

THE
QUAKER INFLUENCES
ON
EDUCATIONAL
AND SOCIAL CHANGES
AT
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Ever since George Fox founded the "Society of Friends of God" in the Seventeenth century, followers of this belief have always given a lead in helping people in distress and improving the way people live and work. Many people have disagreed with their ideas and way of life. In their early days people who disliked them would laugh and say that at their meetings they would become so emotional that they would tremble and quake. Thus it was that members of the Society were given the name of "Quakers". My impression is that they are a people of extreme calm, peace loving and sincere.

At the Hereford Records Office, in a Bishop's transcript for the parish of Kings Pyon, the following statement concerning two of my ancestors came to light, "Abraham and James, two raw striplings, the sons of Abraham Hughes a Quaker and his wife Esther were baptised, June 21st 1767". This discovery caused me to take a greater interest in the Social changes brought about by this religious movement, not only nationally, but locally. The evidence of some of their achievements in Brynmawr are still visible today, a Nursery School, Swimming and Paddling Pool and a Community Centre. Other achievements, a Boot Making Factory, Furniture Factory and a Weaving Group are no longer in existence, these served their purpose during the Industrial Depression and later became obsolete.

The Quakers did much the same work all over South Wales, Brynmawr was one more town that enjoyed the advantages these people were able to give.

BRYNMAWR

BRYNMAWR was the largest town in Breconshire with a population of 7460 in the 1929 census. The town is situated in the extreme South East of the County on the border of Monmouthshire and on the edge of the South Wales Coalfield. During the years 1921 to 1939 unemployment persisted on a large

scale. For over 18 years the people of Brynmawr and district were living on a mere pittance. Hundreds of men and women had given up all hope of ever again living a civilised life. This period had great repercussions on Education, people lost interest in themselves and as a result took no active part in preparing for the future. The only thought the people had was how would they survive tomorrow. They often had no food and no money, unemployed miners scavenged coal from the coal tips and coal levels to keep fires in their homes – this was illegal and often times they were caught by the police. The children were badly undernourished and there was nothing that could be done about it. The chief source of employment, the coal mines were closed.

The following statistics give a picture of the importance of mining in relationship to other occupations:-

Total population 1929	Males	3886
" "	Females	3574
		<hr/>
		7460
		<hr/>
Total population 1931 census		7247

(Statistics on this and the following page taken from "Brynmawr, a Study of a Distressed Area" by Hilda Jennings M.A)

It is easy to understand that when the miners were unemployed it had repercussions on other trades as well. Life was far from easy during those years.

In the Spring of 1928 small groups of Quakers visited South Wales for the first time. Poverty and distress was more evident there than anywhere they had previously visited. They went back to London very concerned by what they had seen and from this the "Coalfields Distress Fund" was set up. Some of the original group of "Friends" returned to South Wales settling down in several communities including Brynmawr.

In 1928 a headquarters called "Community House" Brynmawr was established with Mr Peter Scott in charge. This venture formed a constituent part of a larger undertaking. Since many of the "Society of Friends" were in a

position to influence rich industrialists and more affluent communities, such as South Coast resorts and Cities, they were soon in a position to organised the financial and material aid so badly needed

FREE FOOD AND MILK

The first step taken in February 1929 was to supply free fresh milk to all undernourished children in the district. When unable to obtain fresh milk, children were given "Horlicks" milk. In September of the same year the "Society of Friends" wrote to the Local Education Authority explaining that as funds were getting low, only the very needy children would have to be selected. This selection was done by the County Medical Officer of Health who examined the children and submitted a list of names. In January 1930 the town of Worthing donated the sum of £6.0.0 per week for 13 weeks to help continue the milk scheme. A communal feeding scheme was also put into operation at this time, this took place at the "Drill Hall" Brynmawr. Children were at least able to have one hot meal a day. When these two schemes ran into financial difficulties, the Society requested the Education Authority to take the work over. In 1931 the Authority agreed to do this, selecting only the children suffering from mal-nutrition.

SOCIAL SURVEY

In April 1929 the Society informed the Brynmawr and District Education Authority that they wished to undertake a Social Survey of Brynmawr and Crickhowell. The work was to be divided between a number of groups, each dealing with different aspects of the local situation. They invited the Committee to nominate two members to serve on the group to consider the question of Recreation and Education. The two members elected at that time were County Councillor Enoch Griffiths and County Councillor W.J. Rawlings.

