

# SWANSEA CANAL SOCIETY CYMDEITHAS CAMLAS ABERTAWE

New Year Newsletter January 2005

A VERY MERRY CHRISTMAS AND A HAPPY NEW YEAR TO ALL OUR MEMBERS AND SUPPORTERS. NADOLIG LLAWEN A BLWYDDYN NEWYDD DDA.

The Swansea Canal in Pontardawe has been recognised as a place to visit and to purchase a souvenir of. An enterprising person has produced a glass paperweight, which depicts a scene of the canal from Herbert Street Bridge Pontardawe. The paperweight is oval in shape, four inches top to bottom, two and three quarter inches wide and three quarters of an inch thick. The scene shows the canal in summer with Saint Peter's Church in the background. The paperweights are available from Pontardawe Post Office, Swansea Road, Pontardawe. Price £6.99 each. Telephone 01792-862109.

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Ian Wright (Society member) and Stephen Rowson have produced volume two of their Glamorgan and Aberdare Canals series. Published by Black Dwarf Publications ISBN 903599 12 1. Price £30-00.

This volume details the history of the canal section Pontypridd to Cardiff. Chapter 1 examines the coal trade around Pontypridd. Following chapters discuss in depth the canal boats and boatmen, maintenance on the canal, water supply, and a journey along the canal through Dynea, Nantgarw, Llandaff, Gabalfa, and to the Sea Lock at Cardiff. The industries that flourished along the canal, together with the communities that developed around them, are also discussed, together with interesting comments about the canalside pubs etc.

The publication is lavishly illustrated with photographs, maps and paintings. Ian lived at Cardiff, and as a schoolboy in 1943, he photographed many sections of the canals. His photographs are of exceptional quality and many depict the details of lock-gate mechanisms and construction. Also included are many photographs from the Cardiff City Library collections. A must for anyone with an interest in the south Wales canals.

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## **Good news on the Swansea Canal front.**

The City and County of Swansea intend re-opening the Coed Gwilym Heritage Centre at Clydach in the spring of 2005. The City has employed an Education Officer to work with schools in the area and to show the relationship between the canal transport link and the industries which used the canal. Discussions have taken place between the Council, consultants, and the Society. A new display format has been agreed upon which will centre on a linear map of the canal from Swansea to Abercraf, with the Clydach section given added prominence. Historic photographs of selected places such as bridges, mills, wharfs, public houses, boats and people will be used to show

the rich heritage of the Swansea Valley. The heritage features that are in walking and cycling distance from the Centre will be identified so that interested people may have the opportunity to visit some of the locations.

Various historical artefacts will be on display to give added interest for visitors.

The Society looks forward to working with the City and County of Swansea to bring this project to completion.

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### **British Waterways.**

BW have carried out dredging and repair works along the canal between Clydach and Ynysmeudwy. The canal section below the Mond has been dredged once again. This section was dredged about seven years ago, but silt, surface weed and scrub had increased tremendously since that time. The weed was an especial hazard in retaining litter and debris along the canal and making the waterway very unsightly. The BW floating dredger has been repaired by BW and is now operational again after the vandalism of last year. The weed and silt was removed from the canal, along with motorcar tyres, scrap metal, timber, plastic, bottles and tons of general debris thrown into the canal by youths.

British Waterways repaired the canal embankment at Trebanos at two locations where the River Tawe had eroded the embankment during periods of heavy rainfall. BW laid a temporary timber roadway from Ynysderw Fields across a marsh to gain access to the site. Huge limestone blocks were used to reinforce the embankment and prevent scouring by the river in the future.

This was a costly repair and shows BW commitment to the Swansea Canal. This type of damage to the canal environment by other agencies responsibilities is not really fair on British Waterways. The Environment Agency is responsible for the River Tawe, yet BW have had to fund the repairs due to river erosion, which is something beyond BW responsibility.

At Ynysmeudwy, the repairs to the lock keeper's hut have nearly been completed. Corrugated steel sheets were used to replace the original slate roof. The building is now weather proof again, and hopefully vandal proof also.

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### **Lock Keeper's Residence Ynysmeudwy.**

This small, unusual structure was one of three built by the Swansea Canal Navigation Company in the years following the completion of the canal in 1798. It appears that lock keepers dwellings were built as the need arose for lock keepers to work on the canal developed. Previous to their construction, lock keepers would have lived near to their post in rented accommodation, as was the case when the Swansea Canal Navigation Company rented a property at the Hafod for its workers based in Swansea. In 1794 there were no towns in the Swansea Valley to the north of Morriston, only small hamlets at Clydach and Ystradgynlais. Therefore, accommodation would have been difficult to obtain for new industries.

