

Gelligaer a place in history



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IMAGES

Right • Landscape view from Church tower.

Cover left to right:

Top row

• Harp Inn sign.

• Internal feature, St Catwg's Church.

• Rural life.

Middle row

• Ray Norman, owner of the fort site.

• Sunburst Mosaic, village centre.

• St Catwg's Church.

Bottom row

• Horeb Chapel sign.

• Group of miners at Penallta Colliery.

• Lewis' School memorial.

Introduction

Whilst Gelligaer is probably most celebrated for its Roman heritage, the village and the area that surrounds it have been important throughout human occupation. Here you'll also find Bronze Age burials, Norman churches, Medieval settlements, ancient pastures, Civil War strongholds, some of the earliest educational provision in Wales, evidence of the rise of nonconformity, industry and even a post WWII housing boom. This publication is intended to help you place Gelligaer's wonderful Roman heritage firmly within this rich timeframe.

Why did all this happen around here? The key to Gelligaer's importance is in its location. For millennia people have recognised its strategic, spiritual and nurturing potential. The area resonates with heritage, and you cannot help but feel that Gelligaer has well and truly earned a place in history.

| | |
|------------------------------------|----|
| Prehistoric Past | 1 |
| The coming of Rome | 2 |
| Celtic Stones & Christian Saints | 3 |
| Welsh War Lords and Norman Knights | 4 |
| Faith Food & Felons | 5 |
| Family Fortunes | 7 |
| Seeds of Change | 8 |
| Lots to Learn | 9 |
| Village Life | 10 |
| Extraction & Expansion | 11 |
| Gelligaer Still Fighting | 13 |



The Prehistoric Past

The earliest people to leave us clues of their existence within the landscape were Bronze Age settlers, who came to the area around 4000 years ago. The climate at the time was quite mild, and the landscape was ideal for supporting their pastoral way of life. They were a spiritual people who buried their leaders in stone vaults or 'cists' such as Carn Bugail, up on the highest ridges of Gelligaer Common. We are continuing to learn more about where and how these people lived – for instance, recent archaeological exploration at Llancaiach Fawr has uncovered what is believed to be a Bronze Age settlement.

About 500 years later, a new influx of people known as the Beaker Folk called Gelligaer home. They got their name from their distinctive pottery vessels. A tomb from this period was found in the yard of Llancaiach Isaf Farm which contained a beaker, some bronze ornaments and the remains of a small child.

Whilst there are no Iron Age hillforts around Gelligaer, it seems likely from objects found locally that farming continued in the area. Due to the worsening climate, it is likely that the upland areas of south Wales were used as seasonal summer pastures.

Place names such as Llwyngoleu (The Grove of Light), and mysterious objects such as the Maen Cattwg cup-marked stone hint at the deeply spiritual, sophisticated and complex peoples that existed here for millennia prior to the coming of Rome.

If you know where to look (and have a good map), relics of our prehistoric past are still visible in the landscape. Why not take a trip back in time and explore them for yourself?



Top • Maen Cattwg Stone.
Left • Silure axe.



The Coming of Rome

By the time the Romans arrived, the Iron Age people in Wales had formed into distinct and organised tribes. They had road networks, traded with other tribes and kept slaves. The women of these tribes were well respected and often held high positions.

One of the most fierce of these tribes was the Silures. Known as excellent horsemen, the Silures used chariots in battle and were notorious for employing guerrilla tactics. Their territory covered all of south east Wales, and geographically Gelligaer lay at the centre. Little wonder then that this place was chosen by the Romans as a location for a frontier fort.

But there's more to Roman Gelligaer than just the stone fort. As well as an earlier wooden fort (in fields just to the north of the stone one) excavations uncovered a parade ground in the garden of the Old Rectory, a pottery kiln in the Church cemetery, a Roman

Baths just south of the Fort and a number of cremation burials close to the Roman roadways.

As a frontier stronghold, Gelligaer was one of a string of forts along a major Roman road from Cardiff to Brecon. The remains of this Roman highway can still be picked out on the Common, as can a series of practice camps – sites where Roman soldiers would fine tune their skills at building 'ditch and bank' palisade topped defences.

No one can be 100% sure when the Roman army arrived or left Gelligaer, but it seems likely that the stone fort was occupied initially from around 111AD to 130AD and then again at the end of the 3rd/early 4th centuries.

