

Llandrindod Wells & District U3A Lecture Meeting December 2018

Land of Song – Dean Powell

Report by Clive Barrett

Chairman of Llandrindod U3A Berwyn Woolnough welcomed everyone to the December Christmas lecture meeting. He announced that a Coffee Morning will be held for new members at the Herb Garden Community Café on January 21st 2019, at 10:30am. Berwyn also mentioned that three new interest groups were in the process of being formed, they are French, German Conversation and Landscape History groups, with the proposed leaders in order, Maggie Clarke, Berwyn Woolnough, and Teri Cousins. Janet Swindale, the Town Crier and U3A member then thanked those who had helped her with the November Remembrance evening event she organised in Llandrindod.

The Chairman then introduced the speaker for the morning, Dean Powell from South Wales, whose lecture was entitled “Land of Song”. About two years ago he had given a talk on Dr. William Price. The speaker explained that his talk came about because he has always been interested in male voice choirs, and notably Treorchy. He outlined the history of choral singing, and the fact choirs produced great talent, these were the Choral Society's of the Victorian era. Regarding singing generally Wales has always punched above its weight, and he quoted various now famous singing stars including Tom Jones. In the Principality even in the time of Gerald of Wales in the 12th century there was a lot of singing. Dean said he proposed concentrating on the Rhondda Valleys of South Wales. With the sinking of the first coal mines in 1855, 170 thousand people came from all over the country, and this changed the landscape for ever. Mining also brought a price to pay in terms of health and suffering. In these valleys which numbered 36 there were close knit communities where residents came together for support and worship, despite there being 73 working collieries.

At the time there were 153 Nonconformist Chapels in the area. Permission was given to hold entertainment, political meetings, community hymn singing, music festivals and band of hope meetings in these buildings. The start of a singing nation began with congregational singing, competitions, and concerts, with participants able to travel by train and widen their horizons. Wales produced great hymn song writers. The first male voice choir to sing under the Welsh flag was organised by the composer Griffin Rhys Jones, known as “Caradog”, to the Music Festival at Crystal Palace. They won the first prize of £100(worth a lot more then!) against opposition from right across the European continent. They won again for a second time and Caradog returned home to be hailed as a hero by the Welsh people. He moved to Treorchy, owned the Treorchy Hotel and ran a brewery company. He said all Wales was a “Land of Song”, and the new symbol was male voice choirs. Regarding coal mining there was much camaraderie underground and in the pub, plus male competitiveness, all proving a suitable starting point for choir competitions. Betting was also involved - the hooligans of the 1880's!!! Because of this competitiveness, adjudicators were fearful of giving the first prize to a non local choir!!!!

Treorchy Male Voice Choir started in 1883 when they won £1 first prize singing Myfanwy in an Eistedfodd at St. Fagans, Cardiff. Members decided to continue as a choir and they had a new conductor in William Thomas of Mountain Ash. In 1888 Treorchy won first prize at the National

Eisteddfodd in Brecon, Powys. In a 1893 competition there was keen rivalry between Treorchy and Rhondda Glee Choir, but the former were pipped by two points. However later Treorchy became equally successful. Queen Victoria wanted to hear a Welsh choir of “wonderful voices”. The monarch sent the conductor a silver baton, after their singing in front of royalty. In the 1890's the Royal Welsh Choir was formed, and this small band of singers were in existence for 100 years until the 1990's.

In the 1920's the male voice choirs in the coal mines area were Penderis and the Morryston Orpheus. Further there was the New Treorchy Choir under the famous Welsh conductor John Haydn Davies, and they dominated the scene from the 20's to the 50's. Choirs were reformed after the Second World War, and in 1952 at the National Eisteddfod in Aberystwyth, New Treorchy became the national winners, followed later in the 50's being winners of the event in Porthcawl. The choir have sung in every stadia imaginable, and on radio and television. They had a recording contract and worked with such singing stars as Tom Jones and composer Burt Bacharach. They went abroad several times to Canada, USA, and New Zealand and had an enduring love affair with Australia, appearing at the Sydney Opera House.

Dean ended by speaking about a concert in an all black Atlanta Chapel, Georgia, USA and his unique experiences there. Treorchy recorded 70 years of singing last year. Dean's talk was excellently presented and evidenced by the fact that the time went quickly, it was very funny at times, and brought much laughter from the appreciative audience.

Dean then answered questions including about choir members, smaller average sizes of choirs now 60, members getting older, and the need and difficulties of bringing younger singers in, plus women in male voice choirs---- are men in W.I's. Chairman Berwyn in thanking Dean felt sure that members had really enjoyed his talk.

Following the lecture as it was the Christmas meeting entertainment was provided by some members for the enjoyment of the majority. This took the form of Chairman Berwyn showing his undoubted talent playing the clarinet, exotic dancing by Kate and Louise, and a drama sketch about complaining by letter and telephone calls written by Cheryl Davies, a member of the Creative Writing interest group, which featured members Humphrey Morgan, Mary Davies, and Penny Everett. After the entertainment over 100 members enjoyed their annual Metropole Christmas lunch.