

WOMEN & WORK in the ABER VALLEY

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Commissioners **Undercurrents, Addo Creative & Caerphilly Council**

Introduction

The brief for this commission was clear. Explore the relationship between Women and Work in the Aber Valley.

My approach was simple. Get on the ground, in amongst the community and have as many conversations as possible. Hopefully through osmosis the shape of the piece would begin to reveal itself.

It was clear from the outset that the commissioning group had some strong offers for departure points. This leaned heavily on the history of quilting in the valley, particularly the Rural Industries Bureau (RIB) group that was set up in the early 20th century.

Immediately it was apparent that the project brief and my own practise overlapped with several shared interests:

- The overlaying of past and present. How two points in time can exist on top of and alongside each other, invisible to each other but always in conversation.
- The way in which 'occupation' and 'employment' give shape and meaning to our lives.

Taking the first point first, I knew that any way of moving forward needed to start by moving backwards: the past.

i. St Fagans

I was lucky to establish contact with Elen Philips at St Fagans relatively early in the process. Over email and zoom she was able to share her own insights on the history of quilting in the Aber valley, in addition to the pieces that the museum had in it's collection. First she gave me a broad outline of the scheme:

"As you may know, during the economic depression of the late 1920s/30s, the Rural Industries Bureau (RIB) established a quilting class in the village with the aim of training young women to make luxury hand-stitched quilts as a way of earning a living. The RIB also wanted to promote traditional craft skills."

She also pointed me in the direction of two pieces they had in the collection that had been made by women from the RIB group in the Aber Valley, and that demonstrated two 'signature' quilting motifs that were specific to the Abertridwr group:

a. The Abertridwr 'rose'



Courtesy of St Fagans

Rose: [Cot quilt - Collections Online | National Museum Wales](#)

b. The Abertridwr 'star'



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Courtesy of St Fagans

Star: [Quilted cushion - Collections Online | National Museum Wales](#)

Example A (Rose) is a cot quilt made by Katy Lewis (nee John) who trained under the RIB scheme. She was part of the very first cohort and later became a quilting teacher, teaching Doris James the maker of the Example B (Star).

Katy's obituary in The Quilter magazine is included below for reference:

The photograph shows Angie on the right with Margaret Tucker at Angie's 80th birthday party, doing what they both liked best - looking at old quilts. The whole house (her nephew's) was festooned with wonderful quilts from her collection - it was a memorable occasion.

Pauline Adams

KATY LEWIS OF ABERTRIDWR

1912 –2002

KATY LEWIS [NEE JOHN] was born in Abertridwr, a small mining village near Caerffili, in South Wales. She learned to quilt when she was about 17, at a class established by the Rural Industries Bureau, in order to "get away from housework"

The teacher, Miss Owen, was very strict, having learnt the traditional skills and patterns from her mother, who was the village quilter in Porth, in the Rhondda Valley. Katy and her friends, Gwen Stone, Marion and Nest Davies, proved very skillful and were trained to quilt together professionally by Miss Owen. They used silk, sateen, fine cotton-poplin and even velvet, producing quilts, dressing-gowns, bed-jackets and cushions to order, throughout the 1930's. Their work was sold in London and Cardiff. They called themselves Cymru Quilters and signed their work c.

By 1939, Katy was herself teaching quilting in evening classes. She and Gwen quilted together during the War until it was no longer possible to obtain the materials. After the War, fashions changed and the demand for quilts ceased, but

Katy continued teaching until the mid 1950's.

I first met Katy when she was demonstrating her skills at the Welsh Folk Museum, St Fagans. She gave me one of her frames, taught me how to use it and showed me the patterns she and her friends had used in the 1930's. Her work is recorded in the archives at St Fagans [audio and visual], and she is also featured in a number of books, including Mavis FitzRandolph's "Traditional Quilting", Michelle Walker's "The Passionate Quilter", and Dorothy Osler's "Traditional British Quilts".

Sadly, at the end of her life, she suffered from Alzheimer's disease but her quilting memories stayed with her longest. I feel privileged to have known Katy, to have been taught by her, and through her to have had a direct link with 19th Century quilting traditions of Wales.

Clare Claridge

Below: Katy Lewis at her quilting frame in 1984. Behind her is the green quilt which won her second prize in a competition held at St Fagans in 1951, for the Festival of Britain.



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Katy Lewis intrigued me. She was undeniably a 'woman' of the valley - born & bred - and had a relationship with quilting which was typical of the type conjured by the project brief. She also passed her learning on through teaching, a refrain that would become familiar through the conversations I had with women across the valley. Perhaps because of my own experience with people who have Alzheimers and Dementia (my aunt was diagnosed a year ago following a break-in at her home), I was drawn to her final years and the way in which Clare Claridge (author of *The Quilter* obituary) described the memories of quilting as one of the final things to go. I've been struck personally by how action and muscle memory stay long in the body and provide a form of embodied memory. Not only this, but the importance of engaging in a collective act has undeniable potential to reinforce experience and ensure it lives long in the memory.

I took the opportunity afforded by the reopening of St Fagans to see these examples first hand. They were as impressive up close as they were in pictures and seeing them this way highlighted the way in which the quilts were composed of two elements pressed and woven together. Compositionally this was intriguing and was an early indication that the way I had imagined layering the past and the present had precedent in the construction of the quilts itself.



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Katy Lewis quilting at St Fagans. Courtesy of St Fagans.

My main takeaways from this period of reflection on the RIB groups & Quilting were the following:

- The women worked together on Quilts; they were the product of many hands
- The group drew it's instructors from its alumni; knowledge/expertise being 'passed down' within a community
- The activity provided some form of employment to the women involved; quilts were sold in London and elsewhere as luxury goods
- Provides a sense of purpose and community

I was struck by how universal many of these themes are to our working lives (be that employed labour or work within the household); the importance of a sense of 'doing' and seeing the results of your actions manifested.

My next step was to take this sense of history with me into the ground work in Aber Valley. There seemed no better place to start than Senghyndd museum, which, luckily, was the space that Undercurrents had organised for me to work from.

ii. Senghenydd Museum

One of the first things you encounter when researching the Aber Valley, be it remotely or in person at the museum, is the Disaster, or *disasters*, given that there were two.

It's hard to imagine the impact these twin events had on the local community. Whilst small, the museum has an impressive collection highlighting those terrible events, but I'm still struck by the sense that they are almost too tragic to grasp. The scale of loss in the second disaster - 439 lives - clearly tore through the community. Not a single person in the valley was untouched by the tragedy and its legacy casts a long shadow over the community even to this day.

Meeting with Jill, the resident organiser of the museum and all round fountain of knowledge, provided me with some more in depth knowledge of the experiences of women left widowed by the 1913 disaster. She described the conditions under which widows must act in order to continue receiving payments on behalf of their deceased partners. Such restrictions included a ban on remarrying or taking of any partner including boyfriends, and the loss of all pension if they moved away to another area or out of the country entirely. There was much consternation in the village when the partners of obviously coupled individuals who had chosen not to marry were prejudiced by the system and told that if there was no official bond of marriage, neither they nor their children were able to receive payments. This was eventually remedied but it left a great deal of mystery and distrust around the management of the fund for the bereaved, including a theory that many thousands of pounds still exist in an account somewhere that nobody knows about and has been forgotten by successive generations of trustees. Time will tell...

This period of concentrated research at the museum allowed me to pursue a lead generated by the St Fagans conversation. Knowing the size of the valley and the enduring links between local families, I was sure that someone locally must remember or even be related to Katy Lewis. My hunch was correct when Undercurrents introduced me to Councillor John Taylor, Katy Lewis' nephew.

I took the opportunity to meet with John and discuss all manner of things related to Katy, quilting and the valley in general. Whilst his memories of Katy were limited to evenings spent in her house with his mother as the two chatted away, he remembered a lively woman who was well known and well liked. He described her as one of the village's great personalities, a real 'character'. He clearly had fond memories of her and even though I was still several steps removed, I could feel an image of this woman becoming clearer and clearer in my mind.

iii. WI

By their own admission, Aber Valley WI are an unusual group. Founded several years ago by a younger group of women, they don't make Jam or sing Jerusalem. They are, however, a collection of dedicated local women who have formed one of the most enduring formalised groups in the local area.

I was made aware of the group early on due to the shared links between the Undercurrents team and their organising committee. These sorts of links can often be a double-edged sword because their inclusion reflects a sort of bias towards the aims of the commissioners rather than the community. That said, the Aber Valley WI presents an exception to this rule, their prominence locally rendering them an interesting subject regardless of their proximity to Undercurrents.

So it was with high hopes that I arranged to meet Aber Valley WI at the Oasis Cafe for what I thought would be a short hour-long conversation about their experience of Gender and Work. Three and a half hours later I left the cafe with an absolute wealth of material and a much better understanding of life in the valley and the many ways in which that can be lived.

Whilst the WI group is self-selecting it boasts a broad array of members from a variety of backgrounds. It's an open organisation, welcoming of outsiders and enthusiastic about new members. I was made to feel very much at home despite the obvious obstacle of my gender. They are a range of ages and aren't shy about disagreeing with each other. There was a healthy display of good humor and they weren't above ridiculing each other and themselves. So far so good.

It's clear that there is a divide between those who were born and raised in the valley and those who have arrived later in life. While the former are in the minority, the divide isn't really remarked on by them. Instead it is the newcomers, even those who have been there for over 20 years, who reference this gap. Clearly one is aware when joining a small community like those in the Aber Valley, or elsewhere in the South Wales Valleys, that you are stepping into a community with close ties and long memories.

What both groups do draw attention to, however, is the more recent waves of newcomers who have settled in the valley due to its proximity to major hubs like Caerphilly and Cardiff and

proliferation of relatively cheap housing. Whilst nobody is outwardly negative about this group, it's clear they have a collective noun: Commuters. On the surface, the Commuters are not unlike the other waves of newcomers to the Valley which, if we go back far enough, must include everyone who arrived with industrialisation and wasn't previously a hill farmer. However, it seems that either through deep cultural shifts or the increase in digitally networked communities, these Commuters haven't integrated into the previous generations as much as would be expected. To what extent this is a fair perception, or agreed on by both sides, is open to debate and certainly requires further investigation, but the fact it exists even as a perception is interesting and reflective of just another real/perceived change in the fabric of the community.

The women of Aber Valley WI add to their impressive list of collective achievements a wide and unusual mix of personal professions. As expected, and remarked on elsewhere, the usual array of teachers, educators and teaching assistants is present and accounted for. I enjoyed regaling the group with stories of the Welsh headmaster at my Somerset secondary school, who held weekly assemblies on the meaning of 'community'. I can still hear his valleys drawl and the curling of his upper lip as he pronounced every syllable 'co-mmun-ity'. It was a powerful word then and its meaning is given new resonance by the women of this WI. So far so usual, you might think. That is until one of the women reveals that her last job was a Roman Reenactor at Caerleon Museum. The past and the present do really live as one.

Recounting the full length and breadth of our meeting is impossible here, and some of the content may be too shocking... However, I'd like to draw attention to several points which stuck with me as I left:

- The importance of collective action. Many of the WI's most successful events were about 'doing' something together. It didn't really matter what the thing was, just that there was an excuse to meet.
- Despite the relatively young membership by WI standards, the group was keen to involve younger members and struggled to attract them.
- They've taken part in their own theatrical endeavours. '*Women of the Valley*', a piece produced and performed by their group, charting the experiences of women affected by the disaster.
- They had a limited knowledge of the RIB quilting groups, but an incredible knowledge of local people & places.

iv. Thursday Club

The Thursday Club is an unusual group. As far as I can tell, and after several enquiries, the organising principle behind the group is that they meet on Thursdays. There is no further requirement for entry, other than a keenness for Fish & Chips, which seems a regular item on the agenda, and the necessity of wearing a knitted flower brooch, which if forgotten incurs a steep fine of approximately 20p. Obviously as a first time attendee I wasn't aware of this requirement. However, one of the regular members subbed me the money and I declared profusely my love for fish and chips. To my disappointment that wasn't on the menu but there were copious homemade cakes, cookies and cups of tea/coffee.

It was obvious that despite prior communication the group had little understanding of why I was there or what I was doing in the area. I often find this to be an advantage when working with new groups as it prevents any assumptions on the part of the group about what you're doing there, and allows you to redefine the purpose and focus of the project every time you describe it.

So it was with this meeting. Much like the WI group, the most enjoyable part of the meeting was getting to the point. As each new person arrived, and as each part of the conversation was relayed to those who'd had difficulty hearing it, the purpose of the meeting drifted further and further away. I embraced this and kept declaring that I was simply there on a fact-finding mission and whatever facts I found were valuable.

The average age of this group seemed older than the WI, and had a greater percentage of those who were born and bred in the valley. This corresponds with their memories of the area and consequently we were quickly in discussions that moved beyond the 70's and 80's into the 50's and 60's. It's clear there is a heyday associated with the valley which unsurprisingly sits alongside the heyday of the Universal Colliery. The group were keen to impart on me the knowledge that Abertridwr high street was once a bustling centre with an array of shops, including dedicated men's and female clothes shops - run by husband and wife respectively - and a range of other small family owned-businesses.

Whilst the group bemoaned the decline in the valley's fortunes post the 1960's, they looked back fondly to the time before it and relished in the memories of that past. One member of the group brought a scrapbook of photographs and images - mostly black and white - which he had collected from sources across the decades. The only thing more beautiful than the images

was the care with which the man had taken care of this visual history. Yet another example, if one was needed, of the ways in which the past can occupy and haunt the present.

Curiously they put to bed the myth that young people leaving the valley was a new trend. In fact, as long as people have lived in the valley they have left the valley, searching for work elsewhere, either in larger UK cities or even abroad. As can be seen from the following extract from *Life in the Aber Valley*:

It was those who were most active in the community who left, the men going ahead to find work, to be followed by their families: Daniel Rees, previously a miners' checkweighman and lodge secretary at the Windsor Colliery, was joined in Australia by his wife and three children: Thomas Pugh, a member of one of the strongest clans in Senghennydd and well established as the manager of the Leigh Hotel, also left for Australia. Others answered advertisements for emigration schemes like those run by the church army for boys and girls. The log of the Girls' School noted the fall in numbers and suggested that it was the 'best type of child' who was leaving.¹⁶

Advertisements appeared offering 'dowries' to young women who took up domestic work in London: the men left Senghennydd for the factories of the Midlands.¹⁷ Someone may even have been sufficiently desperate to answer the advertisement in the *Caerphilly Journal* seeking 'Human Freaks of Nature for Exhibition Purposes'. 'Good wages [were] guaranteed to suitable curiosities' and 'anybody with anything peculiar about them' was asked to write to the proprietor of the freak show.¹⁸ Others suggested even more drastic solutions to the problems of the valleys. Professor Ernest McBride, a zoologist of Imperial College London, argued that defectives who were only capable of unskilled manual work, notably the Irish and Welsh, were overbreeding. In the past this excess would have been killed off by disease and war but in the present circumstances 'there is only one remedy for

The Universal Closes

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the over-production of children that we can see . . . This is compulsory sterilisation as a punishment for parents who have to resort to public assistance in order to support their children'. The professor seems to have been serious unlike Thomas Jones who suggested that the valleys should be evacuated and turned into industrial museums, target practices for the military and vast lakes for tourists. Thomas Jones's ironic suggestions are the closest to realisation.¹⁹

For the middle class there were jobs administering an Empire, which appeared to them to be as solid and timeless as ever. Of the sons of the Reverend D. Lloyd Rees, Captain Herbert Rees was in Ceylon, Stanley Rees was in the Indian Imperial Police, Frederick Rees was in the Nigerian Public Works Board, Thomas Rees was also out in India and Wilfred Rees worked for a company in Cuba.²⁰

Over the years the population of the village slowly halved: it was a slow decline masked at first by the number of births. It was in holiday times, when all the young people returned to their birthplace from London and the Midlands, that it really struck home how many of the younger generation were leaving.²¹ To an outsider the town had an air of death and infinite misery about it. One by one the chapels closed and many of the shops were boarded up. At one stage there was not even a resident doctor in the village since it was the colliery which had underpinned the medical service. The school logbooks contain a repetitive comment: 'attendance still poor. No boots'. In 1929 it was

As made obvious from these passages, it was often young women who left the valley in search of other work. Indicating by their absence that opportunities for employment locally were limited to the Collieries, their supporting and ancillary industries, or labour in the household.

Leaving this group was a different experience, if only because there was a raffle and I won two bags of homemade vegetables. But I was left with a similar set of thoughts:

- The club described the amateur dramatic play competitions that used to be held at the workmen's institute, and how popular they were.
- The sense of freedom they had as children growing up in the valley, how this freedom was facilitated by the previous low levels of traffic
- Many of the group were Christian or had ties to the once numerous - now few - local churches.
- Nobody painted their house white because the soot from the mines would blacken it. They always went to school with dirty knees. The outside toilet was riddled with woodworm.

Alongside these thoughts were some snippets of conversation that played over and over in my head like dialogue from a written text:

"If you kicked one person, everyone jumped"

"You didn't go out, you marry each other"

"I knew everyone on my street. I could name everyone on my street"

"John Taylor makes good Bara Brith"

"We don't speak welsh because so-and-so can't speak welsh"

And finally, the most terrifying question you could be asked...

"Who's your mother?"

V. Jailbird Johnnie

Jailbird Johnnie (1960) is a one act play written by local playwright Eynon E. Evans. It's action follows a quilting group working in an ante-chamber of one of the valley's numerous chapels. It features a group of 7 women, 6 of whom are students and 1 matriarch who leads the group. In it's opening pages the play reflects some of the tensions still present today between incomers and established village characters. It's clear that Eynon was a local boy and his dialogue flows with the authenticity of someone who has lived a lifetime in and around this community. Discovering an existing text in a context like this is so rare and it's inclusion of the quilting groups was too good an opportunity to miss. It was an interesting read to be sure, but to really sing I needed to hear it out loud.

I wanted to end this period of activity with something concrete that could close the chapter on this stage, but also open a chapter on the next. I knew I wanted it to be performative but also include some of those women I'd already met. Given their previously theatrical exploits the Aber Valley WI group seemed like a perfect fit. If nothing else, I missed them. So I asked their chair Debbie if she could corral 8 willing participants. She already had the names and scripts printed. This was turning out to be the most efficient production I'd ever been involved in.



Jailbird Johnnie reading with Aber Valley WI

So, on a darkening September evening that foreshadowed the autumn that would follow, myself, the Aber Valley WI and representatives from Undercurrents and Addo met in the back room of Beulah Baptist Church in Abertridwr for a reading of *Jailbird Johnnie*. After a slow start - is there any other? - the women began reading their respective parts and the text slowly but surely crept into life. There's a beauty in hearing non-trained actors reading texts that speak to where they're from. Somehow the stumbles, fumbles and massive gulfs in confidence only serve to layer the work with new meanings. As they concentrated on delivering their lines and not losing their place in the text, I was able to witness something else happening: the bodies of women moving in sacred space together, albeit with small motions, joined in an act of collective endeavor, producing something that was more than the sum of its parts. Studious, patient, determined, together.

Conclusion

It's clear that in the Aber Valley the past and present are always in conversation, whether they want to be or not.

The lives of local women have changed significantly over that time. Industrialisation brought employment for men, and with it an influx of women, but the majority of work they did was still within the household setting. Members of the Thursday Club still speak admiringly of the competitions between different women to see which household had the whitest sheets come laundry day. Whilst some women had work locally, either in the women's clothes store or other hospitality/customer service roles, the majority did not.

This led to younger women seeking opportunities outside the valley as soon as they were old enough, with many moving to big cities, particularly London, to take on secretarial work, child care or any number of professions open to women at the time. Whilst it's clear that some of this still happens, and the days of sticking so closely to the valley have been lost alongside the opportunities that kept them, I didn't spend enough time with younger women to question where this sits today.

In moving on to the next stage of development, there are several themes I'll carry with me:

- A sense that the community is composed of two distinct and separate groups. Those who participate fully in the local community and 'Commuters'.
- Quilting is a process of combining two layers or elements.
- Collective endeavor based on clear tasks or crafts provides meaning, purpose and a sense of community.
- Nearly everyone is a teacher. Formally or informally.
- Memory and physical action are linked.

I've been painfully aware that the voices of younger women have been missing from this stage and any future work should remedy that. I'm also aware that I've been able to spend less time with the 'Commuter' class and I know, even through informal conversations, that they resent some of the characterisation made of them. Elen Philips at St Fagans has expressed an interest in supporting the project further and I'd like any future work to progress this relationship, possibly with a group visit to examine Katy and Doris' work. It also feels inevitable and necessary that we must quilt.

I'd also like any next steps to include playing with performance. As we've taken our first tentative steps in that direction with the reading of *Jailbird Johnnie* it's clear there is potential in this area, and if we are to attempt drawing two points in time together they must meet at an event. What or when that event is is unknown, but I have the curious feeling it already exists and we are destined to meet it.