

‘Tales of Pengarnddu’

Life in a South Wales mining village

Based on the recollections of Esther Powell (nee
Walters) 1904-1979

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To my mother and father.

“The old people used to say that Pengarnddu was a forest once, but then they burnt all the trees down, and all that was left was a big heap of black ash. So they called it Pengarnddu-“top of the black heap.”

My grandmother Esther spent the first sixty-three years of her life in the village of Pengarnddu* in Glamorganshire, South Wales. It wasn't an old village: most of it had been built in the early nineteenth century. However, her family had been living there since at least the 1840's and some of her ancestors may have been among its earliest inhabitants.

She was born in Mountain Row, Pengarnddu on November 17th 1904, the third child of Thomas and Ellen Jane Walters. There were four other rows of houses in the village: School Row, Cross School Row, Castle Row and Company Row; there was a church and a school, shops and public houses. Given that its inhabitants depended entirely on heavy industry for their daily bread, it was relatively remote, perched on the spur of a mountain ridge called Pyllau Duon, high above the steel and coal towns of Dowlais and Merthyr Tydfil.

All of the men in my grandmother's family were coal miners, and she married a miner, my grandfather Evan John Powell. They had four children: Anne, (known as Annie) Thomas Owen, (known as Tommy or T.O.) David, (known as Davy or Dai) and my mother Jean, a late child born in 1944. In 1950, my grandfather died of the miners' disease silicosis, which is caused by stone dust settling on the lungs.

My mother and grandmother, early 1950s



In the late 1960's Pengarnddu was almost completely demolished and the inhabitants re-housed. Only three dwellings remained standing among the ruins.

At 7 Company Row, surrounded by her cats and dogs, chickens and mountain ponies, lived my great aunt Ruby, who had refused to move. Her husband, Tom Walters, had been killed by a roof fall in the Trelewis Drift mine in 1956, and since then she had rarely left the village. Number 6 next door lay empty and derelict.



Company Row in 1968

10 Castle Row was occupied by Peggy Everitt (nee Jones) and her husband. Peggy was a grand daughter of Margaret Jones (*Maggie Tafarn*) who had kept the public house known as, 'The Castle Inn.'

I was born in 1967 and therefore do not remember the place as a functioning village. My grandmother died in 1979, and during the last decade of her life, she would often hark back to Pengarnddu. She would tell me how the village had come to be built, and how her ancestors had arrived there from other parts of Wales. She was one of the last people in the family to speak Welsh as a mother tongue, so it is poignant to think that many of her stories from and about the, "*old people*," were being told to me in translation.

Her stories captured my imagination, and I would spend many hours listening to her “tales of Pengarnddu.”



Pengarnddu village in 1969 shortly before demolition

* *Pen-y-garn-ddu* is the more correct version, but for the purposes of this narrative, I have chosen to spell the name of the village in the way it was always pronounced by its inhabitants, omitting the definite article “y.”

“The old people used to say that Mountain Row used to be stables and Ty Mawr was the groom’s house”

By 1845 Dowlais Ironworks near Merthyr Tydfil in South Wales was the greatest ironworks in the world. It employed 7,000 men, women and children, 3,000 of them in its associated mines and collieries.

The group of Glamorganshire and Bristol businessmen who built the first furnace in 1759 could see that the district was one ideally suited to the production of iron. Here on the northern edge of the South Wales coalfield, iron ore, coal and limestone were to be found in abundance.

In the seventeenth century, most ironworks had been situated near forests, as the iron was smelted from the ore using charcoal. Coal contained too much sulphur and made the iron brittle. Then in 1709, Abraham Darby of Coalbrookdale in Shropshire discovered that if coal was burned under certain conditions to remove the sulphur, the resulting coke made very good iron.

Limestone was the other vital ingredient. It acted as a flux, helping to rid the iron of impurities. At Dowlais, the limestone outcropped some two miles to the north of the works, on the high ground of the Twynau Gwynion.

On July 27th 1792, Robert Thompson of Dowlais Ironworks had written to the engineer Thomas Dadford:

“I intend to make a Rail Road to the Limestone Rock that supplies Dowlais Furnaces and as some part of it will go through a very rough ground will esteem it a particular favor if you will spare Mr Harris to Levell it & assist in laying it out and will satisfy you or him for the trouble; it is in length about 1 mile & a Quarter, if you can send him up Monday morning early and remain till it is finished it will particularly oblige me as I have near Twenty Men at Work on a part of it at present and must rely on my judgment if I cannot have him to assist me at that time.”

As the distance between Dowlais Ironworks and the Twynau Gwynion quarries was more than a mile and a quarter, it is probable that by 1792, Dowlais Ironworks had already built the, “*Rail Road*,” as far as its coal and iron ore workings, a little to the south of Pengarnddu.

In 1800, a new line of track was laid, using the same route, by the Dowlais engineer George Overton. It won the admiration of James Watt junior, son of the celebrated Scottish engineer James Watt, who visited Dowlais with his father in 1800:

“Mr Guest (of Dowlais) ...says that upon the present Dramroad, 2ft 6 wide with a slope of $\frac{3}{4}$ Inch in a yard which they have laid part of the way to their Lime Works, 1 horse does as much as three upon the old Railroad.”

In the very early days of iron making, raw materials had been transported by pack mules or in horse drawn wagons. Horsepower continued to be the means of traction, but due to the advent of the tramroads, exercised with much greater effect. George Overton, writing in 1825, recalled that on his Twynau Gwynion tramroad, “*each horse hauled regularly a weight of nine or ten tons...*”

According to my grandmother, the first house to be built at Pengarnddu belonged to the ostler or the groom as she referred to him, who looked after these horses. A row of stone-built stables adjoined the house, which was roughly halfway between the furnaces and the quarries, at fourteen hundred feet above sea level. Behind the stables, there was an enclosure or paddock.

Eventually, horses gave way to the steam locomotive, which had been invented by Richard Trevethick at nearby Penydarren Ironworks in 1804. The stables were no longer required and were converted into houses. They became known as *Rhes y Mynydd* or, in later years, Mountain Row. The ostler’s house became known as *Ty Mawr* (Big House), and the tramroad began to be called, *Yr Heol Injin* (The Engine Road).

Documentary evidence suggests that the transition from horses to locomotives occurred in the 1860's. This seems to conflict with my grandmother's account, since by that time Pengarnddu was a well-established village and there is no mention of an ostler living at Ty Mawr in either 1861 or 1851. (Before 1851 no census records for Pengarnddu survive). However, I believe her account is plausible, since it explains why a comparatively large house should be attached to so many smaller houses in one row. Possibly the horses were being stabled at a different site.



Mountain Row looking towards Twyn-y-Waun

In 1825, Dowlais Ironworks opened new limestone quarries to the east of Morlais Castle. Thereafter the Twynau Gwynion quarries supplied ironworks in the Rhymney Valley and the old tramroad was extended to accommodate this new development. Officially, from 1864, it was known as the Rhymney Mineral Railway.

'Gelligaer and Merthyr Common,' by Judith Jones, provides another interesting perspective on Pengarnddu's development. She describes how the village was built over a period as a series of "encroachments" onto the common, which was the property of the Marquis of Bute, and that these encroachments were eventually formalised into leasehold

and freehold agreements. She notes that in 1839, the Marquis's agents paid a visit to one Lewis Jones, who had built five houses, a stable and yard at Pengarnddu in 1824 as an encroachment and for which no ground rent had been paid. The stable may have had nothing to do with the limestone quarries, but it is intriguing in the light of my grandmother's account of events.

The exception to this piecemeal development was Company Row, which, as the name suggests, was a row of purpose-built workers' housing, erected by the Dowlais Iron Company; with its generous gardens, it contained some of the best houses in the village.

By 1851, most of what was to become Pengarnddu village had been built, although the census taker lumps all the houses under the name of, "Garnddu," and does not specify the names of particular rows of houses, as was later to be the case.

The census returns for that year show that the majority of the men were "ironstone miners," that is, they worked in the extraction of iron ore. Some would have worked in the iron ore "patches" near Pengarnddu. ("Patching" was an environmentally destructive form of shallow opencast mining). A few Pengarnddu men worked in the limestone quarries, while a rather greater number were coal miners. Some women, especially those who were unmarried, also worked in heavy industry. By 1871, a number of, "navvies," lived there. A branch line of the Brecon and Merthyr Railway skirted the village, some two hundred yards to the west, but this had been completed by 1863.

Rhymney Ironworks closed in 1891, after which large-scale quarrying for limestone on the Twynau Gwynion ceased. With the introduction of the Bessemer system of steel making at Dowlais a different type of iron ore was required, which in 1878 Dowlais began importing from Spain. The result was that by the time my grandmother was born in 1904, most of the Pengarnddu men were working in the Dowlais collieries.

The village was still overwhelmingly Welsh speaking. According to the 1901 census, about a third of the inhabitants could speak no other language; the rest were bilingual in Welsh and English, with a handful of people only able to speak English. Generally speaking, the elderly, the very young, and migrants from rural Wales could only speak Welsh. Those adults who had been through the Dowlais school system were bilingual, while recently arrived English migrants could only speak their native tongue. (English people who spent a few years in the village generally became bilingual of necessity, but as we shall see, this situation would not last forever).

Pengarnddu School had been built in 1860 under the auspices of the Guest family of ironmasters. The children would attend here from the age of five until they were about ten years old, after which they were transferred to the larger schools in Pant and Dowlais.

The church was named after Sant Mihangel (Saint Michael) and was a Welsh Anglican church. That is to say, its liturgy and ministry was Anglican but conducted in the Welsh language. It had been built in 1894, using funds raised by a three-day bazaar in the Oddfellows' Hall in Dowlais. A small Workmen's Institute and library was later built onto the church, which my grandmother always firmly maintained had been paid for by the villagers themselves.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the village comprised some fifty odd houses, two public houses, ('The Castle Inn' and 'The Pengarnddu Hare') a couple of shops, a school and a church. Near the village was Blaenmorlais Farm, often called simply, 'Pengarnddu Farm.' Behind Mountain Row was a field of lush green grass, which was said to have been the old paddock. Again, this was often referred to as 'Pengarnddu Field.' There were approximately two hundred and fifty inhabitants.

'Two brothers from West Wales came looking for work and that was the start of our family in Pengarnddu.'

As previously indicated, the meaning of *Pengarnddu* as related to my grandmother by the *old people* was, "top of the black heap." Another translation of *garn* is, "cairn," rather than, "heap." (The Merthyr and Gelligaer Common is littered with pre-historic stone burial cairns).

However, the earth at Pengarnddu is certainly black to the depth of a foot or more, and is ashy in texture, in contrast with the brownish clay soils of the surrounding area. An area of land near the village, which later became the football pitch, was known as the *Coedcae*, which means "a wooded enclosure." A tithe map of the area shows the *Coedcae* as being at least partially wooded as late as 1850. One wonders if Pengarnddu was a centre for the production of charcoal in previous centuries. However, as far as the Dowlais Ironworks are concerned, it seems that coke was used to fire the furnaces from the very beginning in 1759.

So many of my grandmother's stories referred to the *old people* because at the age of five she went to live with John Edwards and Esther Davies, who were, respectively, her maternal grandfather and his mother-in-law, my grandmother's great grandmother, born in 1824, after whom she was named. This kind of thing was common practice in those days of small houses and large families.

John Edwards had come from Wrexham in North Wales, where he had been a miner. In the middle of a long strike in that district, (possibly the well-documented disturbances of 1869 which particularly affected the neighbouring town of Mold), he decided to try his luck in the south. He walked a hundred and fifty miles to the Rhondda Valley, where he found work in a colliery. Shortly after this, he came to work in one of the Dowlais pits, and lodged at Pengarnddu with John and Esther Davies.

John Davies and his brother, David Davies, as well as his wife Esther and her own family, the Griffiths's, had all come from Cardiganshire

in about 1840. Within a short time, their eldest daughter Ellen married John Edwards, the lodger from North Wales. John and Ellen Edwards had four children, but when the children were still very young, Ellen died. John remained unmarried and his mother-in law, Esther Davies, took the primary role in the raising of his children. After the death of her husband John Davies, her son-in-law John Edwards continued to live with her, and they were eventually joined for a number of years by my own grandmother, Esther Walters.

My grandmother would recall that when John and Esther disagreed over some matter, he would call her a *mochyn Sir Benfro*, a “Pembrokeshire pig.” This is strange, since she was most definitely born and brought up in Llanarth, Cardiganshire, as all her younger siblings were also born there. Possibly she lived for a time in Pembrokeshire before “going up to the works” (*mynd lan i’r gweithfeydd*) as the saying went in West Wales at the time, or else John Edwards, a man who had always lived in the eastern borderlands, had rather a hazy idea of the geography of West Wales!

“Pembrokeshire pig,” is not as disrespectful in Welsh as it sounds in English, as “*mochyn*” is often used among Welsh speakers to describe an inhabitant of Pembrokeshire. It refers to the supposed stubbornness of Pembrokeshire people.

She in turn would retaliate with “*yr hen blwm*” – “the old lead” that is, the old lead miner. “*Plwm*” was a common nickname in the South Wales coalfield at the time, for men who had been lead miners in the north and west. Possibly John Edwards had worked at the Minera lead mine near Wrexham.

John Edwards spoke a strong North Wales dialect. On one occasion, my grandmother remembered him asking her to,

“*Dos nol fy ddospan i mi*” – “Fetch my hat.”

She returned with a saucepan, the South Welsh for “hat” being “*het*.”

“Etty, y diawl dwl!” was his reply, “Etty, you silly thing!” (literally “dull devil.”)

John Edwards’ youngest daughter, Ellen Jane, was my great grandmother. For much of her life, she was known as “Jinny Pant” because before her marriage she had worked as a serving maid in the Pant Cad Ifor public house, near Pant Cemetery.

Ellen Jane married Thomas Jenkyn Walters. His mother Jane had been born at St David’s in Pembrokeshire, and had come to Pengarnddu in her youth. She married a local man called Walter Walters. They had been together for a little over twenty years, when he was burnt to death in an underground explosion in 1878.

The 1881 census finds Walter Walters’ widow and children at Pengarnddu, struggling for a living in the absence of their main breadwinner. Jane was “selling sand.” This entailed burning sandstone, pounding it into tiny pieces, and selling the resulting “sand” for people to spread on their kitchen floors. Sometimes old bricks were used instead.

