

## MERTHYR'S RICH HERITAGE

This talk is about Merthyr's Rich Heritage and I will have plenty to say about that. But there is something else that gets all the press and TV publicity. Merthyr the capital of the workshy: Merthyr with a quarter of its population on benefit. Merthyr -- and our neighbours in Blaenau Gwent -- top of the league for poverty, unemployment, and insolvency; and for high levels of heart disease, alcoholism and poor life expectancy.

These reports speak a truth that we know. No one wants to change this situation more than we do. But the newspapers and television programmes always report these problems as personal failings. They rarely consider how this situation has come about and why we have these levels of unemployment and sickness. Many -- not all -- of these problems arise from decisions made outside this Borough. We are paying for, we have inherited, the consequences of other people's decisions.

It wasn't always like this. I remember a Merthyr where there was full employment, thriving shops and busy cafes from the Fountain at the bottom of town right up to Flooks at Pontmorlais: when Pontmorlais, the entrance to the town, was not a disgrace and when we had five cinemas: the Theatre Royal, the Palace, the Electric, the Castle, and the Temperance Hall.

Mind you, we didn't have anywhere like this Leisure Centre, an example of modern investment that has brought jobs and amenities, but which is never mentioned in the one-sided negative reports.

A recent research report declares that Merthyr has very low people resilience. They are talking about the people of this County Borough who have lived

through the nine-month lock-out of 1926, the Great Depression of the Thirties, the Second World War, the tragedy of Aberfan, the coal strike of 1984-5, the closure of collieries and factories in the Thatcher years, and now the closure of Hoovers. Are we resilient? It's a miracle we are still here!

What these negative reports never reveal or understand are the underlying strengths of this community and the heritage it can draw upon.

One thing they never mention is the many hundreds of thousands of pounds raised for charity by Merthyr people every year. The resilience, courage and generosity of past and present generations is a heritage that we can be proud of.

The journalists and politicians who talk about the workshy never tell us about the inventors and entrepreneurs who have come from Merthyr. It was in Merthyr that Cort's puddling process that transformed the manufacture of wrought iron was perfected; it was from here that entrepreneurs established the trade in best steam coal that enabled Britannia to rule the waves; and here that Adrian Stephens invented the piercing steam whistle – an abominable noise but one that has saved countless lives. It was from here that John Hughes went out to the Ukraine and founded their coal and steel industry; it was here, for the first time in the history of the world, that an engine pulled a load on rails. The impact of that revolution is still being felt all around the world.

It was from here that the remarkable Berry brothers, still in their twenties, built a newspaper and magazine empire larger than anything previously seen. It was from here that Laura Ashley went out and developed a world-wide brand and business. Abe Sherman built a multi-million pound business and so did Stan Thomas and his two sons, Stan and Peter. Bill Roberts, the man who built the Daleks was a Merthyr man. And that stream of invention and entrepreneurship continues with Julien McDonald.

So this Conference is about the fight back. The fight back against the constant negative one-sided picture of Merthyr that fills the press and the television screens. And we should stop talking about 'the Town of the Martyr'. It's too self-pitying and miserable. Cry and you cry alone.

So first we must understand our History.

Merthyr, Dowlais, Abercanaid, Troedyrhiw, Merthyr Vale, Treharris -- were built on the banks of the Taff, and the Morlais and Dowlais brooks and upon bare mountain sides and sheep tracks. When iron works and coal levels were established here hundreds then thousands of people, usually farm labourers from west Wales, came looking for work. The result is that almost everyone in Merthyr is descended from immigrants.

They poured into a town with a reputation as a stinking, noisy, dirty centre of industry; its cramped cottages and alleyways surrounded by slag and coal tips; there were literally hundreds of pubs, the people consuming vast amounts of alcohol. When they weren't drinking they were gambling -- Trevithick's engine pulled that load for a bet! Otherwise, they were rioting, mountain fighting and street fighting. Strangely, they were also joining friendly societies like the Ivorites and the Oddfellows. They were holding eisteddfodau, fostering music and poetry with great success, building chapels and developing a great tradition of choral singing.

This reputation was a caricature, but it contained much truth. It reflects the energy and spirit of an immigrant population that brought together Welsh and English, Irish and Spaniards, Jews and Italians, Catholics and Calvinistic Methodists, Baptists and Mormons -- to name just a few.

Like Manchester and Bradford, Merthyr was a town where modern industrial society began.

That is why it is truly historic. Here was the Industrial Revolution: with its capitalist enterprise and invention; environmental desecration; and the struggles for labour and social emancipation that still continue.

Dowlais and Cyfarthfa were not just large iron works. In the 1840s they were the two largest capitalist enterprises on the planet.

There is something else about Merthyr that needs to be understood. Compared to their immense wealth and power the ironmasters put very little into the community. This town, this community, was largely created by the people who lived in it. The chapels, the shops, most of the houses, the choirs, the pubs, the friendly societies, the fight for public health and local democracy, all came from the people.

And that brings me to the buildings.

