EISTEDDFOD NEWS FROM THE *ABERGAVENNY CHRONICLE*

by Gill Wakley

The struggle for the 1913 National Eisteddfod in Abergavenny

August 1913 was the last time that the National Eisteddfod was held in Abergavenny and from the reports in the *Abergavenny Chronicle* it sounds like a bit of a battle. It was hoped to achieve hosting the National Eisteddfod in 1911, but the *Chronicle* of 18 June 1909 records that, at the National Eisteddfod in London, Carmarthen was selected by 142 votes to 92, despite the best efforts of Viscount Tredegar, Sir Ivor Herbert, the Honourable Mr M^{c}Kenna MP and others.

The application had appeared in some detail in the previous week's paper (11 June 1909) as being of interest to the local inhabitants generally. It gave Abergavenny's claims as they appeared in the submitted memorial. These were:

- Its intimate connection with the National Institution
- Its association with Welsh literature, music, art and industry
- That no literary society had done more for Welsh Literature than the Cymreigyddion y Fenni from its establishment in 1833
- That the Abergavenny Eisteddfodau were at one time regarded as the most brilliant in the Principality
- The Cymreigyddion of 1848 was under the patronage of King Edward VII (then Prince of Wales) and was known as the Royal Eisteddfod of Abergavenny
- These gatherings had been patronised by the leading families of Monmouthshire and South Wales

The memorial also referred to the beautiful scenery by which the old town was surrounded and the advantageous position in relation to the enormous population in Monmouthshire and South Wales and to the railway facilities afforded.

At this time Abergavenny had three railway stations connecting with Newport and Cardiff to the south, Hereford and to the north, and the Brynmawr line to Merthyr Tydfil, railway transport being extremely important for longer distance travel.

It is interesting to note that Carmarthen (Aberystwyth having withdrawn their bid) were reported to have said in their submission that they were not afraid of 'all the titles supporting Abergavenny's bid'.[1] They pointed out the advantages of their town although they 'acknowledged the importance of the Abergavenny Eisteddfod from 1833 to 1853'.

A letter to the *Abergavenny Chronicle* nearly a year later (27 May 1910) renewed the appeal. It emphasised at some length how important the Abergavenny Eisteddfod was and went on to say that up to two years previously the Abergavenny Eisteddfod was a financial success, enabling the creation of a reserve fund, but in 1909, 'a reverse was experienced which exhausted the reserve, causing a deficiency of £150. The last few Eisteddfodau have been characterised by a lack of support both in attendance and in subscription which this year

[1] Items in quotation marks are from the *Abergavenny Chronicle*

only amounted to £30 as against £80 in past years.' The writers, J Straker, Chairman and R H Jackson, Secretary, of the Abergavenny Eisteddfod Committee, went on to appeal to the tradespeople of the town to contribute the £210 required to meet the deficiency and 'defray the cost of the National Application.'

In the issue of 24 June 1910, an article appeared on an Emergency General Meeting of the members of the Abergavenny Eisteddfod and Fete Society and of the provisional committee appointed to lodge the application of Abergavenny for the National Eisteddfod. It was to decide

- Whether the Easter Eisteddfod and Fete should be discontinued
- Whether it is desired that the application for the National Eisteddfod shall be proceeded with or discontinued
- In the event of it being decided to continue both, to adopt measures to 'defray the cost without further delay'.

There was a large amount of emotive language during the discussion:

> 'If the Easter Eisteddfod is abandoned it will be practically impossible to ever resuscitate it ... the discontinuance of the application for the National Eisteddfod will (in view of the work already achieved, which practically ensures the success of the next application) cause the town to be the subject of ridicule, will destroy for all time the prospect of Abergavenny ever being selected as the venue for the National Eisteddfod, and further, such evidence of weakness will not be appreciated by the many influential supporters of the previous application. It is not necessary to refer to the serious financial loss to the inhabitants of the town, as well as the loss to the prestige of the town itself, which would inevitably result should it be found necessary to abandon the two movements. However, in view of recent events, it is essential that the wishes of the inhabitants and especially those interested should be ascertained without delay.'