Jane Walters had four children: the eldest, Blanche, was already married with two children of her own; Mary, aged twenty, was still living at home and working in the Dowlais Ironworks - she emigrated to America a few weeks after the census was taken; Martha and my great grandfather Thomas were pupils at Pengarnddu School. There had been another two daughters, Ann and Jane, who had died as children.

By the following year, when my great grandfather was nine years old, his mother had re-married, and was now Mrs Jane Evans. Thomas started work that year with his stepfather. He would be so exhausted by the work underground, that his stepfather would carry him home on his back, fast asleep. During the winter months, he never saw daylight, except on Sunday.

The Walters family was long established in the immediate locality. Vaynor Parish Records reveal that the family name had originally been Walter, and that they had been living on this part of the Glamorganshire/Breconshire border since at least the early eighteenth century.

One of them became a legend within the village as she achieved the rare distinction of living to be 102 years old! Her name was Mary Baxter, known as "*Old Mari Buxter*" in the local pronunciation. Census records contradict the Vaynor Parish Records as to her date of birth, but her obituary notice (kindly supplied by local historian Terry Jones) establishes that she died on New Year's Eve 1905. She was born Mary Walters at Pontsticill, two years before the Battle of Trafalgar, and died at Pengarnddu, four years after the death of Queen Victoria. The obituary notice records that she was one of the founder members of the Mormon Church in Merthyr, as was her husband, John Baxter, who came originally from Montgomeryshire.

As a young couple in the 1830's they lived at Pant Cad Ifor. Parish records show that they had six baby boys in quick succession, to the first three of whom they gave the traditional Walters family name of Jenkin, and to the fourth, fifth and sixth, the name John. The reason for this repetition was that each baby died before the next one was born. Only the last John survived, dying eventually in the 1890's. They had 14 children in total, some of whom emigrated to America, where their descendants live to this day.

“And Pengarnddu was all Welsh in those days. Oh, it was lovely!”

In November 1904, the Great Welsh Revival under the ministry of Evan Roberts began in earnest. Thousands were converted and before long, the Nonconformist chapels of Dowlais were full.

Also, my grandmother was born at Pengarnddu. As Anglicans, her family were not intimately involved in the spiritual euphoria gripping the country. In any case, the toil of daily life went on as before.

Thomas Walters would have been earning from about thirty shillings to two pounds a week as a collier. The Pengarnddu men worked in collieries on Cwmbargoed Mountain and in the Taff-Bargoed and Darren Valleys.

To reach their place of work it was necessary to “catch the cwbs” at Caeharris station. (The “cwbs” were railway wagons roughly adapted for passengers). Disembarking from the *cwbs* at the end of their day’s work, the men would be black with coal dust and almost indistinguishable one from the other. My grandmother recalled not recognising her own father in the street, on her way home from Dowlais School. (She also recalled men from the Dowlais Irish community walking home covered in red dust after working in the iron ore).

In the early part of the twentieth century, piped water had not yet reached Pengarnddu. Every day, water had to be carried from the mountain springs for the men to bath after their work, and for all other domestic purposes. (In a family of young miners there would be a race home to have first use of the hot water!)

Heavy pitchers of water would be carried on the head. For this task, the women would twist an old towel into a circular shape and place it on top of the head. A pitcher of water could then be carried more comfortably. Dr Elwyn Bowen, in his book ‘*Vaynor*,’ records the local name for this piece of cloth as a *trochan*.

My great uncle, Teddy Walters, once showed me the site of one of these springs - between Company Row and the first field of Blaenmorlais Farm. Nowadays the area is merely boggy, but at one time, there was a proper spout to extract the water. Another spring lay just beyond Company Row, at the side of the track to Pant, and another between Mountain Row and the 'Gwter Fawr' (the Big Gutter). (It was almost certainly the presence of these springs, which had led to the village being built at this particular location in the first place.)

On Monday mornings, the queues at the springs would lengthen as the women started the weekly wash. To avoid the queues, some women would walk to a spring called *Pistyllangoy*, about half a mile away. *Pistyll* means, "spring," but the meaning of *angoy* is puzzling. I think that *Pistyllangoy* is a contraction of *Pistyll-ar-y-Garn Goy*, - "the spring on *Garn Goy*." (*Garn Goy* was the old name for this part of the common, before it came to be referred to, more prosaically, as, 'Rhydney Common'). *Garn Goy* possibly means, "a closed cairn," *goy* being the local dialect pronunciation of the Welsh word, *gau*, - "closed."

The women made their own bread, but the nearest communal bake house was at Penywern. Therefore, the dough would be made up into baking tins, loaded into washing baskets, and carried, again using the *trochan*, to Penywern, where it was baked for a small fee. The field that the women crossed on their way to Penywern is now traversed by the Heads of the Valleys Road, but at that time was known as *Caer Twm Bili* or Twm Bili's Field.

The late Mrs Margaret Edwards of Station Terrace, Dowlais Top, once related to me a story that her aunt, Myfanwy Davies, had passed on to her. Namely, that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a reasonable guess could be made as to which part of Dowlais a woman came from, by what she was wearing on her head: many of the women of lower Dowlais were Irish or of Irish extraction, and their custom was to wear a shawl pulled up over their head; in central Dowlais and Caeharris, the women were Welsh chapel-goers, so it was essential for

them to have a hat; in the mountain villages, such as Pengarnddu, Trecatty and Pantywaun, the women wore headscarves to facilitate the many burdens which they carried.

My grandmother was born in Mountain Row, but a few years later her parents moved to 17 Company Row, the last house in the village on the Pant side. It was known as *Ty Top* (Top House). It had a living room, a separate kitchen, a downstairs bedroom and two bedrooms upstairs. Compared to other houses in Pengarnddu, it was relatively spacious. The curving staircase was set into the wall, and a door in the corner of the living room gave access to it. At the back of the house was a yard, with an outside lavatory and coalhouse. In front of the house was a public roadway, on the other side of which was the garden, enclosed by drystone walls. The roadway was the quickest way to the rest of the village. To go *rownd y gerddi* (“round the gardens”), involved a circuitous route.

Company Row was nicknamed ‘Buck’ and Tub Row’ because hooks to hold buckets and tubs were fastened into the front walls of the houses.

My grandmother Esther was one of nine children: Mary, Esther (Etty), Walter (Watty), Elizabeth (Lizzie), Thomas (Tom), Eleanor (Nellie), Rees, Edward (Teddy) and Martha.

There had been four other children who had died in infancy: David, Blanche, John and William. David had suffered a particularly grisly end. He died of “fits” at the age of five, but during his treatment, the doctor had stupidly put a thermometer into his mouth. He had a fit, bit down onto the thermometer, and lacerated his throat with shards of glass.

My grandmother maintained that, in total, her mother had gone through sixteen pregnancies. Mary and my grandmother came close to sharing in the fate of their dead siblings, for about the time of the First World War, they both caught diphtheria. By this time, my grandmother was possibly living with her parents again, because she recalled all the younger children being sent to stay with grandparents,

so that she and Mary could be isolated, and nursed by their mother. The doctor gave each of them a painful injection in the back, leaving a big black mark, which never completely disappeared. However, it saved their lives.

The large garden at Ty Top was intensively cultivated. Also, an allotment provided an annual crop of potatoes. My great grandfather always used Scottish seed potatoes, as he considered them better suited to the climate at Pengarnddu. Potatoes would be stored under the bed, which was the driest place in the house.

At Pengarnddu, potatoes were traditionally planted on May Day (May 1st). At Cefn Coed y Cymmer, about three miles away as the crow flies, but eight hundred feet nearer sea level, potatoes would be planted at Easter. May Day was a miners' holiday, and provided an ideal opportunity for the Pengarnddu men to complete this task. Also known as 'Mabon's Day,' the holiday had been won for them by William Abraham, the president of the South Wales Miners' Federation, whose bardic name was Mabon.

My grandmother recalled Dowlais people who were of Irish descent, planting their potatoes by making a hole with a stick in previously prepared ground and shoving in the seed potato. This, I discovered in later years, is the classic Irish "lazy bed" system of potato cultivation. The Welsh people planted their potatoes in drills or furrows. Apart from the occasional Irish navvy, the ethnic Irish, so significant a component of the population of Dowlais, do not seem to have lived at Pengarnddu until well into the twentieth century. As Catholics, they were sometimes known disparagingly as, "*plant Mari*," ("Mary's children") or worse still, "*tylwyth Mari*," (Mary's tribe).

In a sense, the Pengarnddu people lived in two worlds. By day, the sun would be darkened by the constant smoke and steam from Dowlais Steelworks; their nights were illuminated by the glare of the Bessemer furnaces. Yet the village lay on the edge of thousands of acres of common land, comprising rough grazing, peat bogs and rocky outcrops, which extended up into the Brecon Beacons.

One of my grandmother's tales made a great impression on me as a child. It concerned a shepherd who was out on horseback one evening, tending to sheep on the Twynau Gwynion, when a thick fog descended. He tried to make his way home, but after a while, his pony suddenly stopped and would go no further. The shepherd had no choice but to stay where he was until the fog lifted. In the morning, it became clear that he and his pony had spent the night on the edge of a quarry.

A little way up the tramroad from Pengarnddu, lay the smallholding of Blaenmorlais, known to the villagers as, 'Pengarnddu Farm.' During my grandmother's childhood, hay was still being cut and turned there by hand, and conveyed to the barn on a horse-drawn gambo. The late Mr David Spacey of Pant, who farmed there in the 1940's and 1950's, used to say that the farmstead had originally been a, "shepherd's look-out post;" in other words a primitive stone-built cottage, probably with a thatched roof. Over the years, the buildings had been extended and additional land enclosed from the common.

His words seem to be endorsed by the evidence of the census, which records a succession of shepherds, rather than farmers as the occupiers of Blaenmorlais. When my grandmother was a child, it may well have been a shepherd called Rees Phillips, since he was there with his wife and child when the census was taken in 1901. In 1881, a Scottish shepherd called John Marchbank lived there, with his wife Jenny, who was also Scottish, and their seven children who had all been born in various parts of Breconshire and Carmarthenshire. By 1891, it was occupied by the Jones family. The head of the household was a shepherd called Rees Jones, who was a widower. His son Thomas and a lodger called William Price also lived there, but these men were coal miners. Thomas was also a widower who had been left with two baby daughters. A servant called Margaret Rees completed the household. Equally, the census records farm labourers living in what were ostensibly purely industrial settlements. In 1881, a female farm worker lived in Pengarnddu village, and agricultural labourers appear in the returns for Penywern.

In addition, many villagers who earned their daily bread by working in industry, owned mountain ponies, pigs and poultry. Sheds or *cwtshes* for these animals were constructed below the embankment of the *Heol Injin*, where there was some shelter from the wind. My mother recalls that a shilling a year was paid to the, 'Lord of the Manor,' for this privilege. (For most of the period covered in this narrative, this person was the Marquis of Bute, based at Cardiff Castle).

In 1890, owners of Welsh Mountain Ponies who grazed their animals on the common land around Pengarnddu formed the 'Dowlais Pony Club'. A stallion would be selected annually to mate with the mountain mares, and the owner of the stallion would receive a payment or *premium* from the club members. (It should not be overlooked that a significant proportion of the Pengarnddu men were hauliers, underground or on the surface, who spent their working lives with horses and pit ponies).

The Walters family kept a sow for breeding, chickens, ducks and geese, and at one time even had a pair of goats and some Angora rabbits, which were kept for their fur and their meat.

Every year, one of the piglets would be kept back to be raised and fattened for slaughter. On the appointed day, a butcher from Dowlais Top would kill the pig on a bench in front of the house. Most of the animal would be salted down and the fresh meat distributed among the wider family, a favour that would be repaid in due course. The breed of pig favoured by my great grandfather was the Middle White, which is renowned for its fatty meat, and is therefore often killed at a young age for pork, before it has had a chance to get too fat. However, at Pengarnddu, it was killed for bacon. The result was the tremendously fatty and salty *cig moch*, beloved of the Welsh peasant.

Surplus pigs would be walked to Twyn y Waun, where they were sold at the Waun Fair, an ancient fair that was held about six times a year. To walk the pig, a stick would be secured to the pig's back leg by a length of strong cord. As the pig walked, the stick would tap the pig, thus driving it along, yet the cord allowed the pig to be controlled. (I

once saw a print of eighteenth century Welsh women in their tall black hats, taking pigs to market using exactly the same method.)

Sometimes a sow would lose her appetite or become fractious. My great grandfather's cure for this was to feed her with two kippers! Apparently, this had a calming effect!

Every year, just before Christmas, most of the poultry would be slaughtered, and the soft feathers from the breasts of the birds used to fill pillows and beds. It was a communal event, undertaken in 'Bopa Ellen's Washhouse' in Castle Row. (This mass slaughter makes me think that perhaps the women ran a small business, selling dressed birds for the Christmas trade).

Bopa means "aunt" in the *Gwenhwyseg* (Gwentian) dialect of southeast Wales, and was used when referring to actual aunts or merely cousins, neighbours or friends. Ellen Roberts (nee Jones) was my great grandmother's first cousin. Her washhouse was put to many uses, other than that of the communal washing of clothes, not least for impromptu entertainments and informal gatherings. In her front room, she ran a small shop.

The Christmas meal at *Ty Top* was usually one of their own geese, roasted on a rotating metal "jack," in front of the coal fire. The precious fat or "goose grease" was saved as a cure for ailments of the throat and chest.

There wasn't much money to spare for presents, but each child would have a stocking on Christmas morning. The foot and heel of the stocking would be bulked out with old cokes from the fire, and in the leg of the stocking, there would be an apple, an orange and a few sweets. (A kind of sweet that was popular with local children in those days was an enormous, black and white mint humbug, known as 'Collier's Lump'; another was liquorice-strips, always referred to for some reason as 'Spanish').