Eight survey groups were set up dealing with the following matters:-
Commerce, Education, Financial, Health and Housing, Industrial, Municipal, Population, and Transport.

**NUMBERS OF MEN ATTACHED TO VARIOUS
OCCUPATIONS IN BRYNMAWR 1929**

<u>Occupations</u>	<u>1929</u>
Mining	1414
Commerce & Finance	398
Professional	129
Metal Workers	147
Transport	114
Personal Service	94
Makers of Textile Goods including Bootmakers	38
Builders & Bricklayers	25
Clerks etc.	55
Railways	10
Carpenters	14
All Others	<u>131</u>
	<u>2516</u>

There was one other to carry out a survey of the Llanelly Parish and Govilon District. More than 150 people assisted in the gathering of information for the survey, they were people from many walks of life, unemployed miners and shopkeepers, bank managers, school teachers, nurses, farmers, rail and bus company workers. Assistance was also received from the Agricultural Economics Department of Aberystwyth University. Each Survey Group sent its workers out to gather as much information as possible on conditions of the present and the past. Every group made a report from which conclusions were drawn. The information contained in the reports was used in future development plans. The surveys were planned as a piece of Community Self Study. When all the various Study Groups had completed their surveys the real work began.

The Brynmawr Study Council continued to exist but divided itself up into committees, each being responsible for particular activities.

ADOLESCENT GROUP

It was the primary intention of the "Society of Friends" to alleviate depression in Brynmawr and district. They believed that by re-educating the people they could lift them out of the squalor to which they had resigned themselves. An Adolescent Group was formed, this was responsible for supervising Boys' and Girls' clubs and for placing boys and girls in employment, this unfortunately, often meant children going away from home.

Boys' and Girls' clubs organised at Community Centre proved very popular. Under the guidance of Social Workers the children were able to learn Handicrafts, Cooking, Sewing and Woodwork. Other activities included Dancing, Singing, Table-tennis and Library facilities. Parties of children were taken to places of interest and though emphasis was on the social activities, it was intended that the children would be motivated enough to try and change their environment some time in the future.

The Social Workers lived on a Subsistence Allowance, which meant that once the allowance was spent there was no question of more, they had to make do until the next allowance was due and they were quite happy do so.

About October 1929 "Blaenoneu" a disused house on the Llangynidr mountain was leased and used as a Summer Camp for boys. It was 6 miles from Brynmawr, yet so remote, it was entirely different from the miserable surroundings of the Urban area. Children who had never and who would never be able to have a holiday were taken there for at least one week during the summer vacation. As one group of children left, another arrived. The boys slept under canvas, there were no girls, all chores were shared, cooking, washing up and cleaning. Boys lighted fires, collected sticks, repaired the house and fences, carried water and grew their own potatoes. They were all free and able to climb mountains, walk over the moors and enjoy outdoor activities. Most of all these children learned to become part of a community to work for the good of each other they were helped to adjust to different surroundings. Many older adults remember Blaenonau with great affection. Many spent happy days in an environment that gave them hope for the future. The camp carried on until 1946 when there appears to have been no need for it. The war took away the Social leaders, there was no one to take charge and there was more than the usual amount of prosperity. The house still exists but it is empty and unused, it has reverted to its original derelict state.

Today the "Summer Camp" would probably be called an "Adventure Centre for Outdoor Pursuits". This illustrates how in this respect the Society of Friends were in advance of their time. They saw the value of Adventure and Outdoor Pursuit Centres which are continually being set up in National Park Areas of Wales, especially by English Authorities. Unfortunately not with so much enthusiasm by Welsh Local Authorities.

