

Newsletter Winter 2020

Looking forward...

This has been a dismal year in many ways. But there are good things to celebrate and even better things to look forward to. And as ever there are challenges...

Life returns ...

In the hope that life will have returned to something like normality, we're making plans for next summer. Activities will start with the launch of Crefft Cymru Y Dolydd - a national Arts and Crafts fair – at the end of May. Co-ordinated by our new Trustee Dan Llywelyn Hall, it promises to be an exciting prospect with products from the very best of Welsh & British artists and artisans on show.



Anyone interested should visit the new website, www.crefftymru.com. The fair will take place over the bank holiday weekend of 29-30 May, indoors and out. Opening hours will be 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on the Saturday and Sunday. A comprehensive programme will include demonstrations, workshops with music and dance performances. Artists, artisans, local food and drink stalls can now apply.



Following a pilot in 2019 the weekend of 5-6 June will be dedicated to Wild Country. That means two days of country music in a bucolic setting, featuring group and solo performers from around the UK and beyond.

Something to celebrate

A date has been set to celebrate the restoration of the Master's House.

On Saturday 26 June, 2021, the bell will ring out once again. People will be able to climb the restored stairs of 1840 in the footsteps of the Master; view the impressive top floor room from which he once surveyed his domain and appreciate the craftsmanship that has gone into the House's restoration.

If all goes to plan they'll be able to see an exhibition on its architect and buy a book on the lives of its occupants. A choir will sing, a distinguished scholar will speak and spirits will be lifted. See inside pages for more.



Garry Robbins and Gideon Brydie at work on the top floor

And more to do

While so much effort has gone into the Master's House it's been easy to overlook the maintenance backlog elsewhere. Y Dolydd's characteristic plan means that we

have no fewer than 19 exposed gable ends at first floor level: six are still letting in the weather, with rotting bargeboards and defective pointing. All need scaffold-



ing and we know how costly that can be. Other areas of roofing and pointing need attention too.

A new sub-committee for Historic Fabric and Presentation has been established, chaired by Gareth Hughes. This has drawn up a system for setting priorities on a points basis. Winter may not be the best time for maintenance, but we know we need to take action: planning has to start now.

A studio reborn



For several years artist Liz Neal has rented the space once used as the Workhouse chapel, above the Venue. The walls - formerly of exposed brick - had been rendered in the 1960s and covered with gypsum plaster. Unable to breathe, they streamed with condensation.

This summer Liz stripped off every inch of render - a tough job as it was immensely hard - and carted the rubble down to a skip. Then she had the walls neatly re-pointed with lime mortar. The result: a far more attractive and useful space, and better conditions for the building.



Liz decided to celebrate by opening her studio during a brief period of COVID relaxation in October. The idea came from wood engraver Bob Guy, who was opening his studio in the town.

Brian Jones joined Liz in her studio. Brian has a screen printing workshop at Y Dolydd but works in a far wider range of media: he showed a retrospective collection that included subversive interpretations of flags and posters and a new series of landscapes.



Liz too impressed by her versatility, exhibiting landscapes and recent portraits as well as her intricate embroideries. She also showed the newly created printing press, designed to produce engravings on copper reclaimed from the former cupola.



More artists...



Other Dolydd artists were inspired to display their works in the Gallery. A new tenant, Andrew McConnach, exhibited complex and richly coloured paintings: many based on circular forms. Andrew was fascinated by

the concentric rings of trees in the Dyfi Valley: this led to a study of mandalas and his works have an oriental complexity whilst incorporating western flower motifs.

Andrew's partner, Hania Gornostajeva, comes from Sweden, but her delicate, smaller scale works are influenced by Asian art. They combine water colour and pencil with collage, often incorporating photographs taken during a stay in Kashmir.



John Eddy favours abstraction. His paintings, irregularly shaped, combine subtle variations of rich colour with complex textures, and textures were explored again in a tall sculpture formed from a weathered railway sleeper.



In the courtyard John Davies exhibited his quirky sculptures composed of scrap and recycled materials, while in the Venue he displayed his collection of over 50 posters

commemorating the rich variety of events held at Y Dolydd over the last 18 years.

And our most famous inmate

Among the paintings on view was Liz Neal's portrait of David Davies, the Dartmoor Shepherd. Sentenced to over sixty years in prison in the course of his long life and the object of fruitless attempts at reform by Winston Churchill and David Lloyd George, he asked to end his days in Llanfyllin Workhouse. That didn't stop him from repeatedly absconding to engage in his favourite pastime: robbing church poorboxes. He passed away in 1929 on the road to Llanfechain and is buried in the cemetery in Llanfyllin.



A Sense of Achievement



After months of painstaking work the fine room on the top floor of the Master's House is looking superb. It's a credit to Richard Stephenson and his team who have mixed vast quantities of lime plaster, applied it skilfully and covered it with seven coats of traditional limewash. The next step is to lay the timber flooring, stolen when the building stood derelict.

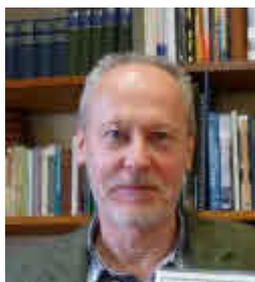


Andy Dunn, seen here with Richard, has been restoring the Master's Stairs. The decorated tread ends are an indication of the Master's status: the stairs leading to the inmates' chapel are plainer.

Andy was able to cut out the dry rot and replace part of the stringer: the staircase did not need to be dismantled as was feared. Many of the simple, square balusters had been smashed: they have been replaced as seen below and are ready for painting.