Life at Pengarnddu was hard, but it was lived to certain standards and within certain patterns. For example, the Walters family observed the Christian Sabbath with an almost Hebraic exactitude. No work was done on Sunday, except tending to the livestock, and some cooking of food, most of which had been prepared the day before. The family attended morning and evening services at Sant Mihangel church, and the children were sent to Sunday school, but all clothes and shoes had to be ready by Saturday night. My mother recalls that knitting on the Sabbath was especially frowned upon. Similarly, cutting paper of any kind was regarded as “devil’s work.” (This regimen ensured that my grandmother could recite the Lord’s Prayer, Psalm 23 and the Nicene Creed in Welsh and English to the end of her days).

There were other distractions for the children, such as Monday night ‘Band of Hope’ (a temperance youth fellowship connected to the church) and the ‘Penny Readings,’ which adults also attended. At both of these gatherings, they could take part in singing and reciting.

The Penny Readings were so called because, originally at least, they were held to raise funds for a family in distress or for some other worthy local cause. Held in halls or family homes, it was often necessary for everyone to bring their own chair! It is probably true to say that they fulfilled the function of the venerable Welsh tradition of the, ‘Noson Lawen,’ (‘Merry Evening’), although they were oftentimes competitive in nature.

Locally, there was a rich tradition of choral and congregational singing. The young people of the Band of Hope were taught using the *Tonic sol-fa* notation, and were led only by the striking of a tuning fork at the start of the piece. They sang the great hymns of the Welsh church and children’s hymns like *Calon Lan* (A Pure Heart), *Iesu Tirion* (Gentle Jesus) and *Hoff yw Iesu o blant bychain* (Jesus loves the little children). The children liked to sing folk and popular songs like *Ar lan y mor* (By the sea); *Cyfri’r Geifr* (Counting the Goats); *Hen fenyw fach Cydweli* (The Old Woman from Kidwelly); *Y Mochyn Du* (The Black Pig) and *Roedd pren ar y bryn* (There was a tree on the hill).

A popular ditty at the time was sung to the tune of ‘Cosher Bailey’s Engine.’ It shows how the Welsh and English languages were beginning to be mixed, often to the detriment of each other!

*Llawer o bethau allai chwarae,
ffidl a’r ffliwt a’r ffrensh piano
Chwarae bel a cico’r football,
Chwarae cardiau, dwbl pinnau,
Was you ever see, was you ever see, was you ever see such a funny
thing before?*

A popular child’s recitation was:

*Cath fach lwyd yw cath fach ni,
Ond galw “Pws” a daw atoch chi.
Paid ag ofni am ei danedd,
Ond gofalwch, ar ei thread mae ewinedd!*

(Our little cat is a grey cat
Just call “Puss,” and she will come to you.
Do not worry about her teeth,
But be careful, on her feet she has claws!)

Tongue twisters were also popular. One of them began with the words:

*‘Roedd dwy wydd lwyd afradlon,
Yn pori ar lan yr afon.’*

(“There were two grey, stray geese,
Grazing on the river bank.”)

Strangely enough, it is quite hard to say in English too! It went on to compare the relative greyness of the one goose as compared to the other goose! Unfortunately, I could never get my tongue around all of it!

Another was purely local, and would now be considered politically incorrect, as it was meant to be an imitation of the strange speech of the recently arrived Spanish community at Penywern who lived in Alphonso Street, known as ‘Spannie Row.’ I can only remember the last line, which went something like:

Heer a malaca, sheer a malaca bith!

Penywern, incidentally, was a very musical little community. At one time, it boasted its own male voice choir and was known as, ‘Piano Town,’ due to the large number of pianos on proud display in its front rooms. Sometimes, the Spaniards were allowed to use the grounds of nearby Hafod House to hold their *fiestas*, where they sang, danced, and played their distinctive guitars.

Soccer was popular, and was played by men and boys. Oftentimes, boys would only have an inflated pig’s bladder for a ball. *Bando*, an old Welsh game similar to hockey, was still being played during my grandmother’s childhood. Boys and girls could play ‘Catty Dog’ a game played using two sticks, which were sharpened at both ends. The “dog” or the longer stick was used to hit one sharpened end of the smaller “cat” which had been placed on the ground, making the “cat” fly up into the air. My grandmother broke her first pair of glasses while playing this game, when she was five years old.

Apart from these homespun pursuits, there were more sophisticated entertainments available in Dowlais and Merthyr. The silent films of Charlie Chaplin were immensely popular, giving rise to the oft-repeated song –

“Oh Charlie Chaplin,
His boots are cracking.
And his old baggy trousers
Need a-mending.
Before they send him
To the Dardanelles.”

In the summertime, the Sunday School ‘Tea Party’ would be held at Pontsarn in the neighbouring Breconshire parish of Vaynor. For naughty children, however, there was always the threat of the *Jini Fedw* (“the birch Jenny”) that is, a birch rod kept at the side of the hearth. (In the Gwenhwyseg dialect, *fedw* sounded more like *weto*.)

In July, bilberries, known locally in English as whinberries, which grew wild on the mountains, would be ripe and ready for picking. My great grandfather Thomas Walters would wake his children before dawn and they would walk to the mountains above Dolygaer in the Taff Fechan valley, where the best whinberries were to be found. They would spend the whole day there and sell most of what they picked to the shops for one shilling and sixpence a basket. Whinberries are very small and grow on low bushes: it takes a long time to fill a basket! However, this activity provided some useful extra cash in a house where there were plenty of mouths to feed. Some of the whinberries would be kept to make delicious pastry tarts. (Intriguingly, Company Row itself seems to have been called, ‘Wimberry Row’ (sic) at one time, as evidenced in the 1871 census and some of the Dowlais Parish records.)

Every year, the villagers looked forward to the arrival of the gypsies, who made their encampment between Pengarnddu and Dowlais Top, at ‘The Turns’ where the roadway snaked through the old coal and ironstone patches. (The Asda superstore now stands near this site.) Near the encampment was a spring, which had healing properties, presumably due to the metals and minerals in the ground. Injured limbs would benefit from being bathed in its waters.

The gypsies were not just “travelling people” but actual Romanies, native to Wales for centuries. The gypsy women would sell their paper flowers and clothes pegs door to door, and the men would buy and sell horses and ponies. No doubt, they were attracted to the district by the proximity of the Waun Fair. Villagers and gypsies would entertain each other with music and singing. The oldest family photograph my

grandmother passed on to me is of her great grandmother Esther Davies, sitting in her high-backed chair at the gypsy encampment.

Esther Davies (nee Griffiths) pictured sitting with the gypsies at their encampment near Pengarnddu, circa 1910



The gypsy children would get a few days' schooling at Pengarnddu and there was at least one marriage made between the two communities. There was a tale, perhaps apocryphal, that newly born gypsy babies were dipped in cold water to toughen them for the rigours of life on the road. Also, that if there was some inherent weakness in the child, it was better revealed early on rather than in later life, when it might prove a burden to the community. Eventually, the gypsies would move on, spending part of their year working in the hop gardens and orchards of Herefordshire.

When the winter nights drew in, and the north-easterly, "pneumonia wind," howled down off the Twynau Gwynion, there was little could be done but sit around the fire singing hymns to each other.

My great grandfather's favourite hymn, rarely heard these days, was *Bugail Israel* (Israel's Shepherd).

“A little woman from the hills”

I have mentioned Old Mari Baxter and Bopa Ellen. Dozens of other aunts, uncles and cousins populated my grandmother’s childhood.

However, her father’s three sisters, for one reason or another, were all absent from the village. The eldest sister, Blanche, had died as a young woman; the middle sister, Mary, was a member of the Mormon Church, and had emigrated to America; and the youngest sister, Martha, had married a shopkeeper from Deri called Gwilym Llywelyn. Martha had eight children. (One of her sons, also called Gwilym, became a prominent chapel deacon and local historian of the Darran Valley.) With a large family to bring up and a business to run, six miles away on the other side of a mountain, she did not figure greatly in my grandmother’s life.

By contrast, my grandmother knew her mother’s relatives well. Her mother Ellen Jane (‘Jinny Pant’) was the youngest of four children.

The eldest was Elizabeth Edwards – ‘Bopa Lizzie’- born in about 1871. Bopa Lizzie had, as the common phrase went, “buried two husbands.” Firstly, she was Mrs Thomas, and then she was Mrs Jones, but both husbands were killed in mining accidents and she died childless.

Her terrible misfortune bore testimony to the fact that although only about a fifth of British miners worked in the South Wales coalfield, nearly half of the fatal accidents occurred there. It was a difficult coalfield, full of geological faults, and dominated by several ruthless coal-owners. The dead would be carried back to Pengarnddu by their workmates, using an old door as a bier. It sounds like a cliché, but is true nevertheless, that a dead horse presented a greater financial loss to the owners than a dead miner.

The second eldest was another to bear the traditional family name of Esther. Bopa Esther married one William Evans, known in Pengarnddu as ‘Billy Cwm’, because he came from the Cwm area of

Dowlais. They had four children: John, Evan, William, (Willy) and Nellie. Willy was my grandmother's favourite cousin.

My great grandmother had one brother, Edward Edwards, known as Ned. He married Mary Hannah Evans, a member of a Pengarnddu clan which had married into many other families in the village. As a result, it was known as, '*Yr Wythien Fawr*' (The Big Vein).



Ned Edwards and William Evans (Billy Cwm) at the Roman Wheel (probably an abandoned millstone – Twunau Gwyniau quarries. Billy's son Evan looking on

They had five children: Eleanor, Richard (Dick), John, Mary Elizabeth (Liz) and Gwenllian. Eleanor and John became qualified teachers. Eleanor was the first woman from Pengarnddu to go to college, and to mark the significance of this event, the villagers clubbed together to buy her a gold watch. She later married Titus Davies, a colliery manager from Aberdare, and the watch is still in the possession of her daughter Marina. John, named after his grandfather John Edwards the North Walian, graduated from the University College of Wales, Cardiff. Eventually, he became headmaster of the village school in Betws-yn-Rhos, Denbighshire, his grandfather's county.

Among the wider family, perhaps the most colourful character was my grandmother's great aunt, Mary Ann Davies, known as Bopa Nan. She was married three times. Her first husband was David Lumley, a railway platelayer, by whom she had two sons, Edward and John. Her brother-in-law, also called John, was the village grocer, with a shop in Castle Row. The village children would sing of him:

*“Halen, pupur, mwstard, blacyn, starts a blew.
John Lumley, groser, sy’n gwerthu pwer mawr.”*

(“Salt, pepper, mustard, blacking, starch and blue.
John Lumley, grocer, sells powerful stuff!”)

Her second husband’s name was John Jones. She had several more children by him, including Bopa Ellen, who I mentioned earlier, and a son called Evan. Before long, she was widowed for a second time.

Despite the family’s misfortunes, two of her sons, Edward Lumley and Evan Jones, received a college education and became priests of the Anglican Church. (The new county grammar schools played an enormous part in raising up the sons and daughters of the working class). It was said within the family that the Lumleys had helped Edward in this regard, but that Bopa Nan had cleaned the village school to help finance Evan’s studies. Edward eventually became rector of a, “high church,” parish in England and was known as, ‘Father Lumley.’ Evan went into the Anglican Church in Wales and eventually became Canon Evan Jones of the parish of Penderyn, Breconshire.

In later life, Bopa Nan married Watcyn Williams, whose first wife had been Blanche Walters, my great grandfather’s sister. Watcyn had been a merchant seaman and had the distinct social advantage of owning a pony and trap. Every autumn, he and Bopa Nan would drive down to Cardiganshire, to stay with relatives who were small farmers near New Quay. They would return loaded with apples, potatoes and dead rabbits, for distribution among the wider family at Pengarnddu.

For a number of years, Bopa Nan ran a shop next door to the Hollybush Inn in Dowlais. One of her customers, an Irishman, would come into the shop every day, buy an egg, crack it open, and swallow it raw on the spot! Bopa Nan herself could be rather eccentric. Sometimes she could be found “*up at the pig cwtshes,*” sitting on an upturned bucket, smoking her clay pipe, while throwing titbits to the rats!

By this time, Canon Evan Jones and his wife were living in a fine house at the top of Cefn Coed y Cymmer, and sometimes Bopa Nan would go over to see them. On one particular occasion, Bopa Nan overheard her daughter-in-law talking to some visitors. The visitors wished to know who Bopa Nan was.

“Oh, just a little woman from the hills,” was the reply.

“They were baptised in Pond Saints, then off they went in the pony and trap.”

Pengarnddu was surrounded by ponds. These small reservoirs were built from the mid-nineteenth century onwards as part of the ‘Dowlais Free Drainage System,’ which supplied water to the Dowlais Works, for raising steam and cooling hot metal. It depended entirely on the force of gravity for its operation. Gutters or leats were cut from the mountain streams at a higher point and the water diverted along the mountainside to the storage ponds. The, ‘*Gwter Fawr*’ (Big Gutter) was effectively the southern boundary of Pengarnddu village.

The old people had spoken of the name *Menelaus* with awe, because it was the Scottish manager, William Menelaus, who had led the Dowlais Works engineers in devising this innovative system.

My ancestor John Davies had been a “waterman” in the 1880’s, cleaning and repairing the gutters and regulating the flow of water. A hundred years later, his great, great grandson, my uncle Davy Powell, was employed in exactly the same way. It seems to have been a job that men took on in their fifties and sixties, since it was not as strenuous as working underground or in the ironworks.

There was Pond Pitwellt, Jepson’s Pond, Pond Mawr, the New Pond, the Penywern Fishponds, Caeharris Pond and all the ponds on Cwmbargoed Mountain. (The New Pond was referred to as the Top Pond by people down in Pant, but was called Banc-y-Pond by people in Pengarnddu).

The pond nearest the village, above the *Heol Injin*, had strong associations with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, commonly known as the Mormons. It therefore became known, in a kind of bastardised English, as Pond Saints. ('Pond' came out sounding more like *Pom*, and 'Saints' was given a Welsh pronunciation, making it almost rhyme with *pints*.) The Mormons attach great importance to the ritual of baptism by full immersion, and sometime around the mid-nineteenth century, they began to use Pond Saints to baptise the local converts. According to Mormon sources, this often took place under cover of darkness, as the sect was persecuted in its early days.

