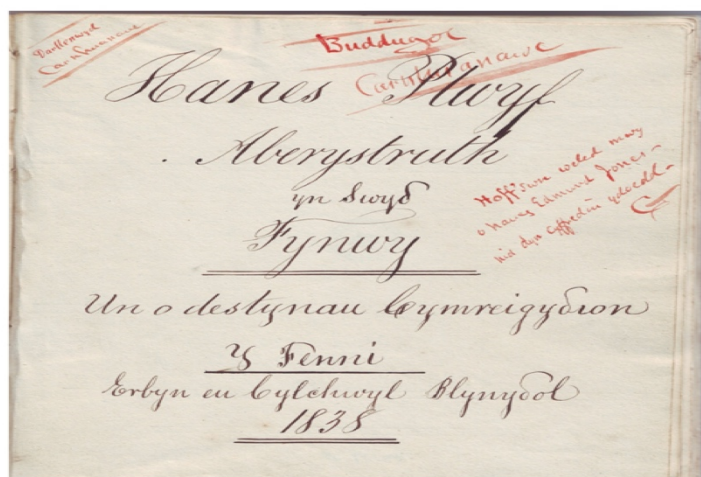


THE HISTORY OF BLAENAU GWENT,

By Daniel Lewis (Ifor Gwent), 1838.



Translated By Colin Morgan

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The Background to This History, Its' Author, and a Note on the Editing

This history of the Parish of Aberystroth or Blaenau Gwent was written by a Daniel Lewis as an essay in one of the competitions of the 19th Century Abergavenny Eisteddfodau. In the first half of the 19th century a remarkable group of people came together in Gwent to form a society to promote love of the Welsh language and its cultural expressions by way of holding Eisteddfodau. The most prominent of these people were the Reverend Thomas Price – *Carnhuanawc*, and Lady Llanofer, Augusta Hall or *Gwenynen Gwent*. The society was known as the *Cymreigyddion*, a society which met in Abergavenny and which promoted Eisteddfodau between 1834 and 1853. Because of the social connections of the Abergavenny Eisteddfod founders the prominent and famous came from Wales, England, and internationally. Some of the essays submitted to these *Eisteddfodau* survive in their original handwriting as manuscripts held in Cardiff Central Library, Local Studies Department which kindly gave permission for me to scan them prior to translation. One of these - Cardiff Manuscript Ms: 2-1024 is: *Hanes Plwyf Aberystroth yn Swydd Fynwy* or the History of the Parish of Aberystroth ie. Blaenau Gwent in Monmouthshire by Daniel.Lewis. It was one of the subjects set by *Cymreigyddion y Fenni* for their 1838 Eisteddfod as the first page of this translation, indicates. Who was Daniel .Lewis or *Ifor Gwent* to give him the bardic name by which he referred to himself at the conclusion of his essay?

Very little is known about him. In the definitive work on the Abergavenny Eisteddfodau by Mair Elvet Thomas: *Afiaith Yng Ngwent, Hanes Cymdeithas Cymreigyddion y Fenni 1833-1854*, 1978, University of Wales Press, she notes: ‘I have not been able to discover any information about Daniel Lewis, *Ifor Gwent*, except for that fact that he worked in Coalbrookvale Iron Works [ie.Nantyglo], and that he won twice at the Abergavenny Eisteddfodau in 1836 and in 1838. I have tried to discover more about him but with limited success’. In my reading of other Gwent manuscripts of the same period, such as the diaries of John Davies - *Brychan* of Tredegar, the several manuscripts by T.E.Watkins, *Eiddil Ifor* of Llanffwyst, all of which are in Cardiff Library, I have come across a Daniel Lewis and a David Lewis - *Ehedydd Gwent*, the both from Blaenau Gwent and the implying that they were brothers. If indeed they were, then Daniel Lewis is a son of a former vicar of Llenwenarth and Aberystroth or Blaenau Gwent parish. Thomas E. Watkins, one of the founder members of *Cymreigyddion y Fenni* and a prolific competitor himself in these Eisteddfodau, refers to a Daniel Lewis of Blaenau Gwent advising and accompanying Archbishop William Coxe when he made his solo tour in Monmouthshire in 1799. Though

one cannot be certain from the data currently available, it seems very likely therefore that the author of this history was indeed a local lad from the very parish described in this history.