MEN'S AND WOMEN'S CLUBS

The Adult Clubs held at Community House and the Lucania Hall, were run on similar lines to the Boy's and Girls' clubs. Members had a choice of

subjects with experienced and qualified teachers giving instruction. The classes had great success, probably because the subjects offered were interesting and acceptable. The Education Authority had been trying hard to establish Further Education Classes during this period, without success, probably because the industrial depression and general unemployment proved too great a handicap. People considered it pointless educating themselves when there was no work available. The Authority was very concerned by this attitude and in 1930 a meeting was arranged when the Brynmawr and District Education Committee, Governors of the Brynmawr County School, Head Teachers, Staffs of the County and Elementary Schools, Local Ministers and Clergy considered the whole question of Further Education in Brynmawr. At this meeting it was decided to change the curriculum of Evening Classes and try co-operating with various organisations in the town and to assist a body like the "Society of Friends" to conduct classes of a similar nature to the ones the "Society" had been running in the past. There is no evidence of this having taken effect. The Society appears to have carried on supporting themselves until 1942.

In 1936 arrangements were concluded by which Community House became the Headquarters of an Educational Settlement. These Settlements arose out of the needs of the people at a time of deep distress, arising from an acute and prolonged state of poverty and unemployment in the area where they were established. While the main concern of the Settlement was Educational, it also had a very definite social concern. Brynmawr was not the only town where a Settlement came into being. A great deal of work was done by the Society of Friends in other areas, here too settlements were established. There were nine in South Wales, these being:-

Maes-yr-Haf - Rhondda Valley	1927
Merthyr Tydfil	1930
Oxford House – Risca	1931
Bargoed & Rhymney Valley	1933
Pontypool & District	1934
Dowlais	1935
Brynmawr & District	1936
Aberdare & Cynon Valley	1936
Pontypridd & District	1937

The Settlement at Brynmawr continued under the Guidance of the Society for Friends until 1942 at which date an application was made to the Board of Education for a grant toward salaries and expenses of organisers. In June 1943 the Board agreed to grant this request.

In November 1942 the Education Authority established a Youth Club at the Brynmawr Senior School, this had repercussions on the Community House Settlement. Boys' and Girls' clubs continued, but not with the success they had achieved in the past. The Adult classes were not affected and were still being held when the Authority took over the Settlement completely about 1945.

A fire at the King St. Community Settlement made it necessary for the Authority to find new premises at Market Square, Brynmawr. Classes for Adults and Adolescents are held there most afternoons and evenings through the week. The syllabus has changed slightly but not to any great degree.

Handicrafts, sewing, dancing and other leisure classes still continue at Community House as they did when the Society of Friends held their classes.

OPEN AIR SWIMMING POOL AND PADDLING POOL

A Development Committee was given the responsibility for work dealing with reconstruction and environmental improvements. Their first gigantic task was to take an area of Brynmawr where a small stream ran through ground which consisted largely of shale, ash and clay and transformed it into a beauty spot. Here they built a children's paddling pool and swimming pool. All the work was carried out by voluntary labour, unemployed miners, university students from Britain and students from the Continent. An International Voluntary Camp was set up in the town. The small French village of Legarde' adopted Brynmawr and gave funds towards the construction of the Swimming Pool. The Architect Mr C.B. Heal supervised the work and gave his services free of charge.

The Swimming Pool was opened on 6th July 1932 and Brynmawr became one of the few towns in Wales to have this facility. No longer would local children have to learn to swim in dangerous mountain ponds and disused colliery feeders. At first, the Swimming Pool and Paddling Pool were supervised and maintained by local men who had shared in the actual construction, overheads were low and the little profit made at the end of the summer was used to benefit the local hospital at Blaina, St. John's Ambulance and the School Boot Fund – each received £20. The Development Committee then invited the Education Committee to allow school children, in groups, under the care of the school teachers, to use the swimming baths as part of the school curriculum. An agreement was reached regarding the charge, the Education Committee decided to make a grant for the whole season rather than pay 1d per head each time a class was taken for a lesson. Once the Swimming Pool was able to pay its own way and run at a profit, the Society of Friends offered it free of charge to the Brynmawr Urban District Council. It has belonged to the town ever since and is still being used by the public with

children attending in groups from all schools in the town all through the summer season. From time to time repairs have been done but there have been no structural alterations.