In the second half of the twentieth century important parts of our Heritage -- the town that was created by our ancestors stone by stone and brick by brick, and that we grew up in and is part of our Merthyr memories -- important parts were destroyed: Ynysgau chapel; the Pentrebach Triangle; the Lamb public house; Nantygwenith street; Dowlais House; Penydarren House; Bethesda Chapel; parts of Dowlais and the whole of Penydarren High Street. If you want to see the houses that Richard Crawshay built at Rhyd-y-car for the workers at the Ynysfach furnace, you will find them in the Welsh Folk Museum. The younger generations are growing up where so many physical reminders of a unique society have been lost. When those buildings go, a part of our identity disappears.

What hasn't been destroyed has been allowed to rot: the Iron Bridge; the Theatre Royal; the YMCA building; the Miners' Hall; Gwaelodygarth House; Vulcan House; the former General Hospital. And dominating the centre of

town, the Town Hall. All those buildings were occupied and functioning within my lifetime. And successive Merthyr Councils must take much of the blame for what has happened. Nothing could be more expressive than the fact that up to the year 2000 the Council allowed 138 listed buildings to be demolished whilst many others were allowed to fall into acute disrepair.

Thank goodness there is a greater sensitivity to these issues now, as the Council's participation in this Conference shows. And I am not here to say that everything should be kept. People need decent houses, Merthyr people need jobs; and developers with their plans look enticing, although I wish that Brunel's railway station had not been destroyed.

We are **not** here to cry over spilt milk. And not all is lost. We still have the Trevithick Tunnel; the Ynysfach Engine House; Joseph Parry's House; the facade of the Dowlais Stables; Cefn Coed Viaduct; Pentrebach House. All of them threatened with demolition at times and saved by public protest. And some of the decaying buildings may yet be saved by a Council that is now aware that what remains is 'precious but fragile' and part of 'the unique character and identity of the Borough'.

Our greatest heritage from the built environment is the Cyfarthfa area: the Castle, the Park, the Pandy clock tower, the cottages at Williamstown, and the remains of the Cyfarthfa furnaces. This area really is of national and world significance. Regardless of whether the application for World Heritage Site status is successful, this area must be conserved and looked after. We have been here before. This is not the first time enthusiasm has been aroused, money has been spent, and then interest has been lost and nothing done and neglect has set in again. Let this time be different.

But heritage is much more than buildings. Merthyr has an important cultural heritage which I can only touch on.

### The Cultural Heritage. .

First, is the story of the fight for democracy against autocratic power. The Merthyr story is more complicated than the one usually told but the key events still stand out: the extraordinary armed insurrection of 1831 -- unique in modern British history; the fact that a few years later here in Merthyr was the largest concentration in Wales of fighters for democracy, the Chartists; and when the people – well the men anyway – had the vote they sent to Westminster two remarkable men, Henry Richard and Keir Hardie. This is not a story about the rise of one particular party, it is bigger than that. It is about the national fight for a democratic voice, and Merthyr has played a major part in that: including producing in Arthur Horner from Georgetown and Moss Evans from Cefn Coed the leaders in their day of the two largest trade unions in Britain.

Then there is our musical heritage. One of the Chartists was John Thomas, better known as Ieuan Ddu, the man who introduced the Messiah into Wales here in Merthyr; the man who fostered the great Welsh choral tradition that started here and only later spread to Aberdare and the Rhondda. Not for nothing does a character in *Under Milk Wood* inquire, ‘How’s the tenors in Dowlais?’ In Nantygwenith Street, Georgetown, lived most members of the outstanding Cyfarthfa band, the first brass band to play Beethoven symphonies. Out of that background of local eisteddfodau, the Cyfarthfa Band, and choral singing came Joseph Parry, Wales’ finest composer in the nineteenth century.

The Nonconformist chapels of course were at the heart of that choral tradition, as they were at the heart of cultural and religious life throughout Wales, with

Merthyr no exception. They were and are bearers of an important part of our Welsh heritage.

We also have a very different heritage. In what other town will you find three statues to boxers? Some of Merthyr's nineteenth century bare-knuckle fighters such as 'Shoni Sguborfawr' -- the 'Emperor' of China -- and Redmond Coleman, 'the iron Man from Iron Lane' who was said to prefer fighting to eating, are legendary. They were also vicious criminals. But out of the brutal bare-knuckle tradition has come Merthyr's line of talented boxers – Jimmy Wilde, born in Quakers Yard, Billy Eynon, Cuthbert Taylor, Tim Sheehan, Eddie Thomas, Howard Winston, Jonny Owen. Not brutal fighters but brilliant exponents with skill and courage of the art of self-defence. And we can add to those Ken Buchanan, a Scot and World Champion, who learned much of his trade in Merthyr.

And let us not overlook the novelists, poets, and critics who have lived among us and written about the town – Charlotte Guest, Thomas Stephens, Jack Jones, Glyn Jones, Harri Webb, Leslie Norris, Desmond Barry -- and the pint-sized Williams boys from Dowlais, Glanmor and Gwyn, two of Wales' finest historians. And the artists who worked here: Penry Williams, Joseph Edwards, Tom Prytherch, George Harris, Jessie Harrison, Heinz Koppel, Arthur Giardelli, Alwyn Hughes.