Aiming for 26 June



COVID permitting, the restored Master's House will be opened on Saturday 26 June by Keith Snell, Professor of Rural and Local History at Leicester University and a leading authority on the Poor Law. Keith numbers both workhouse inmates and a Master and Matron among his

ancestors: his writing and research have focused consistently on the lives of poor or less privileged people and he has worked extensively with amateur historians like ourselves. As well as performing the ceremony he will give a talk later in the day.

We have booked the Penybontfawr Male Voice Choir; there will be displays including one on the architect Thomas Penson and a full supporting programme.



Fresh Faces

To our great regret our Chair, David Goodman, had to step down for health reasons in the summer. We had very much appreciated David's calm guidance; the experience he brought as a long-standing Town Councillor and Mayor as well as his design and internet skills. David has kindly agreed to continue helping us in these areas.



Three new Trustees were appointed at the AGM in September. Steve Bradley has been elected Chair: he brings long experience of the public service sector, followed by work with voluntary organisations: at the same time he has developed high-level skills in

designing and creating works in stained glass. Steve is leading a review of the Trust's constitution.

Professional artist Dan Llywelyn Hall has made his home and studio in Llanfyllin's former Moriah Chapel, gaining first hand knowledge of renovating and adapting a historic building: he is leading the Crefft Cymru initiative.



Photo Bernard Mitchell

Gareth Hughes spent twenty years as a curator with English Heritage. He's updating the Trust's maintenance and conservation policies whilst putting in many hours with paintbrush, vacuum cleaner or trowel. Our newly painted doors are his work.

Two former Trustees, Mick Cape and Debbie Hicks, have re-joined and the Trust is in better shape to face the challenges ahead.



Open by appointment

Since August Y Dolydd and the Workhouse History Centre have been open by appointment only. Visitors have been admitted according to Welsh Government guidelines currently in force. Extra cleaning was instituted, equipment bought and risk assessments written so that we qualified under VisitBritain's 'Good to Go' scheme. Numbers have been far lower than normal, but nevertheless around 70 people have come to look round.



Heads above water

COVID has robbed us of our summer programme and Y Dolydd has been strangely quiet. Like many organisations we were fearful of not being able to pay our bills.



In fact the Trust has managed to keep its head above water. Alongside the Heritage Lottery Fund's emergency grant we were awarded a further £3,000 to cover COVID-related

expenses: as well as buying sanitisers and cleaning equipment we were able to pay for extra cleaning and to install a hot water supply to the toilets and the bunkhouse wash basins. Then the Welsh Government amended its Business Rates Grant scheme to cover charities as well as small businesses, and we received a further £10,000. This puts us in a roughly similar position to a normal year.



Finally, with great generosity the Pilgrim Trust, who have supported us so consistently, granted another £5,000 for the Master's House to cover the

cost of retaining scaffolding through the winter months.

Nevertheless we have to be concerned over our income in 2021. It's uncertain when public gatherings will be able to resume or how well they'll be supported. Our Workhouse Party team are understandably reluctant to commit. Up to now the Trust has always earned the money to meet running costs and interest charges, and has not been dependent on grants. We're determined that this will continue. Part of the answer lies in developing more rental units: a tenant has come forward for the cowshed and is taking on its refurbishment. And further units are planned on the first floor of the Women's Wing.

Exhibition goes live

In the last issue we reported on the Workhouse Network's digital exhibition 'More than Oliver Twist' which features our contribution alongside five other workhouses across Britain. The exhibition is now live and you can view it at: <https://artsandculture.google.com/partner/the-workhouse-network>

You can listen to the moving story of Harriet Perkins and her family, told by Linda Sterry and illustrated by Mel Rye. And all the biographies can be read at <https://ehive.com/communities/1167/more-than-oliver-twist>



Mel Rye

Who was James Anderson?

In preparation for our book - no longer a booklet - on Llanfyllin's Masters and Matrons we've been researching the life of the couple with the briefest tenure: James and Catherine Anderson, who served just six months in 1877. We knew little of their background except that, uniquely before 1936, they seemed not to be local people.

Our genealogy sleuth, David Brandreth, came to the rescue. He traced James back to Hawick in the Scottish borders, where he was born in 1818. He joined the Life Guards and rose to Troop Corporal-Major: the highest non-commissioned rank in the senior regiment of the British Army. While based at Windsor he married Catherine, a publican's daughter.



James retired in 1862 and found his way to Llanfyllin as Sergeant-Major of the local troop of the Montgomeryshire Yeomanry Cavalry. The yeomanry were the equivalent of today's territorials: part-time soldiers with a stiffening of professionals. Their officers were often local gentry. The Sergeant-Majors would be the backbone of the regiment, overseeing training and equipment.

This was not a full time job and James obtained a post with the Llanfyllin Union as Inspector of Nuisances. He impressed by his efficiency, and when David Rowlands was forced to resign as Master he applied. There was one snag: he and Catherine spoke no Welsh. But this was brushed aside. Major Dugdale said: 'Mr Anderson had served him as Serjeant-major of his yeomanry troop over twelve years, and he always found him most trustworthy and faithful'; another Guardian declared: 'As for Mrs. Anderson's qualifications, he thought she was of the two rather the more competent. She was most capable of managing the Inmates and performing duties that would devolve upon her.'

But things went badly. James fell out with the porter, who refused to help with bathing the male paupers. There was trouble with some of the women, who may have been less willing to accept military discipline than the troopers.

By November James and Catherine had had enough. They moved out. James stayed on for a while working with the Yeomanry, but ended his days as an innkeeper in St Asaph. His successor, a Welsh speaker, lasted thirty-three years.