NURSERY SCHOOL

In May 1933 it was reported to the Local Education Committee that the Study Council proposed to establish a Nursery School in Brynmawr. The teachers at this period appear to have had mixed feelings about this report but at a later date, when it was explained, that the school would not interfere with the existing schools in any way the teachers were appeased. In July 1933 the Community Study Council made an application to the "Save the Children Fund" for a grant for the purpose of building the Nursery School. After furnishing plans and certain other information the grant of £450 was awarded, £300 of this was to meet the cost of materials and £150 towards the maintenance of the school for the first year. They decided to go ahead with the work, the school would at least be opened for a trial period of one year.

A Management Committee was set up which included the Director of Education and the School Medical Officer. A site was found opposite the one obtained for the Swimming Pool. Plans were passed and work began. The labour once again was made up of unemployed miners of the town and students from Britain and the Continent. There was considerable opposition to this project from time to time. Some of the County Councillors felt that the Authority would once again be requested to take over this project as they had others and the expense of running the school would fall upon the rate payers once the school was fully operational. This proved to be correct but not for many years.

The work took six months to complete and the school was opened on April 7th, 1934. The first child was admitted on 10th April 1934. The official opening ceremony performed by Lady Astor took place some time later. A Rachel Macmillan trained superintendent was put in charge and she was assisted by voluntary labour.

In 1936 the Education Authorities received a deputation from the Nursery School Management Committee reporting that they intended to apply to the Board of Education for official recognition which would entitle them to a grant for an extension to the school and as the Committee had anticipated there was a request that the school be taken over after the trial period of one year. After hearing the deputation the Education Committee resolved to take over the school after the expiration of 12 months and after the completion of the extension. Actually the extension was never started, it would appear that the school did not come up to Board of Education standards and the grant was turned down.

During the war years the Nursery School came under the Public Health Department and was run as a Wartime Nursery for children whose mothers were working on wartime production. In 1947 – 13 years after the opening, the School came under the Education Authority.

The Brynmawr Nursery School has now been in existence for 28 years. This was the second school of this type to be established in South Wales by the "Society of Friends" the other was opened 10th April 1934 at Merthyr.

Only since the "Plowden Report" 1966 and the "Gittings Report" 1968 have the Government and Local Authorities been spurred on to make greater efforts in the provision of more and better nursery facilities throughout the country.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the whole history of the "Quaker" or "Society of Friends" movement their belief has been strongly linked with Reform. They have not only preached reform but have also practised it by establishing model factories (Rowntree and Cadbury) and model housing estates (Bournville) and by moving into and living amongst social problems.

The work carried out by the Society in Brynmawr and other towns and villages such as Llandegveth, Beili Glas, Trevethin, Pontymoile (Pontypool),

Pontnewydd, Cwmbran, and Cwmavon is an example of the farsightedness of the Quaker movement. In all these places vast problems of social decline throughout the depression were discovered and the Society set about solving the problems in the same way that Elizabeth Fry the prison reformer set about her work of improving prison conditions. Elizabeth Fry gradually persuaded the prisoners to help and uplift themselves by teaching the mothers to knit and sew and by teaching the children to read and write.

The work of socially uplifting Brynmawr developed by environmental improvements. All the schemes begun were at first confronted with suspicion and opposition, mainly due to resentment of interference by the people who were not only outsiders but also of a strange religious belief. The Quakers overcame many obstacles to achieve their aims and it was probably due to the fact that they were farseeing that many of the obstacles arose. The charity they gave was given freely and not upon acceptance of their religion. There is no evidence to show that any of the people they came in contact with, or helped during those years adopted their faith. It would be correct to say, that the people of Brynmawr appreciate the fact that had these people not come to the town in 1928 some of the amenities of which Brynmawr are so proud would not have materialised until many years later, if at all. It is a fact that the "Society of Friends" made a great contribution to the Educational, Environment and Social changes in Brynmawr during a period when changes were badly needed.

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Sir Percy E. Watkins LL.D

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- Mr G. Harris (Merthyr Library)
- Mrs G. Addis (Past Social Worker)
Alma St. Brynmawr.
- Mr S. Morgan (Former Boys' Club Leader)
Twyncynghordy, Brynmawr.
- Mrs E. Trowe (Headmistress)
Nursery School, Brynmawr.

This was

**WRITTEN AS PART
OF THE
FINAL
EXAMINATION
CITY & GUILDS OF LONDON INSTITUTE
FURTHER EDUCATION
TEACHER'S CERTIFICATE
1972**