This was followed by a report on 1 July of another Emergency General Meeting, at which a letter from Sir Ivor Herbert was read out. He stated that 'the Easter Abergavenny Eisteddfod and the National Eisteddfod were not inseparably connected and it might be necessary to discontinue the Easter Eisteddfod'. Other letters of support were read out but the subscriptions received were only £14 8s 6d; rather far off the £210 requested above. A resolution to discontinue the Easter Eisteddfod was made but no suggestions were received about how to meet the deficit.

On 10 July, at a meeting of the Abergavenny & Licensed Victuallers' Association with Mr H B Stocker (Angel Hotel) in the chair, Mr R H Jackson made an appeal for wiping out the deficit after the last Eisteddfod. It was resolved to circulate the trade.

By 12 August 1910, after yet another Extraordinary General Meeting, it was reported that 'after months of anxiety and discussion, it seems as if the Easter eisteddfod will take on a new lease of life'. It sounds as if more money had come in and more was promised, as 'the committee start with a liability of £150. It is hoped that the town will strongly support the committee by subscribing towards the funds and assisting in various directions to enable them to place the institution once again on a sound financial basis.'

On 16 September it was reported that a successful Horse & Agricultural Show, followed by a carnival had raised money for the Eisteddfod and in the issue of 23 September 1910, was an article obviously designed to whip up support and subscriptions – 'The splendid success of the National Eisteddfod at Colwyn Bay should revive the enthusiasm of the

inhabitants of Abergavenny …which aims at securing the holding of the eisteddfod in 1913… 30-40 thousand people attended and as many as 96 special trains arrived on one day…'

Possible reasons for the deficit incurred by Abergavenny Eisteddfod committee in 1910

In 1909, the National Eisteddfod was held in London. Mr R H Jackson, the able and indefatigable secretary of the Eisteddfod committee, gave an interesting review of the Eisteddfod work in Abergavenny to the Tradesmen's and Shop Assistants outing. A petition was raised to alter the date of their outing to allow the members to attend the National Eisteddfod in London. The train would leave Abergavenny station at 5.40am on 17 June and arrive at Paddington at 8.45am running non-stop. The cost for the one day was seven shillings and all shops would be closed on that day. Enthusiasm was obviously considerable.

However, the local Abergavenny Eisteddfod in 1909 contained what was described in the newspaper as 'an extended programme that would be more expensive' than in previous years. On 19 March 1909, the *Abergavenny Chronicle* gave an account of what was expected – it included the donation of a silver cup by the mayor for the triple harp competition. The revived Gorsedd was to be held on Easter Monday morning followed by a procession from the castle to the Eisteddfod hall (actually the Market Hall with a stage and seating). The reformed Cymreigyddion y Fenni were having a congress on the Wednesday, Thursday and Friday and a Wednesday evening concert including a whole band of triple harps, a Welsh Ladies choir, Mrs Gruffydd Richards playing the triple harp and a Welsh glee party. Entries to the competitions had been received from 'Liverpool in the North to Southampton in the South.'

The report of the Eisteddfod, from the issue of 16 April 1909, gave several reasons why it made a loss. The weather was unfavourable – leaden skies and scudding clouds. Fewer people attended (perhaps they were saving up to go on the excursion to London later in the year) and there were complaints about the venue in the market hall.

> 'As far as the space is concerned, the hall is all right, but for the acoustic effects the word atrocious would seem to be the most suitable. When the soloists were singing or playing it was simply impossible to tell what was going on beyond a radius of say ten yards. The recitations were entirely lost to many hundreds of the audience for whom it was merely a dumb show. The pianissimo passages of the instrumental solos were inaudible… '

The account goes on to give summaries of the speeches given and goes into detail about the 'sumptuous dinner' given at the Angel for many titled and illustrious men attending. The account ran out of space and could not give the results of the competitions! Reading this account from the present day is sounds as if the organisers had lost sight of the purpose of an Eisteddfod and it had become more focussed on the officials and the notables, the speeches and the celebrations. In May 1909, the council minutes included a suggestion that the Gorsedd stones in the castle should be purchased by the council, but in June it was decided that they should be left where there were (amongst the flowerbeds) as the property of the Cymreigyddion Y Fenni or until such time as they might be removed.