In 1843, the first branch of the Mormon Church in Wales was established at Penydarren, about two miles by road from Pengarnddu. The leader was one William Henshaw, but as he could not speak Welsh, growth was very slow. Then, a Welsh Mississippi riverboat captain turned Mormon missionary, Captain Dan Jones, arrived in Merthyr in the spring of 1845. He took charge of the proselytizing and published a newspaper and tracts in the Welsh language. As a result, by 1848 there were more than 1,190 active members in the Merthyr Tydfil District and 4,645 members in Wales as a whole, most of them in the south. Edward Giles Roberts, an itinerant Mormon preacher, spent a few weeks at Pengarnddu in 1847, and recorded in his journal that there were two or three Mormon prayer meetings being held in the village every week. He mentions staying at the house of one John Walters, an early stalwart of the Mormon cause, who on further investigation turns out to be Old Mari Buxter's brother.

Elias Morris was another Mormon missionary who passed through the village. Born in Llanfair Talhaiarn in North Wales, after his conversion he emigrated to Iron County, in America's Utah Territory, (the Mormon Zion) in 1851, where he helped to establish ironworks and coalmines. During the mid-1860's, he undertook a number of missionary journeys to Wales, and preached in many Welsh towns and villages. He records in his journal that he preached at a house in Pengarnddu on February 13th 1867. The house was, "full of strangers," that is non-Mormons.

As previously mentioned my grandmother was always well aware of the fact that her father's sister, Mary Walters, was a Mormon and had emigrated to America. However, I only recently discovered that there was a much larger Mormon contingent on the other side of the family. The reader will recall that my grandmother spent much of her childhood with her great grandmother Esther Davies (nee Griffiths). It transpires that three of her brothers and two of her sisters had converted in the 1840's and 1850's, not long after their arrival from Cardiganshire. During the 1860's, they all emigrated, with the exception of one of the brothers, David Griffiths, who had died in 1857. Of this large family, only Esther, Elizabeth and Lewis remained at Pengarnddu, along with their old mother, Eleanor Griffiths. Other Pengarnddu people went with them, including a family with the rather unusual surname of Joseph, including Lorenzo Don Joseph, presumably named in honour of Lorenzo Snow, the American Mormon who first sent Welsh missionaries into the area.



John and Margaret Griffiths (nee Jones) and their family in Utah

The eldest sister, Catherine, went with her husband Evan John Jones and their eleven children in 1866, on the, *John Bright,* along with 765 other "saints," out of the port of Liverpool. Their leader was Elias Morris. Her brother John, her sister Sarah, and their families were also on board. It is unclear as to when her brother Rees emigrated, but it

seems that he may have been the first one in the family to do so, given that his wife Jane and daughter Mary Ann went out on *'The Amazon'* from the port of London in 1863. (Charles Dickens visited this ship before its departure, and recorded his observations in *'The Uncommercial Traveller.'* His impressions of the Mormon emigrants were generally favourable).

They were in the mid-Atlantic when the old wooden sailing ship sprung a leak. In the midst of the panic, quick-thinking Margaret Griffiths (John's wife) grabbed the thick Welsh woollen blanket off her bed, rammed it into the gap, and sealed it as best she could with some ship's tar. This controlled the leakage until the ship's carpenter was able to fix it, thus possibly saving the lives of all on board.

They landed in New York and went by rail as far as St. Joseph, Missouri. From there, they made the one thousand mile journey to the Salt Lake Valley on foot, their belongings piled in covered wagons, drawn by oxen. On one occasion, they were attacked by Indians who stole their cattle. On arrival in Utah they had no easy landing, but were all sent into the fields by the church authorities to harvest potatoes. They initially settled in a place called Lehi, but then undertook another exhausting winter journey of two hundred miles, to southwest Utah, and the farming and silver mining communities of Beaver County. (The county town of Beaver was the birthplace of Butch Cassidy!) It seems that here they were reunited with their brother Rees Griffiths and his wife and children. Life was very hard in the early days. They lived in log cabins with dirt floors. The children often went without shoes, and potatoes were the staple diet for months on end. How they must have missed the steady wages and well-stocked markets of Dowlais!

They were joined the following year by Evan John Jones's sister, Mary, (the wife of John Walters), along with her only surviving natural daughter, Lucretia Walters and her adopted daughter, Margaret Williams. By this time the construction of the trans-continental railroad was in full swing, so they were able to come further by rail, as

far as Laramie, Wyoming, there to be met by the, 'church wagons,' sent out from Salt Lake City.

Meanwhile John Walters was still in Wales, earning enough money to be able to join his family. He eventually arrived in 1869, and was among the first party of Mormon immigrants to journey all the way from the Atlantic to Utah on the newly completed trans-continental railroad.

Many of the Pengarnddu Mormons appear in the 1880 American census records, settled on neighbouring farms in Adamsville, Beaver County. They included David and Ann Powell from Company Row. (This was a different Powell family from my own relatives). David Powell was the first man in Beaver County to build a house out of stone. Nearby was Fort Cameron, an outpost of the American cavalry, established following the Black Hawk Indian War of 1865-1868. The building later became the Murdock Academy, which was attended by several of the Walters and Griffiths girls.

Lucretia and Margaret eventually married their first cousins from Pengarnddu, namely Evan E. Jones and John Evan Jones. This seems to have been a common practice. No doubt, as well as having the same religion, for a number of years after their arrival, there was the common bond of the Welsh language.

In 1875, one of the biggest finds of silver in American history was made at neighbouring Frisco and the Silver Horn Mine was duly opened. Evan E. Jones worked here for a while and he and Lucretia buried four of their children in its cemetery. They had all died of scarlet fever. Frisco is now a ghost town.

The most remarkable feature of the Mormon emigration from Pengarnddu is that the converts were not fleeing from poverty per se, although in nineteenth century Merthyr poverty was always a possibility, whether due to accident, sickness or a trade slump. It is important to see the situation in the context of the times: for example, the stone built houses of Pengarnddu were a vast improvement on the agricultural labourers' dwellings of west Wales, many of which were

little more than huts. Evan John Jones, who later wrote an account of his conversion and emigration, arrived in Pengarnddu from Lampeter in the 1840's and was immediately struck by the quality of the food and clothing that people were able to afford. This relative prosperity had not lessened to any great degree by the 1860's. Neither was their primary motivation based on material advancement: they had been members of the Mormon Church for twenty years prior to emigrating, and in the early days in America they in fact suffered a drop in their standard of living. Rather, the early Mormon converts were often heard to ask the question:

“Pa bryd y cawn fyned i Seion?” / “When may we go to Zion?”

In their eyes, they were on a journey of faith to the Promised Land, and many of the converts were heard to sing songs on the theme of leaving Babylon as they departed from Wales.

On the other hand, given that such emphasis was laid on emigration to Utah, almost as a tenet of faith, and that the 1860's pioneers from Pengarnddu had presumably gone as soon as they could, it is notable that twenty years had passed before they were financially able to make the move, even with some help from the church.

It is astonishing that this 1860's migration, so traumatic an event in such a small village, had virtually disappeared from the family memory. A vestige of it remained in my grandmother's recollection that an aunt of hers had set out for America with a baby in her arms. Mormon records show that this baby must have been Annie, the youngest child of Catherine Jones. She was six weeks old when her parents left Pengarnddu.

The family story handed down to me orally concerning the Mormons was a more recent one, involving my grandmother's aunt, Mary Walters, her father's sister. According to my grandmother, she was baptised in Pond Saints, along with her husband, and that very day they set off on the first stage of their long journey to Utah. However, this story must have become mixed up with other stories about the

previous generation of emigrants since, according to passenger lists of Welsh Mormons, Mary Walters was twenty years old and still single when she emigrated in 1881.

She sailed from Liverpool, aboard *'The Wyoming,'* on May 21st and landed in New York on June 1st. By November 1881 she was living in southwest Utah, and, according to Mormon sources, married to a farmer called Edward Thomas, originally from Dowlais, who was twenty-nine years her senior. My great aunt Lizzie was the last person in our family to be in contact with the people in Utah, and she had told me that Mary Walters' married name was Lewis and that she and her husband were coal merchants. This was because after the death of her first husband, Mary Walters had married again, to John Thomas Lewis, who was originally from Rhymney, and had moved north to the town of Price in the Utah coalfield.



Mary Lewis (nee Walters, 1860-1928) in Utah

(Family photographs in my possession were taken in Springville, Spanish Fork and Payson, which are all towns in north-central Utah).

Her obituary notice in 1928, however, doesn't mention a first husband, but does name two daughters: Sadie, (married name Austen) who had moved to Oregon, and Violet, who married Delbert Leroy Kay, had three sons, and has living descendants in America and the wider world.

According to my grandmother, her aunt Mary also had a son in the United States army, who was killed in France during the First World War and that after the war, she had come all the way from Utah to visit his grave. This had always seemed to me rather unlikely, until Professor Ron Dennis, historian of the Welsh Mormons, informed me

that Mary was what was known in America as, 'A Gold Star Mother,' in that her son Thomas Lewis had died fighting for his country. Thousands of such women received free trips to the European military cemeteries, courtesy of the American government. It must have been very poignant for her to come within a couple of hundred miles of Wales, and yet be unable to visit her homeland, as she was not travelling under her own steam.

The Welsh and American branches of the family kept in touch for many years, and during the Depression of the 1930's money was sent on a regular basis from America to the Pengarnddu relatives. My grandmother recalled that the letters always carried a California postmark. After the Second World War, however, contact was lost.

In an interesting post-script to this story, local historian Terry Jones (himself one of the *Wythien Fawr*/Big Vein family) has uncovered Mormon records which show that Mary's parents, my great, great grandparents Walter and Jane Walters, had been members of the church and that they had all of their children 'blessed' according to Mormon practice by the church elders. Therefore, my grandmother's aunt Mary had not turned away from the family religion. Rather, she was the only one of her immediate family who had remained faithful to it. Oral history is sometimes as fascinating for what is forgotten, as for what is remembered.

'Ask my arse,' in English,
'Gofyn fy nhin,' in Welsh!

A number of important things happened to my grandmother when she was five years old: she was sent to live with her great grandmother; she broke the first pair of glasses she ever had playing, 'Catty Dog'; also, she became a pupil at Pengarnddu School.

According to my grandmother, before the age of five, she could not speak English, because her home and her church were Welsh. She only began to learn English at school. She never related any horror stories of the, 'Welsh Not,' or of the Welsh language being beaten out

of the children. However, there can be no doubt that the whole purpose of the school was to make the children numerate and literate in English. As a result, my grandmother could not write in Welsh. She could read it, but that was due to the influence of the church and the Sunday school. The school existed in the context of its times: the British Empire was at its zenith and the values of the school reflected that fact. The children were even taught to sing *'Land of Hope and Glory.'*



Pengarnddu School, Standard 2-3 in 1914. My grandmother is third from the left, middle row, standing.

Interestingly, however, this Welsh-speaking village contained a number of families with obviously English surnames, like Smith, Lumley, Cartwright, Sayers, Newman, Baxter and Ashton. Admittedly, some of these families had come to Pengarnddu from other parts of Wales, had been resident in Wales for a generation or more, and had inter-married with the native population. For example, the men who had brought the Baxter, Ashton and Lumley surnames into the village, all came from Montgomeryshire. Nevertheless, up to about 1900, the Welsh language at Pengarnddu displayed a healthy capacity to absorb newcomers. There are three startling examples of this tendency recorded in the 1901 census.

The first is that of Richard Newman and his family, who were living next door to my great grandparents in Mountain Row. He, his wife, and five children, the eldest of whom was sixteen, could only speak Welsh. Yet Richard Newman had been born in Wells, Somerset. Even allowing for mistakes in the census, he was at least bilingual, or he could never have communicated with his family.

Then there was John Spratt, a “general grocer’s apprentice,” employed by John Lumley in Castle Row. He was eighteen years old and lodged with the Lumleys. It was essential in such a place for a grocer’s assistant to be bilingual and so he was, even though he had been born in Cumberland.

The 1891 census records that William Cartwright and his wife Mary could only speak English, but by 1901, they were both bilingual. He came from Breconshire, but his wife had been born in Scotland.

However, as the generation of monoglot Welsh speakers passed away, and the English language school system continued to exert its influence, the Welsh language began to lose ground. The four eldest Walters children, Mary, ETTY, WATTY and LIZZIE, were bilingual, but the younger ones could speak fluently only in English, and this pattern was repeated in a number of families.

Another great social shift was underway in the village.

In 1867, the franchise had been extended to all male householders, and many of the ‘old people’ had supported Benjamin Disraeli’s ‘One Nation’ Conservative Party. However, my great grandparents’ generation began to convert to the cause of organised and politicised labour in the form of the Independent Labour Party. According to my grandmother, Pengarnddu was “*all I.L.P.*” in those days, and indeed, since 1900, Merthyr Tydfil had had an Independent Labour Member of Parliament, in the person of James Keir Hardie. (Again, it should be noted that Labour politics were transmitted mainly through the medium of English, and that this also greatly affected the language situation).

The changing political landscape reflected the situation in the coal industry during the years leading up to the First World War. Although these were years of unparalleled growth, there was much industrial strife, as the South Wales Miners' Federation battled the power of the new coal combines.

In 1912, Noah Ablett, the Miners' Agent for the Dowlais area, published, 'The Miners' Next Step,' a powerful syndicalist tract, which advocated worker control of the mines.

In 1910, the dispute centring on the mines of the Cambrian Combine in the Rhondda Valley, had led to a long strike and lockout. The then Home Secretary, Winston Churchill, eventually sent the army into the Rhondda. People like my grandmother never forgave him for, "setting the troops on the miners."

“We would wait for the tipping of the Bessemer”

With the exception of my grandmother’s American cousin, the First World War had left the Walters family unscathed. In fact, because of the war economy, it had been a time of relative prosperity for the miners. In addition, the government had taken control of the mines out of the hands of the coal-owners for the duration.

Six days after the Armistice in 1918, my grandmother turned fourteen, left school, and shortly thereafter began work as a domestic servant. She had been well prepared for such work, since in those days it was common practice for working class girls to go to their teachers’ houses to do the washing, ironing and other household tasks. Indeed, it may well have been an extension of this system that led her to her first job at 17 Caeracca Villas, Pant.

Up until about 1900, the village of Pant, or Pantysgallog to give it its full title, had been a small quarrying village surrounded by farms. Since then it had grown into a suburb of Dowlais, and was home to many of the burgeoning lower middle class, as well as miners and steelworkers. 17 Caeracca Villas was occupied by four teachers. It was a large, three-storied, semi-detached house, with a monkey-puzzle tree in the garden. My grandmother slept in the attic.