Regarding the content of this history by Daniel Lewis, Mair Elvet Thomas suggests in her work referred to above, that he had significantly based it on an earlier history by the eccentric Edmund Jones: '*A Geographical, Historical and Religious Account of Aberystruth Parish in The County of Monmouth (1779).*' I have made a close reading of Jones' history and I cannot agree with her judgement. Whilst Jones does have some similar topographical description, his main aim seems to be to discuss God and the Devil and of the ways in which the topography of Blaenau Gwent offers instruction in divinity, 'and teaches diverse lessons of importance'. I think the two histories differ significantly in quality; with the essay by Daniel Lewis being far superior! Lewis gives an excellent topographical and social account of the parish of Blaenau Gwent in the early nineteenth century, conveying a picture of the time when a long settled dispersed totally Welsh community in language and upland farming economy was giving way to rapid industrialisation.

The headings set out below in Lewis's history are those of the author in the original manuscript. Where I have added a heading, made the occasional footnote or other editorial interpolation, they are always rendered within square brackets thus []. Issues regarding the spelling of the place names the author refers to, sometimes arise. The Welsh spelling he uses can be that of contemporary standard Welsh, though not the form of the name which is in main current usage. For example he always wrote Blaenau, whereas the colloquial Blaina is the form in most current usage. Also, on some occasions he uses a version of Welsh spelling which was not exactly that adopted when the language became standardised some years after he wrote his essay. I have used the author's spelling in the first place and added in brackets the alternative contemporary form if felt necessary.

What follows is a translation of Daniel Lewis's history written in Welsh in 1838.

The History of the Parish of Aberystruth in Monmouthshire

One of the subjects (testynau) set by *Cymreigyddion y Fenni* for their annual Eisteddfod (*Cylchwyl*) in 1838

The Parish of Aberystruth or Blaenau Gwent – Its Name, Location, and Environment

Aberystruth or as it is more generally called - Blaenau Gwent - is a parish of Monmouthshire in the cantref of Abergavenny and the district of Gwent Uwch Coed. It is in the former Welsh province of Gwent and the Princedom of Glwysig (1). At one time Gwent encompassed the present-day shires of Glamorgan, Monmouthshire, Garthmadryn, Eirinawg or Herefordshire and the part of Gloucestershire this side of the Severn. Aslo at one time Blaenau Gwent was considered to include the districts of Grosmont (*Croesmwnt*), Kentchurch (*Eglwys Cent*) and as far as Monmouth Cap. Whilst the name is nowadays confined to this parish only, Williams [in his 'History of Monmouthshire, 1796] says that Blaenau Gwent would at one time have been applied to all the mountainous districts of Monmouth and Glamorgan., but nowadays [ie.circa 1838] Blaenau Gwent is a name restricted to this parish only. The Princedom of 'Glwysig', 'Glewiseig' or 'Glywysyg', was that part of Gwent which lies between the rivers Usk and Rhymney and which became a kingdom, Princedom or Lordship after the defeat of Caradoc the Prince of Eryllwg [ie.The Welsh lands of the Silurians] . After the Romans took over the lowlands of Gwent the brave sons of Siluria retreated to the high ground of Glwysig of which Aberystruth is a part. There protected by high and mountain ridges they were safe, and not even the skilled and brave forces of Julius Ceaser or any other army could reach them. It was these brave Silurians who were the earlier residents of this parish and which was part of the small and undefeated Princedom of Glywisg. The parish of Aberystruth gets its name from the stream Nant Ystruth, a stream which flows into the Ebwy Fechan by the church. The parish is surrounded on the West by the parish of Bedwellty and Mynyddislwyn, to the south by Llanithel,

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1. [Regarding *Glywsig* - The 2008 Encyclopedia of Wales by the Welsh Academy published by University of Wales Press has the following with regard to Glywsing: 'This is very likely the earliest name surviving for the territory between the Rivers Usk and Tawe, and named after King Glywis of the early fifth century, and is said to be the father of Gwynllŵg who himself gave his name to the territory between the rivers Rhymney and Usk'.]

and in the east by Trefithin and Llanffwyst. To the north are the parishes of Llangatwg and Llanelli which are in Breconshire. It is 8. miles from y Fenni [ie.Abergavenny], 15 from Pontypwl, 12 from Merthyr Tydfil, and 20 from Castell-Newydd ar Wysg [ie. Newport].

