

BRYNMAWR HISTORICAL SOCIETY

# NEWS UPDATE

June 2021. Issue 21 The "Tŷ Bâch" Issue

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Just in case there is confusion, Tŷ Bâch means the smallest house i.e. the garden toilet, so this issue is dedicated to that smallest of houses.



I wonder if this is the last outdoor toilet in Brynmawr? It's part of the Apostolic church on Fitzroy Street and I took the photo as they are seeking permission to upgrade the church and provide indoor toilets. This probably means the old toilet block will be demolished. It is a shame in many ways as it's a link to the past but it set me remembering. Often Glyn Robins (a past chairman of the historical society) and William (Bill) Morgan who both taught at the Board School spoke about the cast iron toilet that was on the town square more or less to the side of the Talisman public house, there would be some comment made and both would laugh, along with others who could remember the "urinal". I'm not sure when it was erected but it would have been after 1880 as it's not on the O.S. map of that year. It is clearly marked on the 1920 map of Brynmawr and it was a round construction. One thing is certain (according to them both) it was a health hazard and many who walked past would hold their breath. Below is the only photo I have been able to get showing the round urinal on the Market Square, behind it is Hodges garage, the site of which would later become "International" and later still

"Haven". The urinal is shown to the left of the telegraph post and note the dome on the top. The gas lamp (behind) is not part of the urinal.



I was told the inside section was moved to the Recreation Ground but the ornate cast iron surround is lost. If anyone does happen to know what happened to it, especially the date it was removed then do get in touch. There's a whiff (sorry) of Clochemerle about this story.



This is the nearest photo I can find of a round urinal that may be of the same type as the Brynmawr one. There has to be somebody out there who can confirm if it does look similar to the one that was on our square.

All the valley towns more than likely had ornate cast iron toilets (always as I can remember painted green) on the side of the road and they were beautiful structures, in fact I believe Abertillery had about five dotted around the town but I do need that verifying.

There was definitely one in Nant y Glo and another on the Garn; now most have disappeared though there may be one or two somewhere but not in use any more. Again, if anyone has a photo then please please get in touch.

With the vast amount of men working the mines and often travelling by works train home with no toilet facilities meant the cast iron urinals were essential. I've already mentioned Abertillery, Nant y Glo and the Garn and there was one situated opposite Beynon's Pit in Blaina. But what about Brynmawr, surely there must have been others apart from the circular one on the square.



(From the National Museum of Wales, originally in Llanwrtyd, donated by Breckonshire CC)

I can reveal that there certainly were some around Brynmawr. There was one on Bailey Street. The Western Mail back in 1877 reported that at a Town Council meeting "*the Chairman reported that Mr Henry Judd had not contributed the £1 promised being part of the expense for removing the urinal in Bailey Street*". At the same meeting it was decided that a new urinal be erected at the top of Glamorgan Street. I have no idea where either of the urinals was situated and they are not marked on the 1880 map.

In 1878, the question of the fixing of a urinal in King-Street was discussed but was adjourned till another meeting. At a previous meeting it had been proposed the urinal would be opposite the Griffin Hotel but Mr Wain the proprietor opposed the site as it was exactly opposite his commercial room window. The chairman also said that the chief constable considered it would be a nuisance to the station house. (*I suppose they thought it would be an in-convenience, Boom Boom © Basil Brush*). The council had decided that it would be between the Infant School wall and the Police Station in King Street.

The clerk read a letter from Mr O. Meredith, declining to allow the Board to erect a urinal on his property in Worcester Street as he purposed building there. So quite possibly there could have been five urinals dotted around the town. When the Gwent Archives are again open to the public I will see if the minutes of the Brynmawr UDC will shed a light on where they were finally erected, if at all. If only there were photographs available.

So what is the law about using public space if caught short? I'm sure all of us have heard of the old law dating back to when the truckers actually had horses at the front of their cart that allowed them to relieve themselves against the nearside rear wheel, (the driver that is, not the horse). That's the side facing the pavement where all the people walk. The myth that this law is still on the statute books has been going around for years so although this is widely reported as fact, this is actually not true. There is no general law forbidding urination in public, although it is often an offence under local bylaws.

The same is true of another oft-cited 'law' (probably an Urban Legend) that pregnant women are allowed to urinate in a policeman's helmet. There is no law allowing or forbidding such a practice, but local authorities are expected to exercise discretion in these cases. So, while there is no law forbidding a pregnant woman from urinating into a policeman's helmet, a policeman is unlikely to give her the opportunity.



Industrial Wales was the main reason for the growth of Brynmawr and Nant y Glo. People flocked to look for work and this caused a house building boom and saw the start of large scale terraced housing in and around iron works etc. A block of up to 40 houses would have to share possibly six toilets between them (not flush toilets) and with an estimated average of nine people living in each house, that meant each toilet could be used by up to 60 people. (There could be quite a queue in the morning).