More detail regarding the Roman Fort can be found in the authoritative guide to the Roman Fort by Richard Brewer.

Today you can roam with the Romans and explore the story of Roman



Gelligaer through on-site panels and a self guided 'walk and clue trail' which can be downloaded at www.romangelligaer.org; so off you go, quick march!

Top • Roman practice camps
Gelligaer Common. Right • Roman statue head, found locally.

Celtic Stones and Christian Saints



Although some Roman influences remained, this period saw a revival of local Celtic culture. It also saw the introduction and expansion of Christianity. It is likely that most of the people lived on the higher ground rather than down in the densely wooded valley floors. So not surprisingly, echoes of this time can be found on the Common.

Near Carn Bugail stands a sloping limestone monument known locally as the ROIHI stone. It once had an inscription which said 'TES(F) ROIHI', dating to the late 6th/early 7th century. It is sited close to the Roman road and was once surrounded by a small enclosure. This seems to suggest that it marks a grave, and may be a throw back to the Roman custom of burying the dead near roadways. Another theory states that it commemorates an Irish warrior

Nia – Froich (Champion of the Heather) showing the influence of the Irish in southern Wales during this time. Legend has it that the stone leans because locals once tried to dig under it in search of treasure, but they were prevented from finishing the job by a terrible storm.

Another local monument of the period – the Tegernacus Stone – is now housed in the National Museum of Wales. Its Latin inscription translates as 'Here lies Tegernacus, son of Martius'.

The spread of Christianity in the Post Roman era led to it being called the 'Age of the Saints', and Gelligaer has its fair share of saintly links. The remains of Capel Gwladys – a 6th century religious enclosure on the Common – are still clearly visible. An inscribed stone from Capel Gwladys is preserved within Gelligaer Parish Church. Gwladys

was a daughter of King Brychan and legend says that in her younger days she and her future husband Gwynllyw came across King Arthur and some of his companions at Carn Bugail.

Her son Catwg (aka Cadog) went on to become an important Celtic saint in the 6th century AD. He established churches in Wales (including one at Gelligaer), Scotland and notably one in Brittany (Ile de Cado), where he fought with the Devil, leaving behind his footprint in the stone.

St. Catwg and his monks are said to have used the Roman road as an important highway for their missionary journeys. It's a fascinating thought that when you are walking around Gelligaer, you are following in the footsteps of a Saint.

• Roihi Stone.

Welsh War Lords and Norman Knights



By the 8th century, the Kingdom of Morgannwg had been established. The kingdom was divided for administrative purposes and Gelligaer became part of the Senghenydd Cantref, later the Lordship of Senghenydd.

The relative peace of post Roman Gelligaer came to an abrupt halt following the Norman invasion of 1066. William the Conqueror decided not to take Wales for himself and instead left his Marcher Lords (based on the Welsh borders) to take whatever lands they could. Whilst much of Morgannwg fell to Lord Fitzhamon, the area around Gelligaer retained its native chieftains. In 1094 the Normans attacked Gelligaer. This resulted in a bloody battle in which a number of important Norman lords were killed. Sir Walter

Scott immortalised the battle thus... 'The sun arose and Rhymney's wave with crimson glows!'

In 1158 it was the Welsh who were on the attack, as local Chief Ivor Bach broke in to Cardiff Castle. He captured the Earl of Gloucester and his family, holding them to ransom in exchange for the restoration of local people's rights. One of his sons, Gruffudd, was less of a rebel and married the Earl's illegitimate daughter. His other son Cadwallon was based at Twyn y Castell. He was an ally of King John. However, their relationship changed and the King turned on him, taking two of his sons as 'savage revenge'.

The next major local revolt was led by Llywelyn Bren, a descendent of the Lords of Senghenydd, who was also

based at the traditional stronghold of Twyn y Castell. He had held high office in the County until Edward II robbed him of his status and again deprived the locals of many of their rights. As a result, in 1316 Llywelyn is said to have raised an army of 10,000 men and he overran Glamorgan before being pushed back to Gelligaer. He was captured and sent to the Tower with his wife and children. On his release he returned to the area, only to be executed by Hugh le Despenser, the Lord of Glamorgan.

This bloody period in Gelligaer's history can still be traced in place names, but if you go exploring, watch out for those naughty Normans!