The Size of the Parish and Number of Inhabitants

The length of the parish from its boundaries with Breconshire in the North as far as Aberbyg [Aberbeeg] and the junction of Aberystruth parish with that of Llanithel [Llanhileth] in the southern part, is about seven miles. Its' width from the parish boundaries of Trefethin and Llanffwyst [Llanfoist] and the mountains of Moelfre and Teleri in the East as far as the Ebwy Fawr river which separates Aberystruth from Bedwellty and Mynyddislwyn parishes in the west, is about three and a half miles. The total inhabitants in 1779 were about 500. In 1801 there were 805. In 1821 because of the development and increase in iron works the population had reached 4,059 and in 1831 it had reached 5,992. Since then the iron works have expanded and new ones are being built but the total population of the parish has not increased in the same proportion because of the rapid increase of Brynmawr which a few years ago had only a small number of dwellings. In Brynmawr there are now scores of workers houses, a variety of lodgings and commercial premises, and hundreds of inhabitants, the majority of whom are workers in the ironworks of this parish.

The Mountains

The main mountains of this parish are: Mynydd y Ciliau which lies between Nant Ystruth and Afon Tileri; Y Moelfre or Moelfryn and Mynydd Tileri in the eastern part, and Mynydd y Begwn or The Ban between the two Ebwy rivers. The locals refer to these mountains as follows: the southern part they call Twyn Gwyneb y Nyth, the middle part Mynydd y Cefn and the northern part Cefn Llwydcoed. The gentry of the neighbourhood as well as their friends from away visit these mountains in season for the Grouse shooting as the grouse – *Grugieir* - are very numerous. In the summer one can see thousands of sheep, scores of pigs and some horses grazing on them.

Also, there are hordes of children on the crest of the hills searching for whimberries - *Llysi duon*, and later returning home with their mouths and teeth as black as the coal which is dug up by their fathers from the bowels of the earth. It is said that there were in earlier times 'Look-out Stations' on these mountains, and this is very likely as one can see from them the

greater part of Glamorgan, Monmouth and Breconshire, as well as parts of Rhadnorshire, Hereford and Gloucester. When one stands on this high ground and looks over the hills and at the development around them, there comes to mind the ages past, when the Druids were perhaps carrying out sacrifices on these hills; when exciting and patriotic compositions were recited by poets and ovates at every fireside; and when one would hear the magical sound of the harp in almost all families.

One can imagine that there would on occasions be the signal from the distant 'Lookout Post' or *Caerwylfa*, and immediately a bonfire would be lit on the designated spot – the *Ban*. And without delay you would see all the *Ghwysiaid* – the Men of Glywsig who would have included the former inhabitants of this parish, gather at the ready. One would hear the drawing of arms and the sound of battle horses anxious to enjoin the enemy. One would see the brave youth cheerfully set aside their tasks in order to take-up the sword, and hear the good looking maidens praise their men on their success: – “O Our peerless brave men! Our courageous fighters who are without comparison! You deserve that your feats be recorded in gold letters and kept for eternal memory. It was you who defended us from the intentions of the Romans, you who overcame the best laid war plans against us and prevented the pretension of the boastful conquerors through out the ages. Despite the conspiracies of the Romans, the treachery of the Saxons, the craftyness of the Danes, the underhandedness of the Normans, you kept your independence, and it was the pure Glywsiaid – men of Gwent – who led you!” These mountains are nowadays apart of the Earliship of Abergavenny and in the possession of the ironmasters of Blaenafon iron works; and of Joseph and Crawshaw Bailey rich owners of the extensive NantyGlo works.

The Wells (*ffynonau*), The Streams (*Nentydd*), and The Rivers (*Afonydd*)

There are no natural lakes in this parish, but following the building of the iron works their rich owners have made several large reservoirs to serve their works and the biggest of these are above the NantyGlo works on part of what was previously the smallholding of Ffoshalog.

The Wells - *Ffynonau*

Among the wells, the most notable are:- **Y Ffynonau Oerion**

[The Cold Wells]: these are twelve in number and spring from the western side of Tileri mountain. They never go dry and their waters are always cold.. In the grouse shooting season many of the gentry visit these particular wells. (1)

Ffynon y Tŷ Newydd which before 1779 had been surrounded by a boundary of rocks until the well was destroyed by some rogue. Its' waters were considered medicinal.

Ffynon Llawn Bwn March [the well in the field of pack horsxes] or **Ffynon y Manwynion** [the well of the white stones]. This well was also considered to be medicinal and it is said that many people over the years have been cured by its waters.

Ffynon Faelaw [Maelor's Well] and **Ffynon Bryn Tudur** [the Well of Tudor's hill] which rise from Twyn y Gwryd Mawr were also famous for the medicinal benefits of their waters.