Also carried in the *Abergavenny Chronicle* is a detailed account (from 30 April) of a visit made to this Eisteddfod by a school party from Chesterfield School, Enfield Lock. They travelled on the Saturday spending a few hours in Shrewsbury on the way. On Easter Sunday

after church in the morning they climbed the Little Skirrid, before attending church again in the evening. On the Easter Monday, they witnessed the Gorsedd ceremony, but did not understand what was going on. They then climbed the Sugar Loaf and spent the rest of the week climbing other hills and visiting various large houses where tea was hosted by the owners. It hardly seems that they had attended an Eisteddfod!

The Eisteddfod of 1910 compounded the financial problems. Despite the fete programme with several acrobatic acts, the Military Band of the South Midland Royal Engineers and fireworks, it was not a success. Again the weather was poor with 'leaden skies and drizzle'. The reporter complained about the lack of decoration of the town especially along the route of the procession from the castle to the market hall and in the hall itself. The number of entrants was low – the adjudicator remarking that had the committee chosen better known ('hackneyed pieces' in his words) pieces, more entrants would have been expected. Again there seems an emphasis on the presence of the famous and notable: The Marquis of Abergavenny, Viscount Tredegar, Lord Aberdare, Lord Llangattock, Lord Glanusk, Reginald McKenna MP, Mrs Herbert of Llanover and other representatives of the leading county families. The reporter clearly did not speak Welsh. He wrote 'There was a peculiar air of weirdness and mysticism pervading the proceedings...'. He went on to describe the Gorsedd ceremony with some puzzlement and seemed surprised when 'a number of people in the audience who evidently knew what was going on, cried aloud Heddwch with startling effect (*Heddwch* meaning peace).' This year the report did not include information about the speeches – they were all in Welsh except for a summary of the only one in English, so there was enough room to record the winning competitors!

Despite the free use of the market hall, town hall and castle, there was a financial loss. The decline in numbers attending may also have been due to the large number of local Eisteddfodau in the area where the relatives, friends and supporters of the competitors might be able to hear the choirs, singers and instrumentalists perform, unlike as above in the deadening acoustics of the market hall. There were reports in the *Abergavenny Chronicle* of yearly Eisteddfodau at Llanover, Llangynidr, Brynmawr, Blaenavon and even a report of a man from Abergavenny receiving a Bible for acting as conductor for the Eisteddfod at the Bristol workhouse. However, the main reported reason was the lack of subscriptions – down from £80 to £30.

Success at last – the 1913 National Eisteddfod at Abergavenny – but still having problems

A letter from R H Jackson, General Secretary of the Eisteddfod Committee, in the *Abergavenny Chronicle* on 11 April 1913, reveals the preparations that had been going ahead.

> 'In connection with the National Eisteddfod in August next, arrangements are being made with the assistance of the Misses Jackson of Brynderi, to organise the Pageant of Gwent as the opening attraction of the Eisteddfod with the view of demonstrating the historical and eisteddfodic associations of the neighbourhood.
>
> Such Pageant will be held on August Bank holiday in the historic grounds of Coldbrook Park and it particularly desired that all residents in the immediate and surrounding neighbourhood should take part in the following episodes:
>
> Opening dance of the Mountain Fairies, River Sprites etc.

Episode 5 AD 1177 Massacre of Syswyllt ap Dyfnwl by William de Braose in Abergavenny Castle.

Epsiode 8. AD 1453 reception of the Earl of Warwick, the Kingmaker, at Coldbrook

Epsiode 9 AD1469 The Battle of Banbury before and after.

Considerable progress has been made outside Abergavenny and the following towns and districts are taking steps to prepare some of the other episodes: Tredegar, Brynmawr, Chepstow, Caerleon, Pontypool, Pengam, Usk, Raglan, Llantilio, Llanarth, Llanover, etc. and it is of course essential that Abergavenny and the parishes immediately surrounding should be well represented.'

By 2 May the paper was reporting on the National Eisteddfod committee meetings and recorded that good progress was being made on the building of the Pavilion in Bailey Park and the first instalment of £350 was due. They were concerned about security and proposed having four men on duty at night (although they did not want to go into details because of the suffragettes). The committee expressed their disapproval of the Abergavenny Amateur Athletics Association (the 4As) who were proposing to go ahead with their usual August Bank Holiday Tuesday sports event. They felt this was not in keeping with the ethos of the Eisteddfod. Hereford Road School would be used for the Art Exhibition and the Eisteddfod choir – 'about 400 voices are rehearsing in Brynmawr, Newport and Pontypool as well as the local contingent'.

By 13 June, the treasurer was complaining that the financial position did not look good. They had paid out £700 on the Pavilion so far, but were due to pay another instalment of £350 which they had not got. There was a long argument – it might almost be described as a slanging match - fully reported in the *Abergavenny Chronicle*, about the 4A's proposal to use the castle on the Tuesday evening and to continue with their programme of events on their own athletics ground.

On 4 July, the *Abergavenny Chronicle* reported another row about the 4As wanting to hold their athletics event on the August Bank Holiday Tuesday as usual. Eventually, a delegation was appointed to try to come to an amicable solution. Also in this issue, an advertisement for the Eisteddfod appeared with information about where applications could be sent and information obtained about the competitions. Another advertisement was for the Welsh Industries Association (Monmouthshire President, Lady Llangattock) which would be holding their exhibition and sale in Hope Hall opposite St Mary's Church during the Eisteddfod week.

Advertisements were also appearing for staff, such as: 'Wanted Women for Eisteddfod week. Apply Williams, Hen & Chicks Hotel, Abergavenny', and 'Wanted Women and Girls for waiting etc during the Eisteddfod week. Apply Victoria Temperance Hotel.'

The *Abergavenny Chronicle* of 11 July was full of news of the National Eisteddfod. The rehearsal of the Pageant of Gwent had taken place at Maindiff Court 'by kind permission of Mrs Currey' where the proceedings were 'unfortunately obscured by rain'. The article gave a summary of each episode. Another article reported on the rehearsal of some of the choir in the Pavilion and the excellent acoustics therein. Another article appealed for stewards as so few had come forward, and another pointed out how different this Eisteddfod would be from the usual Abergavenny Eisteddfod with the Gwent Pageant, the massed choirs, new choral competitions and new works by Welsh composers.

A week later and some complaints about profiteering were arising, with grumbles about the excessively high charges for hotel rooms and bed and breakfast compared with previous Eisteddfod venues. At a council meeting, one item was about whether the councillors would take part in the Gwent Pageant (yes) and how much it would cost to have their robes altered to match the period (about 10 shillings). The railway asked to erect poles to connect their information bureau in Bailey Park (showing the importance of rail transport) and the Eisteddfod committee asked the council for the fire engine to be stationed in Bailey Park – but the councillors thought it might get bombed (presumably by the suffragettes) and declined.

The edition of 25 July carried advertisements for cheap tickets for excursion trains to Abergavenny (and several other destinations). The Eisteddfod committee announced rehearsals for the Gwent Pageant, appealed for plants and flowers to decorate the YMCA catering tables, and advertised for tenders for a stall to sell newspapers and magazines in Bailey Park (they had previously advertised for a stall to sell fruit and vegetables). A letter appeared complaining that 'Rhodri Mawr and Howell Dda are not mentioned in the Pageant of Gwent' and the writer took exception to the statement that 'the Arthurian period is the most credible episode in Welsh history', - perhaps we would agree!

On 1 August another advertisement for the Eisteddfod appeared, stating that there were record entries of 2,200 with 88 choirs competing and grand concerts each evening, with special trains and an Art Exhibition at a reasonable charge. An article praised the efforts of the secretary (it certainly sounds as if he worked incredibly hard) and went on to give an account of the Cymreigyddion Y Fenni backed from 1833 by Lord and Lady Llanover and continuing for ten years with an annual Eisteddfod (although the Eisteddfodau had, in fact, continued for much longer). There were accounts of the final rehearsals of the Pageant of Gwent and the Eisteddfod choir in the Pavilion, as well as the final arrangements for the Eisteddfod. In the same issue is an article about the Bank Holiday Tuesday athletics event – special cheap trains would run, and the English champion sprinter (W R Applegarth) would be running as well as local champions. A new venture was whippet racing - the competition between the two events was continuing.

The edition of 8 August was full of news of the Eisteddfod, the competitions, adjudications and winners, the Gorsedd ceremony and long lists of the eminent visitors. It was reported that the King had become a patron and the Prince of Wales a vice-patron.

A diversion from the formal Eisteddfod news was added by the report for Wednesday which included information about the suffragettes. It had been expected that an attack would be made on the Right Honourable Reginald McKenna, MP, (Home Secretary at the time and blamed for the force feeding of suffragettes on hunger strike in prison.) He was due to preside at the Wednesday afternoon session, but the organisers switched him to the morning, and only a few suffragettes were aware of this. He was taken out by a side entrance; his car was attacked in the High Street but got away from the protesters. At quarter to three on Thursday morning, a policeman noticed smoke coming from the Pavilion belonging to the cricket club and by the time the fire brigade arrived, the front was ablaze. The caretaker who was supposed to be guarding the Pavilion was 'fast asleep inside'. Suffragette papers were found and signs that oil had been poured over the front of the Pavilion. The fire brigade had been ready to go out because they had already been called to attend to a fire at Mr Holly's farm

where suffragette literature was also found. The *Chronicle* reported that 'The houses that the suffragettes were staying in had been well watched and no arrests have yet been made… It is thought that some of the suffragettes may be disguised as nurses.'

There was a report that the crowning of the bard was attended by far fewer people than usual, so that the Pavilion was half empty. And a prominent article appeared complaining that 'the Abergavenny tradesmen are bitterly disappointed with the amount of trade they have done with the visitors.' The Eisteddfod committee had refused to grant passes from the Park – once people gained entrance they had to stay there and get what refreshment they could, the concession having been granted to the YMCA. The traders had laid in large stocks of provisions which would go to waste. A spread of pictures of the Pageant of Gwent was interspersed with accounts of the episodes and the names of the people involved.

The issue of 15 August contained more Eisteddfod news. There was a letter of thanks to all those involved in the Pageant of Gwent suggesting a repeat performance to raise money towards the expected deficit. Another article praised the triple harpists. There were 'unpleasant scenes' at the Friday concert when the over-running afternoon Eisteddfod competition started to give the adjudication and performances of the winners during the concert. Those who had come to hear the concert protested, the others said that it was an Eisteddfod and should continue, but the concert goers prevailed. The Saturday morning, a wet day, was a disappointment, many attenders had already left and only two of the promised eight brass bands competed. The decorations in Bailey Park were praised and the mayor gave a speech of thanks and summing up but expressed his regret that it had not been a financial success.

The aftermath

In November 1913 in the town hall, tableaux from the Pageant of Gwent were followed by a dance to raise money to clear some of the debts of the Eisteddfod. Repeat performances of the Pageant of Gwent had been suggested several times, but this is the only one reported. It would have been difficult to collect together all the many participants for a repeat performance.

In January 1914, the accounts of the Pageant of Gwent were presented and thanks given to all those who had participated. In March 1914, it was reported that following the disbanding of the Abergavenny Eisteddfod Committee, the Abergavenny Amateur Athletics Association wanted to take over the Easter Monday booking that they had for many years. However, the council wished to charge them for that day – the Eisteddfod had always had it free of charge – so they decided that they would continue with their previous arrangement of holding their events on the Bank Holiday Tuesdays.

By August 1914, the National Eisteddfod committee were reported as holding a meeting about the accounts. A detailed report of the accounts was published where it appears that the deficit was £51 0s 4d after considerable efforts had been made to collect all outstanding monies – the original deficit having been estimated in the region of £400. The treasurer was authorised to pay as many obligations as he could from the money in hand so far. Complaints were made about the failure of guarantors to pay and that the subscribers list had not been able to reduce the deficit. There was considerable criticism that the final accounts had not yet been drawn up. The committee pointed out that it had taken two years

for the accounts of some other Eisteddfodau to be published and that it was proving difficult to obtain the subscriptions from some people who had promised them in advance of the National Eisteddfod. The financial failure of the evening concerts was regrettable –

> 'the concerts had cost over £700 but only taken a little over £300. The large subscription list and the heavy choral and other entries which accounted for the bulk of the gate money are the saving features on the receipts side. There was larger expenditure then anticipated on things like the protection of the Pavilion from the suffragettes, the augmentation of the Eisteddfod choir, and that the majority of the staff had had to be remunerated.'

It was clear that the enthusiasm of the committee had not been matched by the supply of volunteer assistance or subscriptions from the general public.

The final accounts were published in January 1915: 'The deficit is not as large as feared, namely £40 9s 1d.', followed by a long list of income and expenditure. No further mention of the deficit was found in the *Abergavenny Chronicle*.

On 9 June 1916, Mr E Gaisford, on behalf of the trustees of the Nevill estate, wrote to the Council that 'the stones which have recently been erected in the Castle Grounds should be removed as it does not seem desirable that a modern addition of this kind should be made.' The town clerk was instructed to communicate with the secretary of the local Eisteddfod and 'kindly request the removal of the stones.' Mr R H Jackson must have groaned when he received the letter (he thought it was all over!) but he wrote back to the council stating that 'the committee responsible for erecting the stones was now defunct' and asking the corporation to kindly take possession of the stones 'the value of which, it would be anticipated, adequately compensate for the cost of removal'. The borough surveyor was instructed to remove the stones 'forthwith'. (These stones were the ones for the Abergavenny Eisteddfod, not the National Eisteddfod Gorsedd stones which had been erected in the Grove, Monmouth Road and later moved to Swan Meadows.)

Revivals of the Eisteddfodau tradition

Reports of Eisteddfodau in other areas continued to appear sporadically throughout the First World War, although there was no National Eisteddfod in 1914. The refusal of the government 'in the National Interest' not to allow special trains for visitors to the National Eisteddfod in Bangor in 1915 was given some prominence – although a government spokesman pointed out the same applied to football excursions. Amongst other reports were a successful local Eisteddfod in Brynmawr in September 1916 which raised money for distressed soldiers and sailors, and the 22nd annual local Eisteddfod (!) which was held in Llanover in connection with the Hanover Church on Thursday 15 February 1916, both with lists of competitors, adjudications and winners.

By 1917, activity was re-appearing in Abergavenny. The Abergavenny Band of Hope tried to revive the tradition by holding their first local Eisteddfod on Easter Monday. The published account said that it lasted too long – five hours – and an afternoon would be enough. Another local Eisteddfod was held in Abergavenny on Thursday 19 September 1918 under the auspices of the Congregational Church in the town hall. As well as the music, singing and recitation competitions, there were competitions for knitting and letter writing – activities that would have been well honed during the war. By April 1919, the Abergavenny Eisteddfod was back, organised by the Abergavenny Improvements Association, with

limited expenditure of £150, fetes at the castle on the Easter Monday and Tuesday where the visitors were entertained by acrobatics, comedians, comic knockabouts, boxers, games and 'the fortune teller did great business'. There was a flying display and a rugby match against the New Zealand All Blacks. The reports in the *Abergavenny Chronicle* give a sense of the relief of the population that, after the seriousness of the war, they could get back to enjoying themselves again.

The author: Gill Wakley moved to Abergavenny from Newcastle-under-Lyme in 2002 and after finishing off with some part-time work, retired. Joining the Abergavenny Local History Society gave an impetus to more research work, to build on the skills already acquired as a lecturer, and then professor, in Primary Medical Care. She is an active member of the Society's research group.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the staff and owners of the *Abergavenny Chronicle* who allow the Research Group from Abergavenny Local History Association to regularly search their archives and particularly to Sue Smith, who co-ordinates the Research Group and photographed so many of the items.