I emphasise these cultural aspects of our heritage for two obvious reasons. First, because they are an important part of the Merthyr story about which the outside world knows little. We should tell it, loud and often.

And secondly, because it reminds us of whom we are and where we have come from. We can all take pride in something from that cultural heritage.

But now in a famous phrase: What is to be Done?

It is not my task today, thank goodness! to deal with the pressing issue of how to regenerate the Merthyr economy. Merthyr Heritage Trust knows that an aspect of that regeneration involves reshaping parts of the town and we are not blind preservationists. We recognise that omelettes cannot be made without breaking eggs. I have happy memories of the Castle Cinema but I know that it has to go. The image of rundown Merthyr must be banished.

But not by obliterating the character of our towns and villages. Too much of that has already been done. A good slogan is 'Build the future; preserve the best of the past'. That often means finding a new use for old buildings. That has been done with the facade of the Dowlais Stables and Pentrebach House and hopefully the same can be done with Vulcan House, the Synagogue, and Gwaelodygarth House.

The outstanding example of what is possible when someone has vision and drive -- like Liz McLean -- is Zoar chapel where an historic building is being adapted for a modern purpose that also celebrates important aspects of our heritage: the Welsh language, performing arts, and adult learning.

Zoar is an example of a heritage building embracing our cultural heritage. So is Cyfarthfa Museum with its beautiful setting and its links to the Crawshay family, the ironworks and manufacturing, the Cyfarthfa band, Merthyr's political struggles, and an extensive collection of paintings, many by Merthyr artists. It has much that is not on display and I hope the Museum will be able to expand into more of the Castle building when the school leaves in 2012.

It is a major attraction. Over 70,000 people a year attend the Museum, many of them day-trippers.

Hundreds of £millions a year is spent on visits to heritage sites in Wales. Merthyr needs a bigger share of that money. To catch that larger share I have two small suggestions.

First, it seems to me that there should be a town centre site that complements the Museum and celebrates other aspects of our heritage. There should be a small cinema room that shows videos and films of Merthyr and the surrounding area. Alan George's wonderful archive of photographs of Old Merthyr would also be shown on a large screen. There would be a lecture room where Merthyr history would be discussed and illustrated. There would be a bookshop where books by local authors and books of local interest would be sold; there would be meeting rooms and a cafe. And reflecting the tragedies and triumphs that illustrate Merthyr's own story, the posters and photographs, films and videos of Merthyr's British and World boxing champions in victory and defeat should be shown. I think Stan Thomas senior would have an interest in that.

The old Town Hall – where Eddie Thomas served as a Councillor and was made a Freeman of the Borough -- is the obvious place for these rooms and I hope Chapter Arts will accommodate them in its plans.

Secondly, we know that Anniversaries and Festivals are valuable opportunities for attracting visitors and for reminding ourselves of our heritage. Let us begin to plan a rolling programme now.

21 May 2011 will be the 170<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Joseph Parry's birth. Here is an opportunity for celebration of his life, his music, and his American connections, through talks, guided tours and choral concerts.

A month later in June is the 180<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a massive landmark in the Merthyr story: the armed insurrection or 'Merthyr Rising'.

2012 is a significant year. It is 180 years after the formation of the Parliamentary Borough and the election of Josiah John Guest as Merthyr's first MP. It is also the 160<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death. Even more it is the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Charlotte Guest, one of the most remarkable women of the Victorian era. An aristocrat, she married 'beneath her' to a mere millionaire ironmaster, a widower 27 years older. She bore him ten children in thirteen years, learned Arabic, Hebrew, Persian and Welsh, translated the medieval Welsh text of the Mabinogi for its first published version in English; kept a fascinating Journal, set up the Dowlais schools and took an active part in management of the greatest ironworks in the world.

2012 combines Politics, Welsh Literature, the Iron industry, Dowlais, Education, and Feminism.

January 2013 will be the centenary of the opening of Cyfarthfa Castle school.

October 2013 is 130<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Morgan Williams, the leader of Merthyr's Chartists, the man who beat Josiah Guest on a show of hands in the 1842 General Election although his supporters were not allowed to vote, a national leader who advocated adult education and who published from Glebeland Street the first working class newspaper in Wales. He is a forgotten but important figure in Merthyr's history.

### Conclusion

These are just a few examples. There are many more events that could illustrate the richness of our Heritage and its national importance as a pioneer industrial town with all the riches and poverty, triumphs and disasters that go with capitalist development; including the courage and inventiveness of the people who created this community; and those who made an impact upon Wales and the world.

It is a story we can be proud of; we should tell the outside world about it; and its richness should be taught in local schools. No one else will do it.

This Conference is a sign of a new beginning. If the Council and local cultural and historical organisations work together, we can build our future in appreciation and respect for our past. For too long we have taken our rich Heritage for granted or misunderstood its significance. But now we are on a fresh start and on the fight back against ignorance and misrepresentation. **Can we do it, yes we can.**

(Copyright: Joe England)

26 November 2010

---