The Streams – *Nentydd*

Nant Myrddech rises on the Western side of Twyn Gwyneb y Nyth and runs through a lovely small valley in a southwesterly direction until it joins the Ebwy Fawr at Aber-Myrddech;

Nant Byg rises on the same mountain and runs through a narrow and deep valley until it joins the Ebwy Fawr at Aberbyg [Aberbeeg];

Nant Cathan rises on Twyn Blaen Nant and runs about half a mile to the South West until it joins with the Ebw Fechan near NantyGlo works;

Nant y Glo rises on Mynydd Moelfre and runs from the north-east through the Rhasau before joining the Ebwy Fechan near the the present marketplace in NantyGlo. However, this stream is not visible now because its' waters have been diverted in other directions and the small valley through which it once ran, has been filled-in;

Nant Ystruth springs from a spot known as Blaen Ystruth and runs through lovely meadowland of the same name where there are several small holdings beautifying it. It runs in a southwestly direction until it flows into the Ebwy Fechan near the parish church; and,

Nant y Groes rises on Mynydd Tileri and runs from the North East through a small wooded

_ (1) [In the Edmund Jones history referred to in the preface, there is the following regarding these particular springs: 'Gentlemen who come in summer to sport on these Mountains usually drink these cold waers – Ffynonau Oerion – I once saw the Honourable Capel Hanbury, and I think, the Lord Compton South of Gloucester shire and their servants drinking at these springs']

valley which separates the parishes of Aberystruth and Llanithel. It then joins the Ebwy Fechan

The Rivers – *Afonydd*

The Ebwy Fawr: – this rises in Breconshire above Rhyd y Blew and comes into this parish below the Beaufort Iron Works and constitutes the western boundary of the parish. It flows past the mansion of Mr. Harford Esquire and the Ebwy Fawr Works which are on its' eastern Bank. It continues in a southerly direction past the New Works of Buddugle or Victoria (1) and the new mansion of Roger Hopkin Esquire which are on the Western side of the river and hence in Bedwellty. From here the river runs through a fruitful valley receiving many small streams until it reaches Aberbyg where it leaves this parish. The river keeps the same name whilst it runs through several parishes swallowing-up a variety of streams and other rivers until it flows majestically past Tredegar Fawr, the residence of the famous and patriotic Welshman Sir Charles Morgan, Baron, who is the Ifor Hael (2) of the present day. The river joins the Usk between Newport and the sea.

The Ebwy Fechan: – this rises near the northern boundary of this parish and runs southwards past Nantyglo Iron Works, Glyn Nantyglo, Trawsdref, and Blaenau as well as the new Cwm Celyn Works, and the Abertillery Forge. It continues its twisting course until it reaches Aberbyg where it joins with the Ebwy Fawr. In the northern part of this valley stand the works already named and surrounding them are mountains of waste products from the works. Strangers on getting a night time view of the works in this parish from Brynmawr, Mynydd y Bigwn, or y Moelfryw are often terrified! In exactly the same way as Gwilym Hywel put it in his poem about a 'Night-time View of Merthyr Tudful Iron Works': "They ran off from the hideous sounds in swift terror, and with a horrible look on them

(1) [Other manuscripts of this period reveal that the original name of the smallholding where the Victoria Iron works was built is : Troed Rhiw'r Clawdd - see: Cardiff MS:2.1032: *The History of the South Wales Iron Works.*]

(2) [Ifor Hael or Ifor ap Llywelyn (fl.1340-60) was the friend and chief patron of the poet Dafydd ap Gwilym. Ifor was one of the ancestors of the Morgan family of Tredegar and his house was at Gwern y Clepa about a mile from Basaleg in Gwent.]

shouted out: Come away everyone the whole world is on fire!" There is no need for gaslighting here because the huge furnaces like huge lanterns either side of the river light-up the whole countryside around them, so that this 'daylight' and not the light of the moon always characterizes the evenings. Night never comes to this part of the countryside!

The southern part of the Ebbwy Fechan valley has scattered over the sides of its' mountains lovely whitewashed small holdings among fields which are full of crops of wheat, barley, or oats, and which prove that heather and gorse are not the only products of this lovely valley.

Afon Tileri this rises in a spot known as Blaen Tileri and runs from the north-east in a valley of the same name where you will see pretty small holdings which are surrounded by the deep greenness of trees, gardens with flowers of many colours, and fields full of products for the sustenance of man and animal. Silence reigns with nothing to disturb it save for the sweetness of the winged choir of birds or the sound of the crystal waters of the streams rushing over their rocky beds towards Abertileri, where they are swallowd-up by the waters of the Ebbwy Fechan.

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