The only reference to the construction of a purpose built lock keepers house during the construction of the Swansea Canal (1794-98) is in the minutes of the Canal Company dated 1794. It was ordered that a house be built near the 35<sup>th</sup> lock (Abercraf), the lock keeper also received a coal allowance. However, the house was

not constructed until several years later. The Minute Books record on the 7<sup>th</sup> August 1810 that Messers Berrington, Martin and Harper be requested to point out a situation for building a lock keepers house at the 35<sup>th</sup> lock. The canal company also owned a cottage on Hebron Road Clydach and this presumably would have been the residence of the lock keeper for that District.

In 1812, March 3<sup>rd</sup>, The Swansea Canal Navigation Company Minutes ordered that a lock keepers house be built above Pont Cwmtawe (Godre'r Graig) and that the house consist of four rooms and a slope. (A slope is what we refer to as a lean to), added to the rear of buildings.

In 1826 the Ynysmeudwy dwelling was ordered to be built. The Minute Books record for the 4<sup>th</sup> July that a suitable small dwelling house fit for the services of a lock keeper be erected as near the mouth of the Ynismedw feeder as convenient (lock 12), also that another dwelling house for another lock keeper be erected at or near the Gurnos. This small dwelling was a one-room house, with a single window, four stone internal cupboards built into the walls, with a fireplace against the rear wall. The external dimensions are 13 feet 7 inches long, 10 feet 5 inches wide. Internal dimensions are approximately 10 feet by 7 feet 6 inches. The house was erected on the lock island formed between the lock chamber and the by-pass around the lock. The dwelling operated as a lock keepers house throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and into the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Its use during the post 1920 period was as a lengthsman's hut, a tool store for the canal lengthsman. The building was complete in 1949 but it was abandoned sometime during the 1960's when vandals and inclement weather reduced the building to a ruinous shell. The roof and two side walls had collapsed, the front wall was only 50% complete and the rear wall about 75% complete. The Swansea Canal Society decided to save and to restore this historic buildings because it was one of the very few surviving canal structures extant at that time. The Gurnos lock keepers house had been demolished in the 1960's as was a similar dwelling at Trebanos locks during the 1970's.

The Society obtained funding via the Prince of Wales Trust to purchase tools and materials, two years were spent by Society volunteers in clearing and re-building the small house. Unfortunately, vandals smashed the slate roof on two occasions, and recently broke the steel door. Unfortunately, the Society cannot keep pace with the vandalism. British Waterways offered to help and their staff fitted a new corrugated steel roof to the building. This will help to protect the building for the future.

### **PHOTOS OF LOCK KEEPERS HUT PLEASE, with captions**

#### **LOCK KEEPERS HOUSE AT YNYSMEUDWY. RUINOUS IN FEBRUARY 1985**

#### **LOCK KEEPERS HOUSE AT YNYSMEUDWY. RESTORED 1986-87**

#### **LOCK KEEPERS HOUSE AT YNYSMEUDWY WITH DAMAGED ROOF 2004**

### **What was the role of the lock keeper who lived in these dwellings on the Swansea Canal?**

It was not to operate locks as lock keepers do on many canals. The bargees or boatmen who navigated the canal carried out that function. The Swansea Canal was divided into four major Districts, each about four miles in length. The First District

from Swansea to Clydach. The Second District from Clydach to the north of Pontardawe with the lock keeper resident at Clydach, probably in the canal cottage on Hebron Road. Third District from Pontardawe to above Ystalyfera, and the Fourth District to the canal terminus at Abercraf.

The Swansea Canal Navigation Company Minute Books held at the Public Record Office at London gives an insight into the work of the lock keepers on the Swansea Canal. It appears they acted as assistants to the canal engineer, also as clerks to record such events as damage or obstruction on the canal, and to work as lengths-men. They also had the assistance of lock keeper assistants to help them.

An Order dated 1794 states that the Company Clerk procure minute books for the lock keepers to use. In December 1803 the lock keepers and other people employed by the Company were told to assist in breaking ice on the canal as long as the Traders shall deem it proper to navigate.

Lock keepers were appointed infrequently. 13 August 1802, William Williams was appointed to the First District and told to reside at Swansea. On the 5<sup>th</sup> March 1816, he was ordered to procure a padlock to secure the stop gates opposite Vivian's copper works at the Hafod, and that he must lock the gate every night and in default of his attending to this Order he would be discharged. Lock keepers wages were reduced to 15/- per week in 1816.

The Canal Company had to plant a hedgerow alongside the canal towpath for most of the length of the canal to prevent animals straying onto the company's property, and also to define the company's boundaries and to prevent encroachment by other developers.