The cesspits were emptied by the night-men who would load the sewage into a horse drawn cart before dumping it into the local river contaminating the water source. What made the matter worse was that it was the landlord's responsibility to get the cesspits emptied. This cost up to £1 per cesspit, so landlord's largely ignored the problem causing sewage to leak into the streets and causing diseases and other illnesses such as Cholera to become rife during the Industrial Revolution.

The situation in Merthyr was much worse; Merthyr Tydfil was an example of all that was bad about industrial towns. From a village of just 40 houses in 1760, it grew into a town of 8,000 inhabitants by 1801. It became the largest town in Wales in 1851 with 46,000 people, but only 25 per cent of them had been born there. The iron industry used water from the River Taff to power the wheels of its great furnaces. The water then passed through various ponds before returning, black and filthy, to the river again. This rapid expansion created major problems for public health. There was much overcrowding in low quality housing and insanitary conditions, making the

town a breeding ground for diseases like cholera, typhus and TB. Between 1846 and 1855, the death rate from all causes in Merthyr was 332 per 10,000 inhabitants. The chances of survival for young children were poor, and two in every five children born during the years 1848–1853 could expect to die before reaching the age of five, with many dying before they reached their first birthday. The worst area of Merthyr Tydfil was the slum area called 'China' – also known as 'Little Hell'. Its 1,500 inhabitants had some of the most squalid living conditions in Britain. The slum was based around narrow streets, badly ventilated and full of crowded houses. In his report on the state of Merthyr Tydfil in 1845, Sir Henry de la Beche noted that because there were no privies in Merthyr Tydfil, the inhabitants threw their slops into the streets which were like open sewers. The very poorest slum dwellers lived in cellars, in the worst conditions of all. (*The above Taken from BBC Bite size Guides*).

Even though the modern toilet is relatively new, the need to dispose of human waste has always been there. The main reason toilets were kept outside is because, without indoor plumbing and proper disposal of waste, toilets stunk. Also, gases like methane could even seep into the house and cause an explosion. There is a lot to be said for outside toilets and if you lived out in the countryside without a connection to local sewerage works, your waste would be used to fertilize the garden. (*This may well be illegal today unless the waste has been heat treated due to the various medications taken*).

One of the many jobs I did before deciding to take up further education was to work at a sewage farm. It was quite an eye opener as after filtration the water was clean enough to drink so it was safe to go back into the river, (No, I never tried it). The solids on the other hand were laid out to dry in special beds and eventually carted off to a field to await collection to become fertilizer for farms. It always amused me to see keen gardeners from

the town in early spring coming to pick up tomato plants off the heap, they couldn't be sure what type of tomato they would get but each one came in its own little fertilizer ball. Again for reasons I mentioned above, this would be frowned upon today.

What of the situation now in 2021, are councils supposed to provide toilets? The law states that employers must provide adequate toilet and washing facilities for employees. Likewise, under section 20 of the 1976 Local Government Miscellaneous Provisions Act, if premises provide food and drink for consumption, toilets must be provided for visitors and customers. On the other hand if you are not using the premises to eat or to drink then they are legally allowed to refuse you any use of their toilets. Local authorities are not legally required to provide toilet facilities so they are often closed as a way to save money. The public toilets being closed in Brynmawr caused some discomfort to some people, all very well saying that toilets are available at the following cafe or public house but during lockdown this was not possible so thanks to Wayne Hodgins who kept the Brynmawr toilet open and available.

Maybe a return to the old cast iron urinals is a way forward.

So it's with a little bit of sadness I view the possible demolition of the last outside toilet in Brynmawr; unless, of course, somebody knows better.

P.S. I have often wondered where the toilets were at the Blaenavon Iron Works because when Stack Square was built a toilet(s) was not provided and it was said that "*no point putting toilets up, they won't know how to use them*". Yet the houses were of good quality to attract experienced workers from the Midland's iron works. Assuming toilets were not available where on earth did the workers go when nature called? If anyone knows the answer then please get in touch.

Thanks to the contributors to this News Update:  
Roy Fowler, Barry George, John Davies, Derek (Fred) Harris and Graham Bennett.

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To lighten things up a bit (and I have some room on this page), ALDI (I think) ran a competition to find the best Dad Joke for Father's Day. The jokes had to be ones you would groan at as opposed to actually rolling off the settee laughing type of joke. Here are some of the best received:

**The winning joke was:**

I once hired a limo but when it arrived, the guy driving it walked off!

I said "Excuse me? Are you not going to drive me?"

The guy told me that the price didn't include a driver so I'd spent £400 on a limo and have nothing to chauffeur it!

Someone has glued my pack of cards together - I don't know how to deal with it

I was wondering why the Frisbee kept looking bigger and bigger, and then it hit me

I was stood behind a customer at an ATM and he turned around and said "could you check my balance?" - so I pushed him. His balance wasn't that great.

Two men walked into a bar. The third guy ducked.

Why did the man fall down the well? Because he didn't see that well!

What did the pirate say on his eightieth birthday? "Aye Matey!"

Why did the scarecrow get an award? Because he was out standing in his field!

Keep safe.

Your friendly neighbourhood secretary.