



# E-NEWSLETTER DECEMBER 2024

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Published by Roath Local History Society, Cardiff, 2024

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## E-NEWSLETTER EDITOR'S WELCOME

As Christmas approaches, this letter to the Editor of South Wales Daily News, dated 26 December 1892, seems to me to strike an appropriate seasonal tone:

"Sir,

*Having received a cheque for £5, 5s. [Ed. worth £607 today] from Mr James E. Govier, Cardiff Arms Hotel, East Moors, Cardiff, [Ed: located at 63-65 Railway Street, closed in 2013] I wish to publicly thank him, he having generously given this amount for the Roath Christmas dinner to the poor, instead of adopting the custom amongst licensed victuallers in Cardiff of treating their customers to refreshments on Boxing Day. If only others would follow this example, how many poor families. would benefit by it, the dinner being given to all deserving people, irrespective of their religion."*

E.E. Evans (Hon Sec)



**The former Cardiff Arms Hotel as seen today**

The Roath Christmas Dinner gave a Christmas lunch to up to 500 poor children of Roath. The custom of pub landlords giving free drinks to their regulars on Boxing Day, is, to the best of my knowledge, a lost one, but I hope that the spirit of generosity to those in need endures.

It just leaves me to thank all those who have contributed articles throughout the year and to wish all our members and readers Nadolig Llawn a Blwyddyn Newydd Dda.

**Jon Roberts**  
**Newsletter Editor**

# The First Edition of the Western Mail

## Jon Roberts

The first edition of The Western Mail was published on Friday, 1 May 1869 and cost one penny, equivalent to 42p in today's value. It was then aimed at readers in South Wales and the West of England. I thought it might be interesting to look at what was in it.



By way of background, the Western Mail was owned by the Marquess of Bute. He had tried unsuccessfully to buy a rival paper, leaving him with no option but to go it alone. He bought two well-used printing machines from a Plymouth newspaper, together weighing 16 tons, and despatched one of his engineers from the Bute Dock, armed with a hammer and spanner, down to Devon who dismantled the machines and had them shipped to Cardiff. Once they were reassembled and up and running, they realised that they'd have to buy a new one, so the early days of the paper were both troubled and expensive.

The editor was C Warren Adams (said to be 7 foot tall) who lived on Rumney Hill, but he was quickly replaced by 28 year-old Yorkshireman Henry Lascelles Carr, the paper's first sub-editor. In 1877 Carr bought the paper from Bute, and he continued as its editor for the next 30 years. Carr also became co-owner of the News of the World. The general manager was Mr Abel Nadin, who lived in Canton. He signed the first edition as publisher. The newspaper's offices were in St Mary Street and the printing works was in an old salt store near the long-lost Cornish Mount Public House, which I understand to have been at the bottom end of St Mary Street.

So, what was in the first edition? The thing that struck me was that there was relatively little of local Welsh news. Unlike modern newspapers, the front page was devoid of banner headlines and lurid stories about Victorian equivalents of Love Island contestants, or soap stars' love lives. Instead, it was almost wholly devoted to (very small) advertisements for diverse products and services, not least for opportunities to advertise in the new Western Mail. Properties for auction or sale were announced, and those looking to buy 450 tons of hay, a 2 ½ horsepower steam engine, or a complete set of teeth (the best that can be obtained) for only 25 guineas would find their needs met. Fares and timetables for the Cardiff to

Portishead steamer service were also advertised. Public notices included the dates and venues of the Courts Leet, an archaic manorial court under the auspices of the relevant Lord of the Manor (in this case the Marquess of Bute and the Earl of Dumfries), which had few remaining powers by 1869, performing a largely ceremonial role.

Page 2 contained Births, Deaths and Marriages, not from the South Wales region, but from elsewhere in England, perhaps syndicated from other newspapers. The rest of the page was news and included long-winded stories about the composition and training regime of the Glamorgan militia, a report on science and arts classes in Cardiff and reviews of literary works published in magazines and periodicals. These reviews and extracts continued onto page 3.

A letter to the editor also featured, from an anonymous correspondent, complaining about the state of Cardiff's roads - plus ça change! Specifically, the charge was levelled that the Boards of Health were supposed to water the roads, to keep the dust and horse droppings at bay, but it was not being done. The Board of Health blamed the contractors engaged with the task, who were not honouring their contract. Outsourcing as problematic then as it is now! Other stories and anecdotes featured the American Civil War and its aftermath as well as news accounts from around the UK, but none from Wales.

Page 4 continued with advertisements, the times of church services and a long report about proceedings in the House of Commons in respect of the Irish Church Bill, which excited the likes of Mr Gladstone, but makes very dull reading for a modern reader. Another Westminster report was of more local interest, concerning the Newport Harbour Commissioners Bill, whereby the promoters wished to further develop Newport docks. It is only after this that the paper deals with Cardiff news – an evening of recitations was held in Bute Street, a boy was knocked down by a cabbie in Whitmore Lane, a very unfortunate 16 year-old lad fell into the sewer outfall in East Moors, shirt-stealing in Bute Terrace, a policeman assaulted in Wood Street, and another fight involving a desolate-looking militia man.

Another story laid out the facts behind "The Fasting Girl of Llanfihangel-ar-Arth", from Carmarthenshire, who, allegedly, had eaten no food for 18 months. Her parents had invited watchers to attest to the fact that the clearly unwell 12 year-old child had eaten no food. They also claimed that doctors' intervention amounted to ill-treatment. The parents had received donations from people who came to witness the spectacle – seemingly a macabre form of Victorian "reality" show. The case appeared to have no resolution at that stage. In the absence of records of a miracle, I call foul play and the most awful child abuse.

The thing that surprised me about newspapers of this vintage is the sheer quantity of printed material. Those compositors certainly had their work cut out! Few readers would be interested to peruse everything in detail, but even browsing through the news stories would take some hours – the perfect after-dinner pastime in the absence of Coronation Street, Eastenders or The Archers.



## Part 1A: What life in Roath may have looked like before and in the Stone Age

### Les Phillips

There is certain archaeological evidence of what life in Roath would have looked like in the far and distant past so I'm going to add to that much speculation. The unearthing of a full dinosaur skeleton in 2014 on the same beach near Penarth where young Tegan found the footprints of a camelotia dinosaur must surely indicate that those massive herbivores and dracoraptors, meat eating cousins of the T-rex, roamed in the Roath version of Jurassic Park over 200 million years ago.

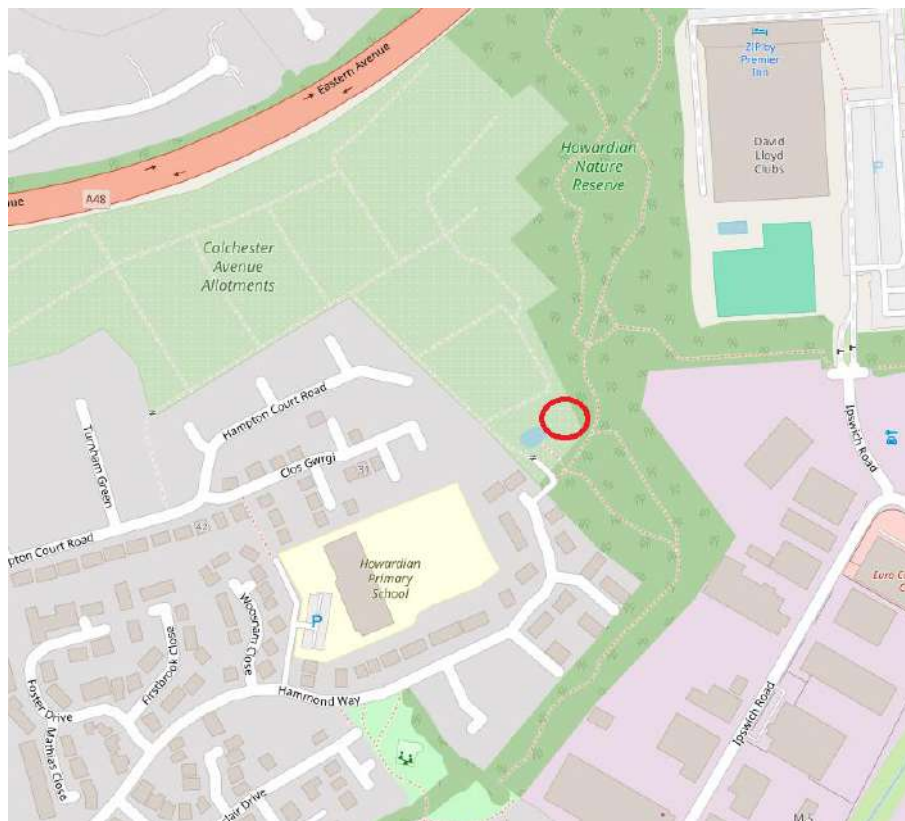


Photograph of dinosaur footprints , with kind permission of [John Walkley on Flickr](#)

The discovery of a large Acheulean axe of the Lower Palaeolithic period with point missing at the Llwyn-y-Grant allotment plot 164 in Pen-y-lan confirmed that Homo Erectus and early Homo Sapiens arrived in Roath somewhere between 1.7 million and 250,000 years ago. That flint axe was used for butchery around 300,00 years before the present. Both the material and its condition suggest that it travelled a considerable distance from the place where it was originally deposited.

The art of preparing slaughtered animals for food appeared in Roath well before the Pring Family Butchers set up shop in Crwys Road and Tariq Halal Meats opened a branch at 104 Albany Road. Extensive excavations at the Boxgrove quarry site in Sussex provided much detail of how early humans, Homo Heidelbergensis, butchered a large horse 480,000 years ago. "The Horse Butchery Site" published by UCL Archaeology South East's "Spoilheap Publications" a ground-breaking book. