

**Present:** David Silver [Chairman], Nick Hawkins (Secretary), Bob Roberts (Treasurer), Eric Blackwell, David Cargill, Cllrs Ralph Vaughan & Helen Lloyd Jones & 11 members.

**Apologies:** Tom Evans [Vice Chairman], Allan Cook, Roy Godier, Karen Wright, Cllrs Rod McKerlich & David Suthers, Julie Davies, Helena Fox, Pat Williams.

### Introduction

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting, particularly on such a hot evening.

### John Nixon and the Welsh Coal Trade to France

The Chairman introduced Brian Davies. He noted that Mr Davies used to be the Curator of Pontypridd Museum and had acquired an almost unfathomable knowledge of the history of the local area. The Chairman had heard him speak on a number of occasions, all on different topics, and always with insight and humour.

Mr Davies started his talk by mentioning the cultural link between Brittany and Wales. Brittany has many place names that sound and look Welsh and the local language, Breton, derives from the same root as Welsh. This is not surprising since the Welsh had been colonising the area since the 4<sup>th</sup>C. It was while researching this link that he visited Trignac, a centre of iron and steel production. It became clear that Trignac locals knew more about the coal trade from Wales to France than did the Welsh. The trade developed because there is no coal in western France, but they have large deposits of iron ore. To produce the steel, they needed the coal. However, the people in Trignac assumed the coal had come from the Rhondda; Mr Davies' research showed it had actually come from the Cynon Valley.

Mr Davies' story actually started in Newcastle, with the birth of John Nixon in 1815. He was born at Barlow, Durham, the only son of a tenant farmer of that village and was educated at the village school and at Dr Bruce's academy in Newcastle, famous as the training-place of many great engineers. He graduated aged 14. He served an apprenticeship in the local mining industry but then found that all mining jobs in both Newcastle and Cornwall (the two major centres of mining at the time) were 'stitched up' through nepotism. John Calvert, a Yorkshire man and friend of Robert Stephenson, advised him to speak to Isambard Kingdom Brunel who was 'building a crooked little line in Wales'. In 1839 Nixon got the job of laying track from Llandaff to Merthyr. On arrival he found he would be second in command to an incompetent and resolved to work elsewhere in Wales as he had fallen in love with the country.

By 1841 he was working for the mineral agent of the Marquis of Bute surveying all the mineral deposits of the Dowlais Company. When that job finished he accepted the appointment of mining engineer to an English company, working a coal and iron field at Languin near Nantes. He found it a hopeless concern and left after a year, to return to Wales.

Whilst working in South Wales he had noted a marked difference between the properties of Welsh and Newcastle coal. Welsh coal burnt cleanly, with little smoke; Newcastle coal was dirty and produced lots of smoke. He realised that there was a great opening for South Wales' coal on the Loire, where coal was already imported by sea from Newcastle for use in the sugar refining industry. He tried to persuade Lucy Thomas of the Graig colliery at Merthyr to set up a link but she was doing very well anyway and did not want to extend her operations. However, a little later, he purchased 100 tons of coal, loaded it onto a barge and took it down the canal to Cardiff where he chartered a small vessel, shipped it to Nantes and distributed it gratuitously among the sugar refineries. The greater efficiency (about 30%) of Welsh coal was quickly established. Through various stratagems he got the contract for supplying coal to the paddle steamers on the Loire, and then for supplying the French Navy.

Trade blossomed. He purchased Deep Duffryn Colliery in 1856 and invented an air pump (Nixon's ventilator) to deal with Methane and also pioneered the long wall system of mining. Output increased from 150 to 1000 tons a day. In 1860 he started producing coal from Navigation Colliery in Mountain Ash, at the time the deepest colliery in South Wales. His work resulted in the South Wales coalfields being an almost uniquely export trade. And he had a hand in the growth of Cardiff when he managed to persuade the trustees of the Marquis of Bute to increase dock accommodation, and even to increase the depth of the East Dock against the advice of their own engineer. This allowed larger ships to enter the docks and thus increase the trade. From 1850 to the WWI St Nazaire was the biggest market for the coal. Unfortunately, it was agreed under the Treaty of Versailles that part of Germany's reparation cost to France would be paid by supplying coal. Trade then fell.

John Nixon married late and went to live in a large five-storey house in Brighton. He died in London in 1899 and is buried in the cemetery of St Margaret's church in Mountain Ash.

As a postscript, Brian Davies mentioned that Welsh coal was used in the Titanic and it is now thought that there was a fire in one of the coal stores when the ship left Southampton. This may have sufficiently weakened one of the bulkheads which then collapsed after the ship hit the iceberg. Did Welsh coal sink the Titanic...?

At the close of the talk, the Chairman thanked Brian for giving such an interesting and entertaining presentation. He presented him with a token of the Association's appreciation.

## **Minutes of the previous General Meeting on 6<sup>th</sup> February 2017**

The minutes were approved. There were no 'matters arising'.

## **Report of the May Festival**

In a brief report it was noted that the Festival had gone well (see also next item) and there had been very positive feedback. A few events had not been so well attended and these would be reviewed in the context of setting out a framework for next year's Festival.

## **Treasurer's Report**

The Treasurer reported that the Festival had done very well financially. £6.5K had been raised for the nominated Charity, St John Cymru, and £1.5k had been raised for the Association, mainly from bars and BBQs. The Concert in the Parc had been the major expenditure (over £1000) but this and other events had been supported by a generous grant from the R&MCC. In terms of notable Charity income, the Gala Concert had raised £910, Ty Gwyn Farm £250, the Vintage Tea Party £780, and the Fashion show £450 (the proceeds of £900 being shared with Tenovus). St John Cymru had received £3K direct. Once the figures are finalised, he was confident the Charity would have received £10K in the year.

The Association's Accounts stood at: C/Ac £10,611 (swollen by retained Charity money); COIF, £3791; Reserve, £1; Total, £14,403.

## **General R&M Matters**

No items had been suggested for discussion prior to the meeting. It was noted that the Association's nominated Charity for the coming year (which starts in July) is The Alzheimer's Society Cymru.

## **Entertainment**

Eric Blackwell noted on behalf of the Film Club that he now had an increasing membership which he planned to involve in the selection of the films for the coming season.

## **Christmas Tree lighting ceremony, 8<sup>th</sup> December**

The Secretary noted that he was raising this topic now as he was about to start detailed planning of the event. With some inevitable changes being forced upon us (notably the opening of the new Co-op store in Station Road), some aspects of the event would need to be re-planned. And, as ever, he

was always looking for new ideas, particularly regarding entertainment. He asked for anyone who thought they could make a contribution in any way to contact him.

### **Any Other Business**

The Chairman noted that, following the sad and sudden death of our President, Rhodri Morgan, there was now a need to appoint a new one. The Association Executive had considered a number of possibilities and decided that Kevin Brennan, MP would be an excellent choice. Mr Brennan had previously worked at Radyr Comprehensive, was a regular attendee at R&M events, knew the Association well and was a supporter of our events. By a show of hands, all members present indicated they were more than happy with this suggestion. The Secretary was asked formally to invite Mr Brennan to become our President.

### **Next Meeting**

The next meeting will be on Monday, 25<sup>th</sup> September 2017 commencing at 19.30 in the OCR. The speaker will be Ian Thomas, Chief Executive of Age Cymru.