One of the teachers had become disabled, so she remained at home to manage the household, and to direct my grandmother in her many tasks. There was washing, ironing, cleaning and the laying of coal fires. The teacher supervised the cooking but my grandmother prepared vegetables and washed dishes. She received 7 shillings a week and her board and lodge. This included the opportunity to use a proper bathroom for the first time in her life. However, she would sometimes be so exhausted at the end of her day’s work, that she would fall asleep in the bath.

After a few years, she went to work for a family in Queen Street, Pant, where the husband was a manager at the Ivor Works, an offshoot of the main Dowlais Steelworks. She eventually returned to Caeracca

Villas, this time to a different house. Here, a dreadful accident occurred, which would affect my grandmother for the rest of her life. She had never had good eyesight. One day, the mistress of the house asked her to go and fetch the sewing basket from the attic. As she bent to pick up the basket in the dim light, she did not see the broken back of an old cane chair, with its spars sticking up jaggedly in the semi-darkness. A spar smashed through one of her spectacles, grazing her eyeball and shattering glass into it. Her screams brought the family to her aid, and she had to be held down to stop her rubbing at her eye while the doctor was sent for. The doctor removed the shards of glass and treated her eye as best he could. There was no talk of compensation in those days.

During her time in service, she did not always, “live in,” but sometimes returned every evening to Pengarnddu. There were few streetlights in those days, and home was half a mile away, up the steep Cwm Road, which was little more than a mountain track. On winter evenings, my grandmother and her sisters Mary and Lizzie, along with other Pengarnddu friends such as May, Bronwen and Maggie Ann Williams and the Woosnam girls, would wait for “the tipping of the Bessemer” at Dowlais Steelworks, that is, the emptying of the Bessemer furnaces. The glow of molten metal and the vast fountain of sparks created by this operation would illuminate the entire district. They would make their way home as quickly as possible, bathed in this spectacular manmade light.

Traditionally, the Pengarnddu women had always taken on paid work before marriage, sometimes during it, and especially so during times of widowhood, some examples of which I have already noted. Many of them were self-employed dressmakers, working from home. The 1901 census records that virtually all the young women and many of the housewives were thus employed. Bopa Ellen had been a dressmaker. She would spend a day or a number of days at a certain house, making clothes for the family and taking her meals with them. She was paid by the day, and her food was part of the deal. This talented woman made her own patterns out of newspaper.

In a previous generation, women had worked at the mines and ironworks, my grandmother's aunt, Mary Walters being one example. Another aunt had shovelled, "small coal," on the surface at Bedlinog Pits. My grandmother used to mention a female relative who was widowed and left with two children, and had sought assistance from the parish. To earn her small allowance, she had been set to breaking limestone in the Twynau Gwynion quarries.

For some time during these years "in service" my grandmother was, "courted," by a Jewish man from Dowlais. Unfortunately, she never mentioned his name. Whether their respective families had objections to the match is open to question. In any case, he wished to emigrate to America, which she refused to do, so the relationship ended.

There was quite a large Jewish community in Dowlais at the time, many of which had recently fled persecution in the Russian Empire. They had a synagogue in a room under the Oddfellows' Hall, and maintained their traditional way of life. Nellie, my grandmother's sister, was later, "in service," with a Jewish family. They were good employers, although their strict dietary laws regarding the separation of meat and dairy products meant that there were always piles of dishes to be washed after every meal!

Meanwhile, my grandmother's elder sister, Mary, had married a young miner from Dowlais Top called Fred Powell, and in 1924, my grandmother married his younger brother, Evan John Powell. They were both just twenty years old.

“The Powells worked in hard ground.”

My grandfather Evan John Powell had been born in, ‘The Round House,’ at Pantywaun, a village between Dowlais and Fochriw, hardly a trace of which now remains, due to opencast mining.

His mother Anne’s maiden name was Owen. Her brother Thomas Owen kept the, ‘Red Bull,’ public house in Caeharris. Inevitably, he was known as ‘Twm Owen the Bull,’ and my uncle T.O. Powell was named after him. Anne died as a young woman, leaving five children, and my great grandfather Joe Powell never remarried.

One of their daughters, Mary Jane, was brought up by Joe Powell’s sister, Sarah Jane Basagelo, who had no children of her own. Sarah Jane’s father-in-law was Domenico Basagelo, an Italian cabinet-maker who had settled in Pantywaun in the mid nineteenth century. As each of his children got married, he would make them a beautiful Welsh dresser. Mary Jane eventually inherited Sarah Jane’s, and since she also had no children, it passed on to my mother. Some of the Basagelo men decided to change their surname to Martin, echoing the name of their father’s native village, San Martino.

The other children - Twm, Fred, Evan John and Edith - were looked after by the kind Englishwoman who lived next door to them in Dowlais Top. Her name was Nellie Jackson.

The story would be told of how Nellie would get herself and the children down to Merthyr on the tram. She didn’t have enough money to pay the fares for the three boys, so to them she would say,

“The first one to meet us in Merthyr gets a penny!”

So the boys would run the two miles to Merthyr after the tram!

Joe Powell, my great grandfather, had been born in Radnorshire. In the 1880’s his parents, Evan and Sarah Powell, had brought their young family sixty miles over the Brecon Beacons in a pony and trap,

and made their home at Coedcae Du House near Pantywaun. There were eventually six boys and three girls.

The Powell men were noted in the locality for, “working in hard ground.” This meant that rather than working with the coal itself, they worked in the solid rock strata, driving the, “hard headings,” to provide roadways in to the seams. This took a terrible toll on their health. Many of them, including my grandfather, eventually died of silicosis.

Yet they were also known as a family of sportsmen. They were proficient at the once popular game of quoits, which entailed throwing heavy steel rings at a metal stake driven into a sticky clay surface. Joe’s brother, Thomas Powell, was listed in, ‘Who’s Who in Wales,’ in 1922 as a quoits champion. When Joe and his brothers were growing up in Pantywaun, every Sunday morning their father would take them to Trehir (Longtown) on Cwmbargoed Mountain, to practise their boxing with the Sinnett boys. One of my grandfather’s cousins, Jenkin Powell, (always known as Shenkin or Shenks), was one of the best soccer players Merthyr ever produced. He is buried next to my grandparents in Pant Cemetery.

*“The old Jew used to say,
Mrs Powell, you have to speculate to accumulate.”*

My grandparents' first home was, “in rooms,” that is to say, sharing a house. The house was one they would return to in due course, and where my mother would be born and raised, namely 10 Cross School Row, Pengarnddu.

There was one large room downstairs, which served as kitchen and living area. It could feasibly have been partitioned into two rooms, but instead a sofa was the dividing line between the kitchen and the, “best side.” Upstairs there were two small bedrooms. There was also a, “back kitchen,” which eventually became so damp it was abandoned, and used for storing tin baths and mining equipment. The only water source was a tap just inside the front door, underneath which was a bucket. It was primitive, but for women who had carried water from the springs, it was a vast improvement. (Much later, in the 1950's, the bucket was replaced by a large sink, known locally as a, “bosh.”) There was no back entrance to the property, and the outside toilet was situated on the other side of the pavement in front of the house.

For their wedding present to each other, they bought two wooden kitchen chairs from Mr Schwartz, the furniture maker in Dowlais. (They cost half a crown each and have withstood almost a hundred years of continuous use, without ever needing to be mended).

The first house that the young couple had to themselves was in Mountain Row, where their first child, Annie, was born in 1925. From there, they moved to School Row, where Tommy (often called T.O. to distinguish him from his cousin Tommy Powell) was born in 1926. Then they moved back to Mountain Row where Davy was born in 1928.

They began married life at an inauspicious time. In 1926, the nine-day General Strike ended in betrayal and fiasco, after which the miners were locked out for six months, until they were forced to return to work under the owners' terms, amid much recrimination. Throughout

the inter-war period, bitter industrial battles were fought between the South Wales Miners' Federation and, "company unionism," the so-called, 'Non-Pols,' (non-political unions). Locally, it was Guest, Keen and Nettlefolds that dominated the scene, along with the Powell Duffryn coal combine. In fact, the Powell family of landowners came from the same part of mid Wales as my ancestors.

The contraction in the British coal industry, (brought about by coal reparations from defeated Germany and the increasing use of oil), was exacerbated locally by the closure in 1930 of most of Dowlais Steelworks. Three thousand men were thrown out of work overnight, and the unemployment rate in Dowlais rocketed to 80% of the insurable population.

By the early 1930's, my grandparents and their three children were living on dole money of about a pound a week. It was not sufficient, and by itself would have meant semi-starvation. The Powell family and their neighbours began to look to other means of survival, as they had in 1926 and during other, shorter periods of unemployment.

One source of food was salmon, poached from the Usk and its tributaries in the neighbourhood of Talybont, Breconshire, some twelve miles away. The men would walk across the mountains under cover of darkness, and the salmon would be located by shining lamps down into the water. The light would at once illuminate and dazzle the fish so that they could be speared using gaffs. They would be bundled into sacks and the long walk made back over the mountains. For reasons of expediency as well as of the palate, the salmon would be eaten up as quickly as possible. Maldwyn Powell, who grew up in Blaen Dowlais, once told me:

"We would come down in the morning and there would be a big salmon hanging up in the back kitchen. Then it was boiled salmon, fried salmon, boiled salmon, fried salmon, for every meal until it was all gone!"

Maldwyn was my grandfather's cousin but also a cousin of my grandmother's, as his maternal grandmother was Martha Llywelyn (nee Walters) of Deri.

Sometimes "black powder," a kind of explosive consisting mainly of salt petre and charcoal, would be used to kill the fish. Fred Powell, my grandfather's brother, once had an accident while using this method, and sustained severe burns. It must have been an horrendous experience. Apart from the pain and the fright, it happened miles from home in the pitch dark. The walk back still had to be accomplished, and even then they could not call a doctor - if such a thing could have been afforded - due to the illegal nature of what they were doing.

However, my great grandmother Ellen Jane Walters, ('Jinny Pant'), came to the rescue. She made a herbal mixture, known as "marshmallow ointment." It was made by boiling the leaves of a broad-leafed plant, (not actually the true marshmallow), which is often seen growing locally on waste ground. After being strained, lard was added, and after being left to cool, was applied to the skin. It eventually healed up using this method.

(Strangely enough, Fred's son Joe also had an accident at about this same time involving a cup of hot fat. It had been placed near the edge of the table and he, as a small child, had reached up for it, thinking it was a drink. The hot fat tipped onto his throat, and left burns so severe *'you could see his windpipe.'* Again, however, marshmallow ointment was used successfully).

Poaching carried with it other hazards. William Evans, ('Billy Cwm'), my grandmother's uncle by marriage, was caught by water bailiffs and sentenced to a spell in prison. However, he had the temerity to leave the jail with a prison Bible hidden in his overcoat!

During the 1930's, the Pengarnddu people relied more heavily on their gardens and allotments for sustenance. Conversely, there was less stock rearing than had once been the case, as it represented too great a capital investment, and in any case would have been inadmissible

under the terms of the, 'Means Test.' The allotments were situated above Banc-y-Pond, near the railway line, and the stone markers that divided the various plots can still be seen.

Billy Cwm was an expert gardener, a skill that he had acquired wholly by reading books on the subject. My uncle Tommy once described to me how Billy would grow magnificent parsnips. Firstly, he would dig a trench and line it with old slates. Then, my two uncles would be sent with a small cart, made from old pram wheels and orange boxes, to the Twynau Gwynion to collect bracken. The trench would be filled with a mixture of bracken and horse manure, covered with a thinner layer of earth and the parsnips sown on top. The parsnips would grow like mad in this rich mixture, but the slate at the bottom would stop the development of a long, tapering root and would force the parsnip into a thicker shape, with plenty of good eating in it. Uncle Billy would also send the boys to collect old bones that he would burn and crush to make bonemeal. The loose earth from molehills was also sought after and used to enrich the soil.

As ever, whinberries were a source of both food and money. My grandfather would walk to the Glyn (Glyncollwn) near Talybont, and spend the whole day filling an old potato basket, which was about two and a half feet tall, with handles on both sides. He would sell the whinberries door to door, charging a few pennies for a pint of whinberries, which he measured into the customer's bowl using a pint glass. Picking whinberries was fiddly work at which my grandfather was particularly adept. He had sufficiently good co-ordination to be able to pick with both hands. He also had beautiful copperplate handwriting.

Come the autumn, wild plums would be gathered in 'Twynau Woods,' above the dam of the Pontsticill reservoir. One day in the early 1930's, one of my uncles went missing. (Whether it was Tommy or Davy has been forgotten after all these years). The whole village was roused to look for him. He was eventually discovered in a corner of a bedroom in his own house, where a basketful of plums had been stored. He had eaten them all and fallen fast asleep!

Winters at Pengarnddu could be harsh and the houses were damp. A good fire was essential. In any case, it was necessary for cooking and washing purposes at all times of the year. Gone were the days when the wagons loaded with concessionary, “colliers’ coal,” from Rhos Las Pit had arrived at the village. To provide fuel, the men opened small pits and levels into the lower coal measures at the, ‘*Garw*,’ an area of old ironstone and coal, “patches,” over towards Rhymney Common.

“*Garw*” means, “rough,” and it surely was a moonscape of dusty, yellowy-black hillocks of slag. (The area has since been levelled to create the Pengarnddu Industrial Estate). In this way, the word, “patches,” began to change its meaning. Where once it had referred to a place where coal was stripped from the surface, now it came to mean a place where coal was dug illegally, since all the minerals underlying the common were the property of the Marquis of Bute. However, generally speaking, the police turned a blind eye to their activities. The coal was either burnt on their own hearths, or sold very cheaply to those who could still afford it.

The coal seams of South Wales lie in the shape of a saucer, so the lowest seams come very close to the surface on the edge of the coalfield. Beneath the lower coal measures is a layer known to miners as the, ‘Farewell Rock,’ because no more coal was to be found either beneath or beyond it. Pengarnddu village itself was built on this rock stratum, and the building stones were quarried from it, near the *Coedcae*.

As with poaching, working in the patches was illegal and potentially dangerous, as well as being physically taxing. On one occasion, my grandfather was trapped by a roof fall, but was rescued by his workmates.

I recall the late Eddie Evans of Dowlais Top telling me that he once chanced upon his brother-in-law, Will John Thomas, “working a patch,” with a man called Harry Figgish. Eddie was horrified. As former steelworkers, Will John and Harry were “green,” in the ways of mining, and were unwittingly taking dreadful risks. Eddie set them

right on a few basic points and continued on his way. Poor Harry Figgish later drowned in Banc-y-Pond. For years afterwards, the village children would be wary of passing Banc-y-Pond late at night, for fear of encountering his ghost.

Despite my grandfather's best efforts to keep his family warm, my aunt Annie fell ill with bronchial pneumonia during the winter of 1934-5, and her life hung in the balance for many months. Dr Cresswell Jr. attended her, and Ruby Walters, (nee Carpenter), my grandmother's sister-in-law, came every day to help change the dressings that held the poultices to her body. She survived but the illness had weakened her, so from then on my grandfather taught her at home, so that she didn't have to walk to school in Dowlais or Pant.

Inevitably, people began to leave the village. Stephen and Ceinwen Jones from Mountain Row and their three children John, Vera and Margaret, left for Birmingham. Willy Evans, my grandmother's cousin, found work in a London hotel. Many young women went into domestic service in distant parts of the country. My grandmother's sister Lizzie spent most of the 1930's working at the Gwalia Hotel in Llandrindod Wells. She would recall how eagerly the Merthyr girls would await the arrival of the, 'Merthyr Express,' every week, with its news of home. Another relative, Eunice Jenkins, was packed off to domestic service in London at the age of fourteen in 1929, and was later joined by other family members. Her cousin Rhys Davies, although brought up in Pengarnddu, could claim to be a true Cockney, as he was born within the sound of Bow Bells. During the inter-war years, approximately 20,000 people left the borough of Merthyr Tydfil, a quarter of the population.

In contrast to the mines and steelworks, jobs on the railways were relatively secure, although there was some contraction due to natural wastage. Railwaymen were often transferred to other locations, as was the case with Joe Davies from Blaen Dowlais, who had married my grandmother's cousin Mary Elizabeth (Liz) Edwards. With their two-year-old son Eddie John, they moved to Welshpool. Her brother Richard (Dick) Edwards followed his father (my grandmother's uncle

Ned) into the mines, but moved to Ammanford, Carmarthenshire, in the anthracite section of the coalfield, which had not been so badly affected by the slump in the industry.

Meanwhile, those who remained at Pengarnddu managed as best they could. My grandmother would clean Bopa Lizzie's house at Troedyrhiw, a mining village a couple of miles below Merthyr, where Bopa Lizzie had a shop. She would do a load of someone's washing and ironing for a shilling. No doubt, my grandmother's cooking skills helped the family to survive at a time when children in Dowlais were fainting with hunger. She was adept at making delicious meals from the cheapest cuts of meat and offal: *cawl* (Welsh broth) was made using mutton on the bone and vegetables, whether from the allotment or Dowlais Market; her stuffed lambs' hearts were a dish fit for a king. I remember her recalling times when they had eaten pigs' trotters, not to mention *pen dafad* – sheep's head!

Sometimes they had to pawn my grandfather's best suit to tide them over for a few days. The suit would be taken to Gittlesohn's pawnbroker's shop in Dowlais and later redeemed. Hermann Gittlesohn did not live up to the stereotype of his trade, and preserved many a family from starvation due to his willingness to give money for what were essentially bundles of rags. Both the Schwartz and Gittlesohn families were Jewish, as were many of the "packmen" or "packies" who sold their goods door to door. Another prominent member of the Jewish community at this time was Miss Dora Lipsett, headmistress of Pengarnddu School, to whom my grandmother would refer in the warmest of terms. She had arrived in Dowlais from Russia in 1904 at the age of twelve.

Groceries were hardly ever paid for immediately: the items were noted in a ledger and paid for at the end of the week, when a page would be turned and the whole process would start again. This system was commonly known as, "turn books." Constantly they had to beware of the, "Means Test man," who would order a cut in their benefit if any increase in their standard of living was discovered, however pathetically small. Once a week they would go to Dowlais to collect

the dole money. (In 1934 it was 21 shillings and sixpence for a married couple). They combined this errand with a weekly treat they allowed themselves, which was a thick slice of rice pudding and a cup of tea at a café near the Bush Hotel.

Meanwhile, my grandmother's parents had difficulties of their own. Although they were nearing old age, they still had young children living at home, and in the midst of the Depression, they were evicted from their house in Company Row, (Ty Top). The woman who owned the house wanted it for a relative. Apparently, the family had no rights as sitting tenants. They found rooms in Dowlais at, 'The Mackworth,' a building that had once been a public house, and there they lived for a few years.

When they returned to Pengarnddu, it was to live in Ty Mawr, the old ostler's house. The house had been made into a back-to-back dwelling, and they lived in the rear half of it. The, '*gwli*,' or alleyway, which gave access to the back of Ty Mawr was said to be haunted by, 'Marged the Milk!' Who Marged was, and what fate she had suffered to make her spirit so restless is open to speculation!

As well as a propensity to invent ghost stories (chiefly for the benefit of the children), some of the women were interested in Spiritualism, and would hold séances at each other's houses. Bopa Lizzie, my great grandmother's sister, was one of the most avid enthusiasts. It was, perhaps, an inevitable consequence of so much premature death due to accidents and disease. Many of them saw no contradiction between this practice and their staunch Anglicanism.

Alongside these beliefs, there was a wide range of superstitions. Birds in the house were looked upon as harbingers of death. Even an image of a bird was considered unlucky. (The *aderyn corff* or corpse bird had long been a tradition among the Welsh). May blossom, which grew in abundance on the hawthorn trees, was never cut or brought indoors. To do so was to bring death into the house. This was possibly a survival of the ancient Celtic veneration of the thorn tree, due to its associations with both the fairy world and the cross of Christ. For

some reason, there was a similar taboo on the bluebells that grew in the ravines at the bottom of Blaenmorlais Farm.

My great grandmother Ellen Jane Walters ('Jinny Pant') died in 1938 of pernicious anaemia, not long after returning to Pengarnddu. She was fifty-nine years old. Her youngest daughter Martha, only fourteen at the time, was left to keep house for her father and three of her brothers.

Another inhabitant of Mountain Row at this time was a character known as, 'Marged Ann Sandstone.' She eked out a living by selling sand for kitchen floors, and "white lime," for whitewashing the exterior walls of houses. She would gather small pieces of limestone from the Twynau Gwynion and coke from the tips. With a spade, she would dig into the mountainside to form the basis of a rudimentary kiln, which she would fill with successive layers of coke and limestone. It would then be set alight and covered over with clods of earth to restrict the air supply. It would then burn slowly for days. The end result was a white powder. A bucketful cost a few pennies.

Marged Ann was rather eccentric. It was rumoured that she had money hidden in the brick archway underneath the railway line, and that she could be heard down there at strange hours of the night, tapping on the brickwork with a stone.

"Mary and Ruby and me carried a banner from Pengarnddu and we all met at 'The Greyhound Inn' in Dowlais. And from there then we all marched down to Pontmorlais. In the end they started stoning the windows of Iscoed House. And S.O. was there. "You rebels!" he said.

By the mid 1930's conditions at Pengarnddu and in South Wales as a whole were reaching crisis point. The National Unemployed Workers' Movement endeavoured to organise the demoralised population into political action. Some joined the Communist Party, most notably in the case of Pengarnddu, Griffith (Griffy) Jones, who later fought for the Republic in the Spanish Civil War.

On Monday February 4th 1935, the women of Merthyr took matters into their own hands. The previous day 300,000 people had taken to the streets of South Wales in protest at the Unemployment Assistance Board Act of 1934-5, which was commonly known as, 'The Slave Act.' As the late Professor Gwyn Alf Williams observed:

“The legislation was a direct threat not only to what self-government they had left but to the family most of them lived by.”

The effect of the act would have been to drive children of working age out of the family home.

Organised by Communists such as Ceridwen Brown of Aberdare and Jack Williams of Pant, the Merthyr demonstration consisted mainly of women. The immediate grievance which motivated them and which lived longest in the folk memory was the proposed cutting of child benefit from three to two shillings a week. The offices of the Unemployment Assistance Board, at Iscoed House near the centre of Merthyr, were ransacked, and the local Labour Member of Parliament, S.O. Davies, condemned the action.

However, the result of the countrywide mass protests was that the Conservative dominated government had to back down. The proposed changes were postponed for eighteen months, and in the end were never fully implemented. Locally and nationally, it was the turning point of the Great Depression of the 1930's.

“Dr Cresswell used to say, ‘Why do you go down to Barry Island, to the filth? Take the children up into the mountains and let them breathe the clean air!’”

On warm summer days when her children were very young, my grandmother would sometimes take them down to Pant for the afternoon. In those days, there was a bowling green at the bottom of the Garth Lane, near the Pant Cad Ifor public house. Here she would spend a pleasant couple of hours, watching the bowls matches, while the children played quietly, or sat and watched with her.

As the children grew older, they would go, along with many others, to the broad expanse of cool water at Pond Pitwellt, high above the village. They would spend most of the day there, swimming or paddling and playing games.

Once a year, for one marvellous day, they would leave the confines of their daily existence, and go on the Sunday School trip to the seaside at Barry Island. Although Barry was some thirty miles away, and its attractions included sea, sand and a funfair, this annual treat was still referred to as the ‘Tea Party.’



The family at Barry Island, late 1930s

My grandmother’s prescription for a successful outing to the seaside never altered. Plain salad sandwiches were prepared in advance, but these were always eaten later on in the afternoon, down on the beach. Arriving in Barry at about eleven o’clock in the morning, the first port of call was always the, ‘Black and White Café,’ for, “a good feed,” of

fish and chips. This was the only dish that she trusted restaurants to prepare properly without ill effects, since it had to be deep-fried. It had the added advantage of filling everyone up, so that no one would be “daunted” with hunger later on. The day would be rounded off with a visit to the funfair, always known as, ‘the shows.’

As the Depression deepened, the Quaker Settlement at Gwernllwyn House, (now the site of Gwernllwyn Primary School), provided much-needed social, recreational and educational activities. It was presided over by the saintly John Dennithorne. For some years, there was a very popular art class for women, which my grandmother attended, along with others from Pengarnddu.

My mother recalls that during the 1930’s or perhaps even before, the Pengarnddu people acquired for themselves a wooden building, which became known as, ‘The Hut.’ It stood in front of School Row, and was used for community events and entertainments. Sometimes there would be a carnival, and the villagers would bedeck themselves and their children in fancy dress. At one of these carnivals, my aunt Annie was made up to look like a child’s doll. Tommy was dressed like a little sailor boy and taught to salute smartly.

The children soon began to seek out their own fun. Every Saturday morning, hundreds of boys and girls would flock to the Oddfellows’ Hall, to enjoy the still relatively new craze of, “talking pictures.” This Saturday morning foray was known as, ‘The Penny Rush.’ To obtain the necessary funds and perhaps an extra couple of pennies for sweets, my uncles would go to the rubbish tip at Caeracca. Large tin cans, which had once held jam or other provisions, were dumped there by the shopkeepers. These cans would be taken home, well scoured and scalded, and sold to local housewives for rudimentary boiling pots. The smaller round tins sold for 2d and the larger square ones for 3d. Sometimes, children would take a raw swede from the allotment to chew on while they watched the films, that or perhaps a bag of, “broken biscuits,” which the shops sold off very cheaply.

Another source of pocket money was, “holding horses’ heads,” at the Waun Fair. Young lads would hold onto a horse by its halter or bridle, while its owner had a drink in the Full Moon Inn at Twyn-y-Waun. Their reward would be a penny.

Young girls tended to play in or near the village, but my uncles, like other village boys, were allowed to roam further afield. Their adventures sometimes led them into fights and stone throwing with rival gangs from Caeracca, Penywern or Dowlais Top. Their mother would beg them to come home, but they were heedless to her cries, lest they be called, “yellow,” by the other children.

From the age of eleven, they faced a long walk to school at Gellifaelog near Penydarren. At lunchtime, they would race home to Pengarnddu, where their mother would hand them a thick slice of bread and cheese or bread and jam, known as a “culf,” and off they would go, back to their games. Sometimes they would be late for the afternoon session, which earned them a “cut” across the hand with the cane.

The Welsh language began to fall into an alarming decline during this period, but in some respects, the old ways continued. The women would still contrive to keep the traditional Sabbath of their childhoods, even if some of the men would just as enthusiastically break it by playing cards for small amounts of money, “up behind the cwtshes.”

Whole families were still known by their Welsh nicknames. I have already mentioned the, ‘*Wythien Fawr*,’ family, and there were a number of others besides. One man was wont to complain constantly about the sludge which would gather on the floor of the coal seam and in which he had to work. He could cope with anything but, “*yr hen slwj*.” Thereafter, his entire family became known as the, ‘*Slwjys!*’

Another family by the name of Lewis was known by the nickname, ‘*Paish*,’ meaning, ‘Petticoat.’ The nickname had started when their father, Benny Lewis, had been a little boy. In the early twentieth century, it was customary to dress boys in petticoats until they were

about three years old. As Benny was being put into his first pair of short trousers, he cried out,

“Na! Dw i moyn fy maish!” – “No! I want my petticoat!”

From then on, he was known as Benny Baish. (In Welsh, the first letters of words often mutate, depending on their context).

One self-explanatory family nickname was the, ‘*Talu ‘fory’s,*’ the, ‘Pay tomorrow’s!’

In the Welsh context, nicknames provided a means of quickly distinguishing between families in a land of few surnames, but of course, the English migrants to the area had brought with them a wider range of surnames. One euphonious Caeracca name was Gossage, the most notable bearer of which was Eddie Gossage, a well-known breeder of Welsh Mountain Ponies. Dai Thomas, a schoolmate of my uncles, was once asked by one of his teachers,

“Who was born on Christmas Day?”

“Muriel Gossage, Miss!” he replied enthusiastically!

There were characters in those days who provided much mirth as accounts of their exploits circulated within the village. One such was my grandmother’s bachelor brother, Watty Walters.

Once, for a lark, he and his mates shaved their heads to look like convicts, and all marched solemnly into the back row of the little Pentecostal chapel at Dowlais Top, to the chagrin of the congregation!

At one time, he was lodging with his aunt, Bopa Esther, and working underground. Every evening, as he took his bath in front of the fire, he would be disturbed by the arrival of the woman who lived next door. She seemed to time her visits to Bopa Esther to coincide with this daily and necessary ritual. He would try to finish his ablutions as modestly as he could. Eventually, he got to the end of his tether. One evening,

he suddenly stood up in the bath, completely naked, and told the woman that perhaps she had better just take a good look at *it*, and then she might leave him in peace!

My uncles Tommy and Davy spent a lot of time with him, and he taught them to swim in Banc-y-Pond. It was typical of him, however, that his teaching method consisted mainly of throwing them in and letting them get on with it, helping them only if they got into difficulties! When they were little boys, he would occasionally take them down to Merthyr. So overawed were they by the crowds and big shops, that they would walk one each side of him, each with a hand in one of his pockets. In the 1930's, Dowlais, although brought to its knees by the Depression, was a town in its own right, and Merthyr was visited only very occasionally.

Watty was what used to be called, 'a doggy boy.' He was immensely knowledgeable about the canine species, bred terriers for ratting and greyhounds for racing. He once caught a polecat alive, and brought it down from the mountain in a sack for all to see.

His greyhounds were trained on the embankment of Banc-y-Pond, the perimeter of which was a mile long. An old bike would be turned upside down and a length of cord attached to one of the wheels. At the end of the cord, he would tie a rabbit skin. By turning the pedals, the rabbit skin could be wound in very quickly, and the greyhound would then be released to chase it.

His cure for a vicious dog was to heat a poker in the fire; when the dog made to bite, he would quickly touch the dog's nose with the tip of the hot poker. The dog would be cured of its bad habit instantly!

When terrier pups were a few weeks old, it was customary to dock their tails while the bone was still soft. However, in the case of one particular dog he decided, a few months later, that the tail was still too long. So he just took a very sharp knife and cut a bit more off! Cruel, no doubt, but then none of his dogs were ever beaten or starved and

they were always clean and well fed, unlike many cases one hears about nowadays.

It is sad to record, however, that Watty eventually became an alcoholic. Rough cider, drunk in large quantities in the Dowlais Inn, led to cirrhosis of the liver. He died during the hard winter of 1963, when Pengarnddu was cut off by snow. The hearse couldn't get through the deep drifts so Watty made his final departure from the village on a sleigh.

“A taste of Spain.”

During the 1920's a new family had come to live in Pengarnddu and according to my grandmother, their arrival marked the end of civilised, neighbourly relations in the village. Previously, it was possible to leave chicken coops and coal sheds unlocked. After their arrival, even the potatoes in the ground weren't safe, for they would creep into gardens and allotments at night and extract mature potatoes from under the haulms, using an old spoon. When the rightful owner of the potatoes came to lift them, there would be nothing left!

One member of this family was also a bully, but he met his nemesis in the shape of Griffy Jones the Communist. Griffy was a very tough man, yet also very kind and always ready to stand up for the underdog.

He was born in Pengarnddu in 1905, the son of Richard and Amelia Jones. (I mentioned his brother Stephen earlier). His mother came from Craven Arms in Shropshire and is listed in the 1901 census as one of the few people in the village who couldn't speak Welsh. He followed the familiar pattern, leaving school at fourteen years of age to work underground. The injustices he observed in the mining industry and during his years of unemployment made him a convinced Communist. (He was also a very fine amateur artist, depicting scenes of underground life in pencil and charcoal).

He lived to a ripe old age, and once related to me my grandmother's oft-repeated tale of how he and my grandfather went to heckle a meeting of Fascists at the Bont Field at the bottom of Dowlais.

Grandfather Evan John Powell and Griffy Jones

On their way down, they stopped at the Caeracca Tip, where Griffy selected a big rotten cooking apple from the piles of rubbish and put it in his pocket. At the Bont,



the Blackshirts were being addressed by their local leader, Arthur Eyles, who had at one time been a Socialist. Griffy positioned himself a little higher than the crowd, waited until Eyles was really getting into his stride, and then launched his secret missile. It caught its target on the side of the face, and the impact splattered the rotten heart of the apple all down the front of his shirt! The speech ended rather abruptly!

Griffy later took his fight against Fascism to the battlefields of the Spanish Civil War, where he became a friend and comrade of my paternal grandfather also, Lance Rogers of Cefn Coed y Cymmer.

I will now return to the story of the bully. It was near the end of the 1930's and Griffy had just returned home from the, 'Spanish War,' as its veterans often referred to it. On a piece of waste ground at the back of Ruby's house in Company Row, the man in question was giving a severe and unprovoked beating to a smaller and weaker man. Griffy lived next door in Number 8 and could see what was happening. Without hesitation, he reached for the long black leather bullwhip that he had brought home with him from Spain. Reaching the scene, he unfurled the whip and lashed the assailant until his clothes were in tatters and the blood flowed down his legs.

The bully ran home to his mother, crying,

“Oh Mam! Come quick! I've had a taste of Spain!”

Ever since then in our family, the phrase, “a taste of Spain,” has been used to refer to any kind of harrowing experience, or an instance of someone getting their just desserts!

“The Germans dropped bombs on the mountain but they reckon they were trying for the ICI.”

My grandmother was almost forty years of age when she gave birth to my mother on October 25th 1944. Mrs Douse, the midwife, known to all and sundry as ‘Nurse Douse,’ trudged up from Pant for the delivery. Tommy and Davy spent the night at their grandfather’s house, where they shared beds with their uncles.

Originally, my mother was going to be called Edith Mary, after my grandfather’s two sisters. (The other children had also been named after relatives of my grandfather and it was typical of my grandmother’s easy-going nature that this did not seem to bother her unduly!) However, on his way to register the birth, my grandfather stopped off to have a cup of tea with his elder daughter Annie, who was recently married and living with her in-laws at Miriam Buildings in Dowlais, opposite the Coal Arch. When she was told what my grandparents planned to call the child, she said it was far too old fashioned a name, and why didn’t they call her Jean? So Jean it was.

The Second World War had brought full employment back to Merthyr Tydfil and district. Coal was in high demand, and Merthyr’s mountainous location would keep it relatively safe from enemy bombing. As a result, armaments factories were built on the site of the old steelworks, and Bonymaen Farm near Pant was levelled to make way for the chemical giant, ICI. Annie worked in the munitions factories, filling shells with explosive, which temporarily turned her hands and forearms yellow! (These workers were thus often referred to as, ‘Canaries’).

My grandfather had been in the army for a while, manning the coastal defence guns or the “Ack-Acks” as they were known. It is hard to see how this could have happened, since mining was a reserved occupation, but it wasn’t long before he was once again working underground. My uncles had started work during the war, at the recently opened Nant-y-ffin Drift Mine near Bedlinog.

Rees, my grandmother's brother, was in the army, and formed part of an escort to provide protection to merchant shipping. He undertook some long voyages, and recalled seeing the orange groves of California. He was almost lost at sea after his ship was torpedoed, but kept blowing on a whistle to attract attention and was eventually rescued.

Rationing was in force and continued for a number of years after the war. Yet at least it ensured a nutritious and sufficient amount of food, and for many people it was an improvement on what they had had during the Depression years. My mother remembers my grandmother packing up a big lump of cheese and posting it to her cousin Willy Evans in London, where he was still working in the hotels. She had cheese to spare because the miners, due to the hard, physical nature of their work, received a very generous allowance. Rationing was fairer than it had been during the First World War, when my grandmother remembered having to queue for hours just to get a pot of jam.

Of course, there was the blackout, and as a child, I was always mightily diverted by the story of how my grandmother's brother Teddy was once chased by a sow during the blackout, and had to run into my grandmother's house to escape the jaws of the enraged beast! Only once did a few bombs fall on Merthyr and even then only on the mountain. It may even have just been a stray bomber, emptying its payload before trying to find its way back to Germany.

The bombing of English cities led many Welsh people who had left during the inter-war period, to send their children to the safety of their native villages. One such was Gwenllian Thomas (nee Edwards), my grandmother's cousin, who had been "in service" in London, where she met her husband Thomas Melville Thomas, a native of Tonypany. In 1940, she sent her little girl Mair to live with her parents (my grandmother's Uncle Ned and Bopa Mary Hannah) at 12 Company Row, where Mair safely and happily spent the rest of the war.

Children also arrived from Folkestone and Deal in Kent ("hell fire corner," as it was known), as part of the official government

evacuation programme. Two of them came to live with Bopa Jen at number 7 Cross School Row. Jennet Davies was her proper name and she was my great grandmother's first cousin, another descendant of the Davies's and Griffiths's who had come from Cardiganshire a hundred years before. She was a spinster lady, born in 1892. Next door in number 8 there lived another lady with the same name, but called Jenny to distinguish her from her neighbour. She was Bopa Jen's cousin and had one son, Rhys Davies who, as mentioned earlier, had been born in the East End of London. Jenny was also a mother to her deceased sister's children, Mair and David Parry. Jenny worked for many years as a cook at Pengarnddu and Dowlais schools.

My grandmother, Bopa Jen and Jenny were all Welsh speakers and it was the natural mode of discourse between them to the end of their days. As a result, my mother was always able to understand Welsh, although she herself could not speak it. After the death of my grandfather, the bond between the three women became ever stronger as they helped each other in raising the children.

My grandmother's immediate neighbours in number 9 Cross School Row were the Prices. Billy Price was a widower with two daughters, who married again and had another two daughters with his second wife. This completed the small row of oddly numbered houses at the centre of Pengarnddu.

During the war, the old rifle range in the valley of the Morlais Brook below Blaenmorlais Farm was used by the military. It was known as, 'The Targets.' The mountain was used for military manoeuvres and tanks travelled up and down the old tramroad. The weight was too much for the old bridge that crossed the Morlais Brook, and this spot where the tramroad turns towards the Twynau Gwynion has been known ever since as, 'The Broken Bridge.' Formerly, it was known as, 'The Feeder.' There are two possible explanations for this name. My grandmother always said that that the steam locomotives stopped here to be, "fed," with water. However, it was also at this spot that water was diverted from the Morlais Brook, and "fed," into the Dowlais Free Drainage System.

American soldiers arrived in South Wales and some of them were encamped for a while at the *Garw*. Jane Jones from Castle Row married one of these men, and after the war moved to Ohio. She was the daughter of Margaret Jones (nee Evans), landlady of the ‘Castle Inn,’ (*Maggie Tafarn*) who I mentioned briefly at the start of this narrative. Margaret Jones was known to her grandchildren and all the village children as *Mam Mam* (literally “mother’s mother”) and was another member of the *Wythien Fawr* / Big Vein family. She had a fine singing voice and was another good friend and neighbour to my grandmother.

The end of the war and great events such as D-Day never figured greatly in my grandmother’s tales, presumably because her immediate family was not involved in them. The event that seems to mark off the end of this period was the hard winter of 1947 when the deep snow and icy conditions lasted for months. At Pengarnddu, there were snowdrifts as high as the upstairs windows.



The village under snow.

Photograph taken from near the southern end of Banc-y-Pond

Two Pengarnddu people died during the winter and had to be taken to the cemetery on sleighs.

The miners were walking to work, as the trains could not run because of the deep drifts. One day, my grandfather and Davy arrived home from work with their clothes frozen stiff on them. On their way, they had walked on top of a train that had become stuck in snow in the Pantywaun cutting. It had been taking children to Pengam Grammar School in the Rhymney Valley but had to be abandoned. The first bus service to Pengarnddu had started in 1946, but this was now disrupted, and all provisions had to be carried on foot from Dowlais through the arctic conditions.

My great grandfather Thomas Walters died on the day the first bus came to Pengarnddu. Great was the excitement in the village prior to this auspicious event, and first preference was to be given to the more senior residents. My great grandfather was sitting in his house, dressed in his Sunday best, waiting for the bus to arrive, when the bread man happened to call. However, his hands were full with a box of bread, so he kicked the bottom of the front door instead of knocking it. The sudden noise on top of all the excitement was too much for my great grandfather, and he had a heart attack. It was a strange way to die, for a man who had spent fifty years working underground.

In the immediate post war period, unemployment again began to rear its ugly head, although it only lasted a couple of years. However, it was enough to send my great uncle Teddy off to London in 1947, where he met and married his second cousin Eunice Jenkins, who had left in 1929.

In 1947, the mines were nationalised. It fell far short of the syndicalism that Noah Ablett had advocated, but at the time, it was looked upon as a forward step.

“We were like one big family in Pengarnddu.”

My mother had a very happy childhood. Her best friend when she was growing up was Jean Jones, who was a niece of Griffy Jones. In fact, there were four Jeans in the village at that time: Jean Powell, Jean Jones, Jean Davies and Jean Williams.

Their games were simple, like playing at “tea party” in the quarry. Sometimes they would take sandwiches and my grandmother would go mad when my mother would swap a meat sandwich for one filled with sauce!

My mother was prevented from straying too far from the village by a series of dire warnings issued by my grandmother.

“Don’t go past the Turns, Dan the Darkie will have you!” (Dan was a local character who lived in an old railway wagon, in the tips above Dowlais).

“Don’t go down the Cwm! There’s rats!”

“Don’t go down Banc-y-Pond, Harry Figgish’s ghost will have you!”

“Don’t go past the farm wall, because a stoat will jump out and suck your blood!”

It’s a wonder the poor girl wasn’t completely disturbed! However, it stopped her wandering in what could be quite a dangerous environment. If she strayed past, ‘The Broken Bridge,’ my grandmother would always know by the next day, because my mother would develop a barking cough called the croup. (As the tramroad turned towards the Twynau Gwynion the quality of the air changed). The remedy for croup was a dark-coloured drink, consisting of vinegar, sugar, butter and a little warm water, mixed in a bowl and put into the side oven to warm through.

For the 'Festival of Britain' celebrations at Pengarnddu in 1951, it was decided that four little girls would represent the four constituent parts of the United Kingdom, with the central role of Britannia taken by Mair Parry. My mother was to be the English maid because she was fair, while dark-haired Jean Jones was to be the Welsh maid. However, she wanted to be an English maid like my mother, so they ended up with two English maids, one Scottish maid, (Phyllis Newman) one Irish maid (Christine Murphy) and no Welsh maid at all!



