

Brynmawr Market Hall 1894 - 1994

The name Brynmawr first occurs in 1817 and by 1829, twenty houses had been built.

It was not until 1834 that the building of the town began in earnest and in 1835, street names appeared; Davies Street, Bailey Street, King Street and Market Square. This Market Square of 1835 was not the one we think of today on which our War Memorial stands, but the market site in Beaufort Street on which was built in 1844, the Old Town Hall.

This original Market was owned and run by a Market Company which had obtained a franchise from the Duke of Beaufort.

In February 1884, the Brynmawr Board of Health (fore runner of the Brynmawr Urban District Council) approached the Brynmawr Market Company as to whether they were prepared to sell or lease the Brynmawr Market Place and the premises in Beaufort Street. The Market Company agreed to meet the Brynmawr Board to discuss terms of selling or leasing.

Eventually in October 1889 (five years later) the Clerk to the Brynmawr Board submitted the counterpart of their lease of the Market Rights granted by His Grace, The Duke of Beaufort. On the motion of Mr. Herbert Lewis seconded by Mr. Gage, it was unanimously agreed that the Chairman of the local Board apply the seal of the Board to the said lease and sign it.

As the population of Brynmawr grew there was a need for a larger public hall and so, having obtained a site from His Grace, the Duke of Beaufort, a new Market Hall was built at a cost of £2,500 and opened by Mr. Charles Morley (Liberal M.P. for Breconshire) on 28th February 1894. The Hall was to serve a dual purpose - as a Wholesale Market, open on Saturdays from 6am to 2pm and also as a place for public meetings and entertainment. The General Market continued to open for some years at the Old Market in Beaufort Street on Saturday from 8am to 10.30pm.

The first concert in the new Market Hall was presented on 10th March 1894 when the Royal Welsh Ladies Choir performed a concert. Eisteddfodau were frequently held and sacred concerts were given on Sundays.

This Hall which could seat 1,400 people was the largest hall in the area and many heated political meetings were held particularly during the times of local and general elections.

With the frequent visits of various travelling theatre companies and companies which presented the fore runner of moving pictures as Dioramas and Panoramas which were animated with sound effects and music and narrated by show men, the Market Hall, Brynmawr became known throughout the Country.

One of the Companies which had presented early Dioramas obtained a lease from the Town Council to show silent movie films just before World War One. The Hall had it's own theatre orchestra to accompany films and artists.

This early leasee was Messr Dooner and their manager was an old stage performer by the name of Gussie Harrington, who lived with his wife and daughters in a caravan at the rear of the Hall.

During times of Depression in the 1920's and 30's, frequent charity concerts were presented. Many famous singers have appeared in this Hall- Mostyn Thomas, Arthur Fear, Parry Jones (all of Blaina) Ann Zeagler, Webster Booth and Frank Titterton.

During the 1939-45 war concerts were held for various war charities. In one Aid to Russia Concert a name stands out, that of the Russian contralto Oda Slobodskia.

The London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Muir Matherson gave a concert for school children in the afternoon and for adults in the evening.

Due to many London theatres having to close during the War, many actors were engaged by a government sponsored company C.E.M.A (Council for Entertainment Music and Art). This continued for a few years after the war resulting in many famous actors and actresses performing in Brynmawr Market Hall - Sybil Thorndyke, Lewis Cassons, Wendy Hillier. One of the organisers of these tours was a young ex-serviceman named Huw Wheldon- later to become Sir Huw Wheldon of the B.B.C. T.V. fame.

Local schools, Drama groups, amateur Operatic Societies, Choral Societies, Brynmawr Silver Band, Brynmawr's own Breconia Gleemen have all given of their best ion the stage of this well loved building which became the focal point of all visitors leaving the buses on the square or strolling up from Brynmawr Railway Station.

Over the years, many changes have taken place inside the Hall and to the outward appearance. From a hall which seated 1400 in 1894 to a cinema which seated 938 in 1951 and now in 1994 seats about 250.

The lease has passed through several hands- from the time the Hall became the property of Brynmawr Town Council or Urban District Council it has been leased to Dooner's, Fred Phillips, then to Brynmawr Institute who, with the profits, were able to buy Hebron house for pensioners to spend their leisure time. Then Brynmawr UDC ran the Cinema with profits helping support the town rates and eventually with the transfer of Brynmawr to Blaenau Gwent the Cinema has remained one of the few Municipally owned in the Country.

P. G. O

If people who have sat in this Hall in the last one hundred years could have recorded their memoirs, what tales of love, laughter and sadness could be told; stories even better than those shown on the silver screen or portrayed on the stage.

Edwin L. Jones
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