In July 1807, the wages were increased to 18/- per week and the lock keepers were told to procure bill hooks and to keep the hedges properly trimmed within their respective Districts, and to procure rakes to take large stones out of the canal. That if lock keepers neglect their duty the increase of allowance is to be stopped. The hedgerows had obviously matured between 1794 and 1807 and thus required regular trimming. More work for the lock keepers.

John Williams, the lock keeper for the Second District was told to repair the bridge and road at Heol James (Pontardawe) in July 1809.

The Minute Books record on the 5<sup>th</sup> July 1812 that Daniel Williams, lock keeper on the District Swansea to Clydach had held that appointment for 33 years faithfully. That ten guineas be presented to him as a mark of the Company's approbation of his conduct.

In August 1816, the Company reminded the lock keepers to pay particular attention to the impounding of all cattle found trespassing on the canal path, as well Sunday as a weekday.

In December 1847, a David Williams retired due to old age and was given an annuity (pension) of 12/- per week.

George Lewis was appointed to this District in July 1853 at a wage of 21/- per week. Lock keepers were respected by the Canal Company as a reference in May 1855 records that five pounds be paid to the representatives of the late lock keeper James James, to defray his funeral expences, he having been in the services of the Company upwards of twenty five years.

Llewelyn Powell was appointed lock keeper for the Fourth District on the 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1855, with a wage of 15/- per week, this was conditional on him giving up his other job of public house keeper.

On the 5<sup>th</sup> March 1858 the Committee visited the stations of the four head lock keepers. The lock keepers were examined as to their respective duties and those of their assistants. It appeared to the Committee that the persons employed were suitable and trustworthy, and that the increased trade on the canal render the present number of lock keepers necessary.

Trade had increased substantially since 1800, much to the satisfaction of the Swansea Canal Navigation Company who's dividends paid to shareholders also increased substantially. Traders were encouraged to expand by the construction of new wharfs by the canal company. Four new wharfs were created in 1808 at the Hafod, and an agreement was recorded that year for 900 barges annually to use the new wharfs. This created additional work for the lock keepers hence the increase in the number of lock keepers. In September 1858 Thomas Owen's wages were increased to 18/- per week. Also in 1858, 5<sup>th</sup> November, James Williams was appointed lock keeper of the Third District at 15/- per week with 1/- per week allowance for coal.

Lock keepers would be dismissed if they could not carry out their responsibilities properly. George Lewis the lock keeper for the First District had his services dispensed with due to his illness and infirmity. Thomas Owen was offered the situation at 21/- per week. Thomas no doubt, was the assistant lock keeper referred to in September 1858.

In September 1866 the lock keepers were informed that boats had to be gauged quarterly, when empty, and that their cargoes would also be weighed when necessary. The lock keepers had also to obey the existing Orders to require a Declaration with every cargo on the canal. This meant that the lock keepers were now responsible for keeping records of canal cargoes. The gauging was a simple process of weighing canal boats. With each ton of cargo loaded, the boat would sink lower into the water by an inch. The routine was to measure the boat in three places. At the bow, the centre, and at the rear of the boat. An average would be worked out from this and the tonnage recorded for that boat and entered into the lock keepers Minute Book and the Toll Books of the Company.

Lock keepers must have been gauging boats incorrectly as the Minutes for the 7<sup>th</sup> December 1866 show. In the Minutes for that meeting, it was recorded that the engineers do give peremptory notice to each lock keeper on the canal, that he is not on any account whatever to receive any gift, money, or otherwise, from any trader and that in the event of his doing so, he will be immediately dismissed.

We can determine from the existing Swansea Canal Company records that the daily life of a lock keeper was not an easy one. He had to inspect his District each day, to keep the canal clear of any obstructions, to cut hedgerows, to pull obstructions out of the canal, to break ice, to gauge boats, to supervise his assistants, to report any untoward events to the engineer, and to keep a minute book. For this he had to be literate and numerate. His wages could fluctuate depending on how busy the canal was with boat traffic. He could not have two jobs to supplement his wages with the canal company.

Sadly, no minute books of the lock keepers survive to show the daily routine of working on the Swansea Canal.

All the above information has been obtained from the Company Minute Books, which we must presume to contain a certain amount of bias in favour of the Company.

However, they do offer the present researcher a glimpse of life in bygone days.

They do not record any information with regard to the lock keepers family, his wife, children, poverty, disease, nor any social ills that affected the communities along the

canal. They do, however, contain a mass of information with regard to the operating of the Swansea Canal Navigation Company.

Clive Reed December 2004.