Festival of Britain at Pengarnddu in 1951, my mother third from the left

My mother's father died when she was six. Although she doesn't remember him, she remembers Bopa Edie and Bopa Jane, (his two sisters) taking jelly to someone upstairs. She also recalls her brothers carrying someone upstairs and then a "boat" appearing in the living room. Shortly afterwards, a beautiful china doll and a big box of chocolates arrived at the house, courtesy of a fraternal Polish miners' organisation. At that time, widows of miners who had died of lung diseases were not properly compensated, as the legal framework had yet to be established. My grandmother received very little beyond a small widows' pension from the government and four tons of concessionary coal a year.

My mother was fortunate to have two elder brothers who in many ways were replacement fathers for her. They played games with her for hours, and both brothers had sweet tenor voices so the house was always full of singing. Davy was a tease while Tommy was more serious, but my mother never recalls a swear word or a raised voice in her home. The only exception to this was when Tommy went out to work in the very early morning. He hated having to get up so early! His only comment as he left the house was a muttered, “*Oh, arsehole!*”

Tommy bought his first Welsh Mountain pony mare, Polly, from the renowned Criban Stud at Talybont, and bred from her until he owned a number of ponies, which he kept on the nearby commons. It was a curiosity of his ponies that they always returned to the *Ffald* area, above Pontsticill Reservoir, to have their foals. This was where their ancestors had been bred, and they returned to it instinctively. Polly and her offspring, (with the exception of one filly called Flicker), were all later killed by lightning. Ponies were his job as well as his interest as he was an underground haulier, working with the pit ponies.

The boys also owned a succession of terriers and greyhounds. Shortly after the war, they had great success with a greyhound bitch called WAAF, named after the *Women’s Auxiliary Air Force!* (However, “*waff*” is also a Gwenhwyseg dialect word meaning “fast.”) Of the two, Davy was more interested in dogs and continued to breed and run greyhounds all his life.

There was no obvious demarcation between the village and the common land that surrounded it. Sheep, ponies and chickens wandered around the village at will - including Ruby’s vicious old cockerel, who was given the ironic name of Gandhi! Sometimes at night, the lights would flicker, as the ponies rubbed their backsides on the power lines! My mother cannot remember a time before electric light, but the villagers went directly from using candles and oil lamps to having electricity. There was no period in between when they had gaslight. Eventually, there was an electricity sub-station built very close to the village. However, my grandmother continued to cook off the coal fired range until she left Pengarnddu. Of course, they had a

plentiful supply of concessionary coal, which was burnt unstintingly in the generously proportioned fireplace. The chimney was built of solid masonry, so to clean it my grandmother would merely throw a lighted newspaper up it and set it on fire! A *blower*, which was a piece of sheet metal with a handle attached to it, would be held against the opening to the fireplace, and this would draw the draught up the chimney. It was advisable to choose a foggy night to do this, in case someone called the Fire Brigade!

Sant Mihangel (St Michael's Church) was closed and demolished in the nineteen fifties. My great aunt Lizzie had returned from Llandrindod Wells a number of years before, and was one of the last faithful worshippers there. She was living once again in the old family home, 17 Company Row, and was therefore known as *Leisa Ty Top*. She started to attend Christ Church at Pant instead. To fill the spiritual gap at Pengarnddu, Hebron Baptist Chapel, based in Caeharris, started a Sunday School in the old school shelter, which was well attended. Here there was no electricity supply and oil lamps were once again the order of the day.

At 10 Cross School Row, Sunday was a day for eating. During the week, they lived mainly, "out of the pan," but at weekends, my grandmother would fire up the range sufficiently to heat the oven. There would be a cooked breakfast in the morning, consisting of bacon and egg, tomato and fried bread. At dinnertime, they would have roast meat and vegetables, followed by rice pudding. Teatime would consist of apple, rhubarb or whinberry tart, depending on the season, or perhaps egg custard tart. There might be vinegar salad with bread and butter to start. (This consisted of onion and cucumber steeped in vinegar and sugar, sometimes with added tomato). Then came *teisen lap* (a kind of fruitcake) or Welsh cakes. After tea, my grandmother would put the remains of the dinner into the oven, to be eaten at suppertime as, "warm up." Then she would go out to chapel for the evening.

At this period of her life she started attending the little Pentecostal chapel at Dowlais Top, known locally as, 'The Bakehouse,' because

that is in fact what it had once been. The late Pastor Gwyn Evans once told me that his maternal grandfather and a few other men had re-mortgaged their houses to buy the old bake house, in the wake of the 1918 Revival. (They had “split” from the ‘Mission,’ in central Dowlais, established by the revivalist Stephen Jeffries, that later became the Elim Church). It was said that in the early days, when the worshippers “danced in the Spirit,” they would emerge from the meetings, “as black as colliers,” because their jumping had disturbed the old flour dust from under the floorboards!

By the 1950’s, one of the leading lights of this congregation was the late Pastor Eddie Evans, (not a relative of Gwyn) who I mentioned earlier in this narrative. He was known locally as, ‘Eddie Ap,’ because his father’s name was Apram Evans. (Apram is a Welsh version of Abraham). Eddie also had an Uncle Meth, which was short for Methuselah! Eddie’s brother, Dai Ap, was also greatly involved as a preacher, and could preach in both languages. Eddie would hold evangelistic meetings at Pengarnddu, in front of the *cwtshes*, where the women hung their washing and which was essentially the village green.

He had been, “saved,” during the war, following two serious accidents underground. In the first, he had cracked his skull in three places. Having survived this, and still not having availed himself of the “means of grace,” he injured his leg, which healed initially, but then became poisoned because he had, “picked at it.” He recalled lying on his back in the General Hospital, listening to the German bombs falling on Cardiff, when God spoke to his inward condition. He later became a missionary in the Congo for a number of years, along with his wife Lillian (nee Hall) who had been born in the Congo to a missionary family.

The Pentecostals believed in the power of prayer for healing, and my grandmother recalled one evening when a lady by the name of Mrs Gunter had her leg healed. The congregation started singing spontaneously,

“He has healed, He has healed, He has healed Mrs Gunter’s leg!”

As previously mentioned, Eddie was a skilled face worker. He once told me that the most coal he had ever cut by hand in one shift was thirteen drams, which was six and a half tons. He achieved this feat of the miner’s skill in the Fochriw Level. His haulier at the time was my uncle Tommy, who worked in the level between 1956 and 1963.

By the 1950’s, pithead baths had been installed at most deep mines, but not at smaller drifts and levels. My mother recalls that her brothers were still bathing at home in the tin bath in front of the fire. Their pit clothes were only washed once a week, but between shifts, they were hung up to dry on a line suspended from two stout hooks in the ceiling. (They were so large and strong, my mother suspects they had once been used to hang up hams and sides of bacon). Once dry, the clothes would be stiff with dried coal muck, so my grandmother would rub them to make them supple enough to be worn.

My grandmother would wash clothes using a scrubbing board, in a tub set onto two kitchen chairs. Whites would firstly be boiled in a metal pot on the fire. Clothes were wrung out by hand, but such was the strength in my grandmother’s hands and forearms, they would be almost dry going onto the line. Sheets would be wrung out by two women twisting the sheet at either end. In the mid-fifties, her cousin Willy Evans sent my grandmother one of the new-fangled electric irons from London, but up until then, she had still been using flat irons, heated in front of the fire. One iron would be used while the other was heating. Then they would be swapped around. To do the ironing, a blanket would be laid on the kitchen table. There was no ironing board. Despite all this hard work, my mother always had a fresh blouse to go to school.

After my grandfather died in 1950, my uncles left the mines as soon as they could. They found work on the building sites of post war Merthyr and Davy worked for a while as a corporation dustman. The local name for this job was, “working on the ash cart!” One of his workmates was Billie Pugh, better known as, ‘Teacher Bessie.’ He

loved to put on make-up and dress in women's clothes, which often made him look like an old-fashioned schoolmistress. Yet he was one of the strongest men in the area. He carved a niche for himself in this most unlikely of places, as a drag entertainer and talented dancer, who would dance with men or women as required. (Billie had been born in Pengarnddu, but grew up in Elizabeth Street in Dowlais).

Davy also worked at Meredith's bakery in Dowlais and in the mid-fifties went to work in Birmingham with his uncle Rees Walters. He eventually arrived home in a very dishevelled state, having sold his football boots to pay the train fare!

Tommy returned to the mines for a spell in the Fochriw Level, and after that worked on the building of the Gurnos housing estate. He recalled, "cutting the footings," (digging the foundations) and going down through four feet of topsoil before reaching the subsoil. It was like, "cutting through butter." The Parry family of Gurnos Farm used to employ an old tramp to go round the town, collecting the manure from behind all the horse-drawn vehicles, and spreading it on the fields. No doubt, this had contributed to the good condition of the soil.

The 1951 Festival of Britain was followed in 1953 by the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth the Second. It was the first televised coronation. My mother watched it at Teddy and Gwyneth Jones's house (Jean Jones's parents) and at Georgie and Muriel Carpenter's – Georgie was Ruby's brother. It went on for hours and both houses were full of children, many of them kneeling on the floor, so people must have been very tolerant. Radios had become commonplace but television sets were few and far between. Eventually, *Mam Mam (Maggie Tafarn)* bought one, and my grandmother would go and sit with her to watch television and keep her company. Some of the programmes seemed very daring to a generation of women who were essentially still Victorian in many of their attitudes. Once, during a performance by Shirley Bassey, Bopa Jen was heard to exclaim,

"Dishgwl Etty, mae hi'n bwrcyn, bron iawn! 'S dim festyn arni hyd yn oed!"

“Look Etty, she’s very nearly naked! She’s not even wearing a vest!”)

The oldest surviving member of the family at this time was Bopa Lizzie, my grandmother’s aunt, born in 1871. My mother remembers her vividly, as she didn’t die until about 1956. Bopa Lizzie was always very elegant, dressed, “like a lady,” and would from time to time delicately take a pinch of snuff. Old Fred Warner, one of the original migrants to the village, was still alive and still spoke with a distinctive Herefordshire burr.

Ruby’s husband, Tom Walters, was killed underground in 1956. It was the day of the Waun Fair, and he had been thinking of “missing a turn” in order to attend it. In the event, however, he set off for work. He finished his shift and was on his way out when it occurred to him that he had forgotten to lock his tools onto the, “bar,” a length of steel that held the miner’s equipment. He headed back to the coalface and on his way, a, “bell,” (a single massive rock) came down on him and broke his neck. Apart from this one fatal injury, there was, “hardly a mark on him.” Understandably, Ruby never got over it but she did receive substantial compensation.

My mother passed the Eleven Plus examination and as a result became a pupil at the County Grammar School in Merthyr. During the late 1950’s, she was the only child from Pengarnddu who attended the school, so a double-decker bus would come to the village just to collect her. Ultimately, however, the impetus was lacking for my mother to continue with her studies, and she felt that she should be earning something to help her widowed mother. Therefore, at the age of fifteen, she left school and began work at the Candlewick bedspread factory in Dowlais. She also worked for a while at their factory in Brynmawr. Her next job was at Lines Brothers’ Triang Toy Factory in Merthyr. Here she met my father Tony Rogers from Cefn Coed. They married in March 1966 and lived with my grandmother in Pengarnddu for the first eleven months of their married life. (My uncles had married and left home by this point). They began married life with just £9 in the bank.

I was born in St. Tydfil's Hospital on February 21st 1967 and was named after Corwyn Reakes, a little boy who had been killed in the Aberfan Disaster in October 1966. I was taken home to 48 Dowlais Top, a house that my father had bought with a £650 mortgage. When I was five weeks old, my mother was diagnosed with tuberculosis and had to go into the Mardy Hospital. She was there for five weeks. For two weeks I was looked after by my grandmother, and then for three weeks by my paternal grandfather and step grandmother, Lance and Iris Rogers, at their house in Ystrad Mynach. When my mother came home from hospital, my grandmother came to stay at Dowlais Top for six months, to help her with the new baby. She still had her house at Pengarnddu, where she had to leave her vicious old Fox Terrier, Sandy. He had been rescued from a cruel owner and only my grandmother could handle him. Sadly, he died of a broken heart.

Meanwhile, Pengarnddu was due for demolition, although the church and the school had long gone. Some Pengarnddu women had staged a protest at Merthyr Town Hall after one baby died of bronchitis, and another had been found with what were alleged to be rat bites. They demanded to be re-housed. My mother recalls the mould that sometimes appeared on walls, and how people would stick table oilcloths over it and then wallpaper over that. She recalls how in summertime, hay would be cut in the Pengarnddu field, after which the neighbouring houses would be invaded by fleas that had been living in the grass. A visit to the outside toilet at night would be preceded by setting fire to the end of a rolled up newspaper, which was thrown into the toilet to scare away any rats. (Thankfully, my mother doesn't recall actually seeing any rats – perhaps the newspaper did its job!) In the end, some people who were, "new," to the village were so desperate to get away that before visits by council officials, they would throw water on the walls to exaggerate the damp state of the houses. However, other people who had lived there all their lives did not want to move, despite the conditions they lived in.

Ruby owned several houses that had to be demolished, so she employed her nephew, Mickey Warner, to do the job. Tragically, he was killed by a falling chimney.

The age of the houses, and the amount of money it would have taken to bring them up to modern standards, combined with neglect by private landlords, meant that most of the properties had become unfit for human habitation. Yet they had been sturdily built, and my grandmother recalled that it took two swings of the wrecker's ball before the "pine end" (the gable end) of 10 Cross School Row fell in.

To end this story of life in Pengarnddu, I will return to the period following the Second World War and another tale that my grandmother told. Sometimes, on a Saturday night, the men might have had a few beers. If the weather was good, they would get my grandmother to make up some meat sandwiches for them off next day's roast, and they would set off for Abergavenny. They would walk through the night, skirting the towns of Rhymney, Tredegar, Ebbw Vale and Brynmawr, at the valley heads, and then down the Clydach Gorge into the lush countryside of the Usk Valley. It was a walk of almost twenty miles. In the morning, they would catch the very earliest train back to Dowlais (the "milk train") and walk the last stretch home.