• [St Catwg's Church.](#)



Faith, Food and Felons

Ordinary life in the later medieval period revolved around three things, the Church, making a living, and staying within the law.

Evidence of how people eked out an existence on the land is shown by the remains of platform houses up on the Common. The name for these dwellings comes from the fact that they were built in to the hillsides, with the back ends dug in to the bank at the rear, whilst the resulting soil was used to create a level platform of ground at the front. The houses were about 60 feet long by 30 feet wide. Excavations of one such settlement on the slopes close to Carn Bugail (led by Lady Aileen Fox in 1938) found pottery and evidence of metal working. It seems that the occupants were continuing the ancient tradition of pastoral farming in the area. Interestingly this area is known as Dinas Noddfa – City

of Refuge. Perhaps the people here appreciated the benefits of being away from the troubles further south?

Other farms closer to the village have their origins around this period, including the ones at Top Hill, Llancaiach Fawr and Gelliargwellt. These lower homesteads would have been easier to farm and more fertile.

In any case the people living off the land would have been subject to local laws and government. This included paying taxes (the "toll of the pix"), and fines following periods of revolt. Domestic and minor misdemeanours in the Lordship of Senghenydd were dealt with in a lower court, whilst more major crimes were considered at a County level. Guilty parties faced a range of sentences depending on their crime, and could have all their possessions seized and sold. A new form of punishment introduced by

Edward III circa 1376 was to place people in stocks, a very public and humiliating penalty indeed. The Gelligaer Stocks were in place outside the Church until relatively recently. To find out their fate, read on.

Land ownership equalled power in medieval times, and as such, land boundaries were very carefully recorded, using features such as rivers, standing stones and even trees as boundary markers. It is said that the boundaries of the Lordship of Senghenydd were marked once a year by a ceremony known as Beating the Boundary. This entailed walking around the various boundary markers, and literally whipping a young boy at each one... in order that he would always be able to remember where the borders lay! Ceremonies, traditions and superstitions were essential to local life, and no where was this more obvious than in people's religious beliefs.



The Church of St Catwg in Gelligaer took its current form when it was rebuilt in stone in the 13th century. Gelligaer parish was wealthy and important enough to have a Rector as far back as Norman times, and in 1366 the post was held by a man named Henry de Staunton. The inside of the Church would originally have been brightly painted, with scenes from the Bible in order to share the gospels with the mainly illiterate congregation. The outside would have been lime-washed to heighten its visibility in the landscape. The original bells were one of six sets donated by Jasper Tudor to local churches. They were a gift to thank the people of Glamorgan for supporting his nephew, the young Henry Tudor (Henry VII) in his bid to become King. By the time of the reformation, when Henry VIII set up his own Church, Gelligaer was worth £13 10s per annum (well over a year's

salary for a craftsman at the time), making it one of the richest hill parishes in the diocese of Llandaff.

St Catwg's has become a storehouse for a number of remarkable artefacts including the 10th century stone from Capel Gwladys which is inscribed with a cross, and of course, the ancient village stocks! It is also home to a memorial to Edward Lewis, who bequeathed funds to set up the first permanent local school. The Lewis' benefaction boards are also there and they make captivating reading, but more of Lewis later... Another interesting feature is the wood and glass screen to the Lady Chapel which was donated by David Morgan who was married here in 1868. He founded a department store which was a main stay of Cardiff's shopping centre for 125 years, until it finally closed in 2005.

The churchyard is fascinating too, and

amongst the stones is reputed to be the burial of a Gypsy Queen, quite an unusual find in an Anglican graveyard.

Amazingly St Catwg's Church has remained at the heart of the village for over 700 years and still has an active congregation. The Church is open to the public on Saturday mornings as well as for services on Sundays and in the week, so why not pop in and immerse yourself in centuries of local life, tradition and worship.

Clockwise from top left • Platform Houses, Gelligaer Common. • William Greenhill and Charles Edwards pose in the parish stocks for a travelling photographer in this turn of the century photograph. • Internal feature, St Catwg's Church. • David Morgan Screen, St Catwg's Church.

Family Fortunes



The Acts of Union (1536-1542) brought Wales under English law, and importantly saw the abolishment of 'gavelkind'. This was a Welsh tradition whereby all siblings inherited a share of their parents' estate. Whilst fair, this led to parcels of land and wealth being ever more diluted. Under English law, the estate passed to the oldest son. This resulted in a smaller number of wealthy land owning individuals. Over a number of generations, this led to the establishment of a few powerful 'leading families' within the new County of Glamorgan. In the Gelligaer area, the most important families were the Thomas's, the Lewis's and the Pritchards, each of which built houses befitting their status.

Probably the most celebrated of these families are the Pritchards. Such was their success that by 1599 Edward Pritchard had risen to the lofty status

of High Sheriff of Glamorgan. However, it was his grandson (also named Edward and also High Sheriff) who was to play an important role in the Civil War. Originally a Royalist, he entertained King Charles I during a recruitment drive in Wales. However, being a canny man, Edward was quick to change his allegiance to the Parliamentarians when it became obvious that the King was losing support. Cromwell (leader of the Parliamentarian forces) rewarded Edward's new found puritan sympathies with the role of Governor of Cardiff Castle. Pritchard also played an important role in the Battle of St Fagan's in 1648.

It is said that it was Edward Pritchard who (with his reinvigorated religious tendencies) first brought nonconformity to the area, establishing a Baptist congregation at his home. In time, nonconformity became more popular

than the established Church. Notably, John Wesley (founder of the Methodist movement) is known to have preached a sermon in Gelligaer on May 25th 1744. A wonderfully simple reminder of the heydays of nonconformity is Horeb Chapel (1848) which lies at the heart of the old Village of Gelligaer.

The Pritchards continued to be an important family within the locality for many years. More recently Llancaiach Fawr passed in to public ownership. It is now a prize winning living history museum where visitors can enjoy meeting characters from Edward Pritchard's household on the eve of the King's visit. It's the ideal place to get a real feel for life during the Civil War, so why not go along? Just be sure not to loose your head!

Clockwise from top left • Llancaiach Fawr.
• Llancaiach Fawr - Stewards. • Horeb Chapel.

Seeds of Change

Unlike many Valleys communities, Gelligaer retained its rural look and feel until relatively recently. In the late 19th century agriculture still dominated Gelligaer's lowland whilst the Commoners continued to exercise their rights on the higher ground. Farming families were well established, such as the Stradlings of Gelliargwellt who worked the same 300 acres of land for hundreds of years until the early 19th century. Later still, photographs from the 1930's show characters such as William 'Greenhill' of Green Hill Farm taking a calf to Nelson Cattle Market by cart. Whilst urbanisation finally caught up with the southern end of the village in the 20th century, even to this day there is significant agricultural activity to its northern fringes.

But that is not to say that Gelligaer was without its industries. As far back as 1478 there are records of a Llancaiach Foundry. Mining, which had taken place on a localised scale for centuries, became more widespread from the 1760s with numerous small pits and drift mines being established including ones at Top Hill and Llancaiach.

In 1828 Thomas Powell (who founded the Powell & Duffryn industrial empire) opened the Gelliargwellt level. This was the site of the so called Gelligaer Riots which took place in 1843, when Powell tried to bring in blacklegs to work the coal whilst his miners were on strike. Powell instructed his manager Lewis Lewis to bring down men from Dowlais to work the level, which he did. The Dowlais blacklegs were lodged at Gelliargwellt Farm. However following a series of run-ins at the picket line, Lewis was forced to swear on a frying pan that he would not recruit any more 'scabs'. Only then was he allowed to leave the site safely with the Dowlais men.

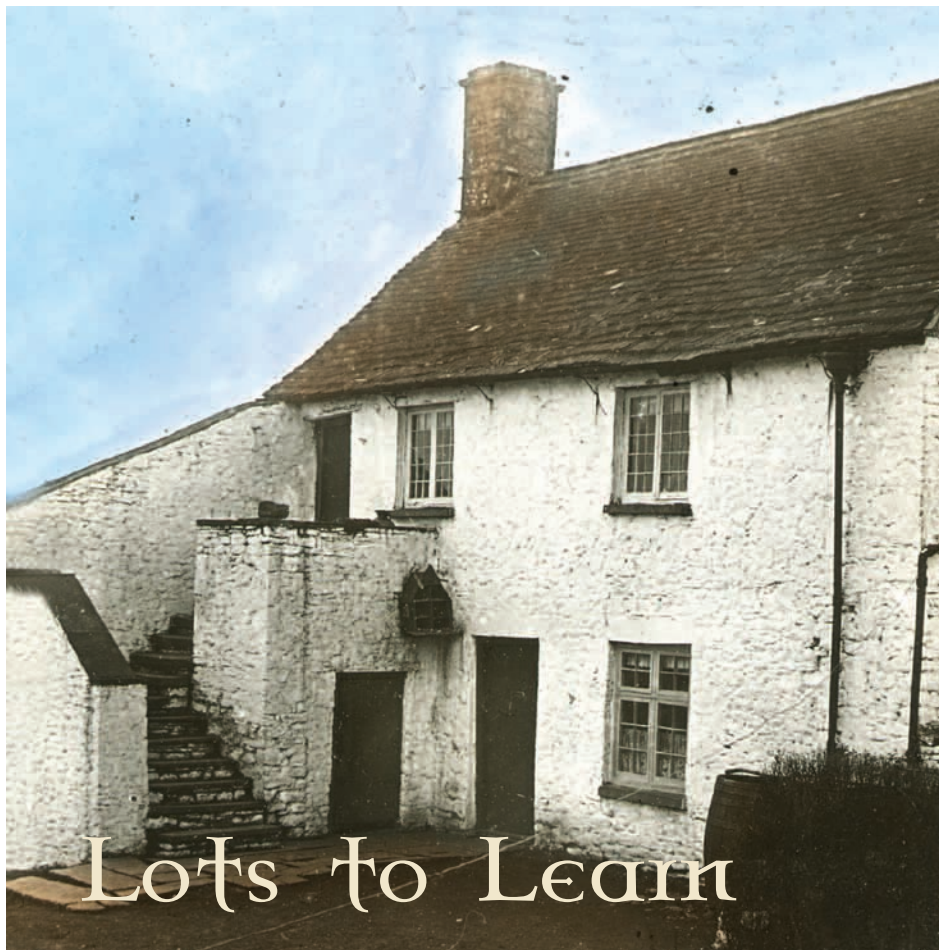


Later the Gelligaer Colliery Co. was established, but due to water in the workings, the company closed in 1887. Local drift mines continued to be exploited, such as the one operated by the Edmunds brothers, up on Gelligaer mountain which was worked well in to living memory. However, it was south of the village that the impact of mining was to be at its greatest, with the establishment of Penallta Colliery, but more of that later...

The landscape around Gelligaer continues to be a fascinating mix of urban and rural, so no two walks are ever the same! Why not get out there and see for yourself.

Clockwise from top left • William George Williams of Pottery Farm Glyn-gaer stands alongside some of his Ayrshire dairy cows.
• Mr O. B. Greenaway with a fellow worker and a pit pony working at his brother Tom's small drift mine on Gelligaer Mountain.
• Dyffryn Cottages. • William Greenhill in the 1930s at Green Hill Farm, Church Road, Gelligaer preparing to take a calf to the Nelson cattle market.





Lots to Learn

In the early 18th century, despite a few circulating schools, education was generally reserved for the relatively wealthy. This situation so worried one wealthy landowner of the Parish, Edward Lewis (of the wealthy Lewis family mentioned on page 7) that he decided to leave money in his will specifically for setting up a school. He died in 1728 at only 37 years of age.

The school was to benefit 15 poor boys of the Parish at any one time, and the sum he left was to cover the cost of purchasing a building, paying a teacher and to provide for uniforms and other materials. As his mother outlived him, it was a condition of his will that his wishes could not be put in to force until she too had died. On her passing, the will was temporarily disputed by a relative. Finally on the 1st August 1762 the school was opened in a small cottage near the site of the Roman

Fort. There is a plaque there commemorating Edward Lewis and his charitable school. The school, now on its third site, near Pengam, still has an excellent reputation.

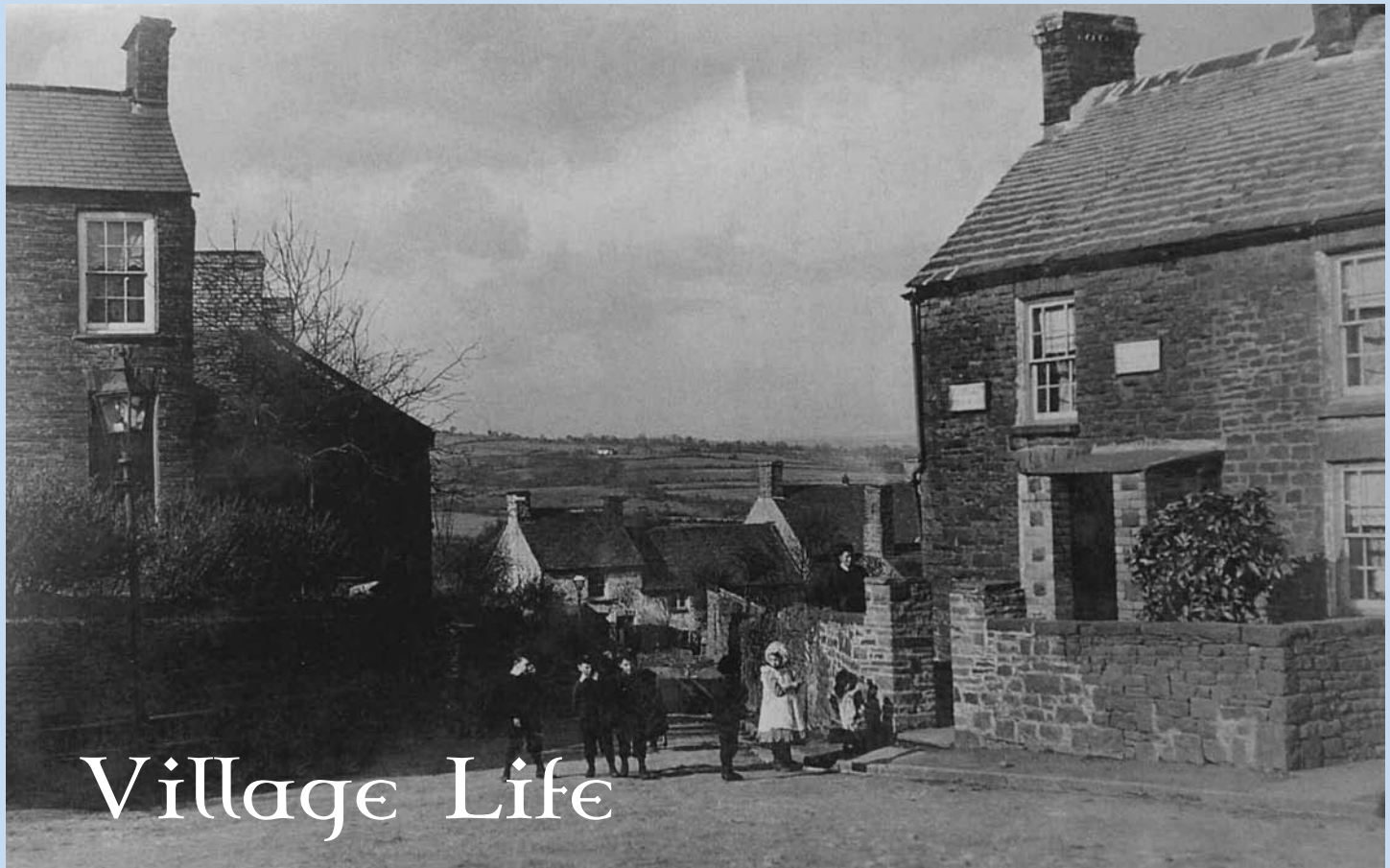
Lewis was well ahead of his time. Education legislation began with the 1870 Education Act, but it was the 1880 Education Act that led to the establishment of compulsory schooling for 5-10 year olds. The leaving age was gradually increased, but compulsory education up to the age of 16 was not introduced until 1972.

The connection between Lewis Boys School and the Roman Fort continued, when in the 1900s the school master Arthur Wright brought some of his students to the excavations at the fort. Wright was a keen photographer, and glass plates of his photos show pupils enjoying the dig.

Today the area is served by three primary schools, Greenhill, Glyn Gaer and the newly built Welsh medium primary, Ysgol Penalltau. Comprehensive education is provided at a number of secondary schools around the area including, aptly, Lewis School Pengam and Lewis Girls School.

Lewis knew the importance of education, but his legacy could only afford to help a few boys at a time. Fittingly, the site of his first school is now the focus for helping to educate everyone about the Roman heritage of Gelligaer. So make sure to attend or you may get lines!

Clockwise from top left: • Original Lewis' School. • Lewis' School site memorial. • Memorial to Edward Lewis, St Catwg's Church.



Village Life

Circa 1900 the village of Gelligaer was idyllic. The old roadway ran down past St Catwg's, Church Houses and the Post Office, along Chapel Cottages and past Horeb Chapel, winding its way down the hillside, with Twyn y Castell off to the right. Other features of the village at the time included the Old Rectory, the cottage which had housed the first Lewis Boys School, Green Hill Farm, a new village school and importantly two pubs, the Cross Inn and the Harp Inn. A visitor to the village around this time might also have caught a glimpse of the Cardiff Naturalists busy excavating the recently discovered Roman Fort.

Second only to the Church, the Harp Inn was probably the most important building in the village.

"The Harp Inn, standing in the shadows of the Parish Church, with its stables, brewing house, coach house and handball court, was of great antiquity and its range of buildings gave it

great significance" D Gethin Thomas, pg 10.9, 2010.

In the 18th and 19th centuries it was a coaching inn for the Crosskeys to Merthyr Tydfil stage coach – a very important means of transport prior to the development of rail and motor vehicles. Also, prior to 1894 The Harp had served as a kind of civic centre. Parish business was often conducted here, and it was here that agents of Lord Senghenydd (by then the Marquis of Bute) collected 'chief rents' from his tenants. It also served the social needs of the community as well as offering rooms to travellers.

The Davies family were landlords of the Inn for the best part of two hundred years, and a number of them were renowned harpists. Thus when it became a requirement in law to give public houses a name, 'The Harp Inn' must have seemed most fitting.

The original Harp Inn was demolished



sometime around the turn of the last century, but the name lives on in a fine Victorian pub which still sits opposite the Church on the main village square.

Churches, chapels, shops, post offices and pubs in small communities are a finite resource, and the motto 'use it or loose it' rings true here. So if you are out exploring Gelligaer, why not make sure you take advantage of what's available... you might get a slice of history thrown in for free!

Top • Historic Village Centre circa 1900.

Bottom • Historic Village Centre 2010.



Extraction and Expansion

"It was observed in 1906 that the peace that was then to be found on the pastoral slopes of the Cyllau Valley was soon to be rudely disturbed by great industrial enterprise with a great crowd of people following in its train."

D Gethin Thomas, pg 10.9, 2010.

As D. Gethin Thomas notes above, the turn of the 20th century signified huge change for the Gelligaer area. The catalyst for which was the sinking of Penallta Colliery, just a few miles downstream of the village itself. Despite some earlier forays into mining, the area had largely escaped the scars and urbanisation which had so characterised much of the Valleys during the 18th and 19th centuries.

Owned by the Powell Duffryn Company, Penallta originally employed about 270 men. However, by the 1930s its workforce had grown to over 3,200, and annual production peaked at

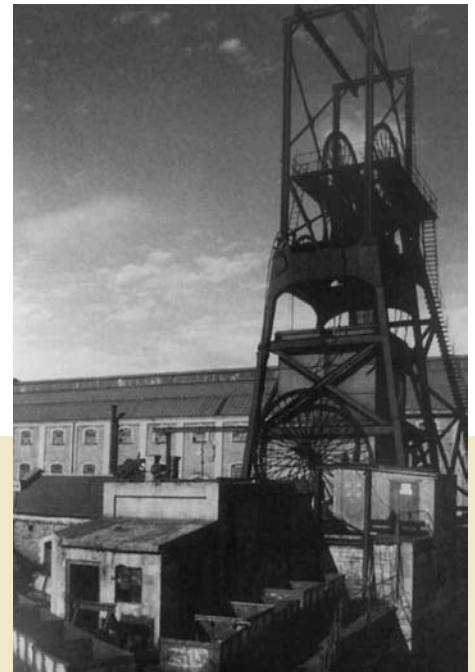
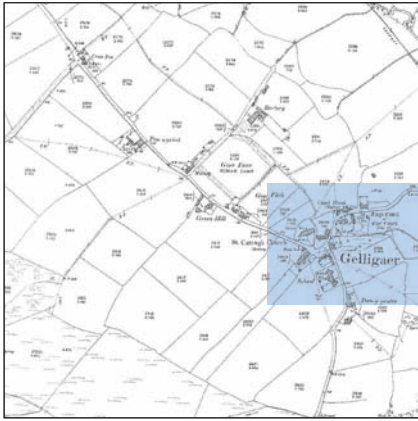
975,603 tons of coal. Despite this, the interwar years saw the coal industry within Wales on the decline. During WW2 the government took control of the Mines, and after the war they decided that Nationalisation was the best course of action. An Act was passed to that effect which led to the creation of the National Coal Board (NCB) in January 1947.

Nationalisation was intended to ensure better safety underground, modern machinery and practises and a fairer wage system. For the miners of Penallta, however, change was too slow. As a result, on February 4th 1948, in a fit of disillusionment, 25 colliers staged a 'stay down' strike, refusing to come up from the pit for 60 hours. Not least among their grievances was the fact that the 'new' 7 man management board contained 5 of the old Powell Duffryn bosses.

Production continued in Penallta until November 1st 1991. Latterly the area occupied by the colliery has been under development. Some of it forms the basis of a Country Park, other elements include a Business Park and many of the remaining fine brick buildings are earmarked for housing.

But how did the Colliery impact upon Gelligaer? Initially, the village was little changed. The Harp Inn was rebuilt, and Harp Terrace emerged some time before 1920. There was little in the way of housing development in the UK during the 1930s due to the general economic conditions of that time. Post WW2, however, the Labour MP Aneurin Bevan (best known for establishing the National Health Service) embarked upon a national house building scheme.

He introduced the idea of 'prefabs', which were quick and relatively



inexpensive to build, yet provided accommodation that was far better than most local people were used to. As part of this scheme, a fairly large development of prefabricated houses was built in Gelligaer, occupying the area opposite Harp Terrace. This was the first major social housing development to encroach on the Village itself. However, with the baby boom of the post war years, additional social housing was called for, and by the end of the 1960s Gelligaer saw huge changes. The prefabs were demolished to make way for a new housing estate which spread further to the west and covered the allotments, as well as much of the land of the former Green Hill and Penwylod Farms. This development gave us the Gelligaer urban settlement that we recognise today.

Further housing changes in the village included the demolishing of the cottages near the fort (including the first Lewis Boys School) and the building of Gelligaer House, as well as a number of modern private houses springing up along Church Road and around the old village centre.

Other alterations to the area included the development of the new road to Cascade/Penedairheol circa 1950 (on top of a former refuse/ash tip) and the realigning of the road away from the Cross Inn in the late 1960s.

This 'new' elevated roadway along with the vast housing expansion skew the ancient views from the village, and create a very different landscape to that which our Prehistoric, Roman, Medieval and even Victorian counterparts would have seen.

So, armed with the tools provided by this project (www.romangelligaer.org) and with your imagination to the fore, why not peel back the layers of Gelligaer and expose in your minds eye the vistas that once made this little patch of countryside important to the might of Rome.

- Clockwise from top left • Urban spread.
- OS map 1875. • OS map 1969.
- This group of miners at Penallta Colliery shows the enormity of the winding wheels used. • No 2 upcast shaft at Penallta Colliery in the 1940s. The colliery was a provider of jobs in the area for eighty years. • Mrs Elaine Harris and her children in front of Harp Terrace 1961.



Gelligaer – Still Fighting!

After decades of general decline which have faced the Valleys as a whole, Gelligaer is once again fighting back. As history has shown, Gelligaer folk have always been resilient, whether battling with the Romans, raiding the Normans, or taking on the NCB. This spirit is still alive and kicking, with pockets of the community actively working to regenerate the area for the benefit of present and future generations.

Recent improvements include the redevelopment of the Church Hall, renovations to St Catwg's Church, and improvements to the housing stock. Aided by the Council and public

funds, much is now being done to restore Gelligaer's pride. One such example is the Gelligaer Roman Fort project which owes a debt to the drive and determination of key local individuals. This project aims to use the area's rich and intriguing Roman heritage as a catalyst for change ...both social and economic.

It is an interesting turn of history that this period in Gelligaer's story is now being celebrated by local people, who are realising the potential offered by legacy the Romans left behind.

Clockwise from top left • Roman Fort site today. • Welcome signs. • View of the Fort.



Gelligaer

