to assist those who were endeavouring to make things better and if they responded spontaneously there were hopes for the future. He sincerely welcomed Her Grace to Brynmawr and said that in the near future they might ask her for some other favour. It was her first visit to the town and they sincerely hoped it would not be her last. He trusted she would have pleasant memories of the day. (Applause)

Mr. T Evans, secretary of the Study Council read messages from Mr. Ramsay McDonald, the Prime Minister and Mr. George Lansbury. The former said he was glad to learn that the Brynmawr Experiment had completed another stage of progress. It was a notable demonstration of what unemployed men could do to help the community and at the same time save their own self respect and physical health from the corrupting effects of enforced idleness. He congratulated them all most warmly on what they had accomplished and hoped the example would be widely followed.

Mr Lansbury wrote that he thought the work they were doing was very splendid and wished it could be extended throughout the country. There was nothing better for the men and women concerned than to work together in the spirit of comradeship and mutual help.

The Duchess of Beaufort was presented with a scissors by Miss Constance Heal and her Grace cut the tape and declared the swimming pool open. She said she was not accustomed to make speeches and she felt nervous after hearing so much eloquence from the platform. She remarked, amid laughter that if Mr Lansbury could have seen the swimming pool at Brynmawr he would feel the Hyde Park Lido was not in it. She was delighted to see such a beautiful spot which they had made out of the coal tips and she hoped it would prove of great benefit to the people of the town.

Mr J. K. Watkins moved a vote of thanks to the duchess of Beaufort and remarked that she belonged to a family that had rendered much national service and they felt grateful to the Duchess for identifying herself with their little effort at Brynmawr. Personally he felt she had joined on their co-operative effort regardless of creed, class or political belief to make that swimming pool an actual fact and not a dream. The vote was accorded with ringing cheers.

The company then assembled around the swimming pool and as interesting item in the programme was an address by the Mayor of Lagarde. He spoke in French and the address was translated by Monsieur Pierre Ceresole. The Mayor who was cordially received said that Lagarde was a small village in the South of France and he brought greetings from the inhabitants to the people of Brynmawr. His village suffered severely through floods two years ago. The Service Civil Voluntaire International, a voluntary organisation with its headquarters in Switzerland whose object it is to enlist young people for constructive voluntary work during their holidays came to their aid with a large contingent. The people of Lagarde were so grateful for this help that, hearing these voluntary workers were sending a party to help in the voluntary work at Brynmawr they decided to send the balance of the money raised for their reconstruction work to help. The sum of £143 was therefore given towards the construction of the swimming pool. The Mayor spoke of the great friendship between his country and Great Britain and said that this international goodwill would help them to solve their economic and political problems.

An interesting programme was gone through consisting of folk dancing, exhibitions of swimming by the Abertillery Swimming Club and several interesting swimming competitions concluding with a polo match between Mr. P. M. Mason's team and Abertillery. Valuable service were rendered by Mr. J. C. Charles, Tredegar in broadcasting the speeches and the results of the competitions.

### **The Baths belong to Brynmawr.**

The Brynmawr baths were formally handed over to the Urban District Council at a social organised by a committee at the old Town Hall. Among those present were the following; Mr. J. Forest (who represented Captain Geoffrey Crawshay the District Commissioner for special Areas), Mr. Peter Scott, Alderman T. J. Jones, the chairman of the magistrates Mr. J. Downey and County Councillor the Reverend H. J. Evans.

Mr. Peter Scott in handing over the deeds said he had been among the people for ten years and he was positive something that something would come to the town. He added that had there been more co-operation better results would have been gained.

Councillor Gurnos Jones (J. P.) in accepting the deeds said that he did not approve of the swimming baths which had been done by voluntary labour but they had a mandate from a public meeting to accept the free offer of the baths and he hoped it would be a benefit to the town especially to the younger generation that they might learn the art of swimming.

Mr J. Forester said he had been impressed by Brynmawr Swimming Baths and it should be widely advertised. The commissioner (Capt. Geoffrey Crawshay) made a grant of £4,300 towards modernising the Swimming Baths.

In the following years the pool became a focal point in the town during the summer months with numerous competitions and galas being held. Families enjoyed picnics on the lawns and made a day of it. Was the water cold? Yes, it was. It came straight off the mountain stream via a leat and into the pool. Later it was channelled through a filtering system provided by the Brynmawr Urban District Council. That was the water fountain near the paddling area; the water flowed into the upper dish of the fountain and the dirt settled, it overflowed into the second dish and again the debris settled on the bottom and finally it overflowed into the third dish, considered clean and then into the pool. Sadly, the swimming pool is no more though some of the pathways can still be seen. We also have Bath (Bars) Mountain as it's called locally where so much of the soil etc. was dumped to remind us of the efforts made by Brynmawr people with help from abroad..

In July 1982 a weekend reunion of some of the original workers together with present day members of the I.V.S. took place at Brynmawr Comprehensive School. This was to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the I.V.S. and also to give members an opportunity to visit the site and remains of the Brynmawr Swimming Pool which had been the very first project of the V.S.O. I'm sure it would break the hearts of all those volunteers if they saw the site today.

## **What happened next?**

This section is still to be done.

Watch this space.

Eifion Lloyd Davies. February 2017

(Written from the notes of Edwin Lewis Jones and own research)

Thanks to Merthyr Central Library and Dowlais Library for their help.

Photographs courtesy of Evelyn William (Tredegar) and David Jones (Caldicot)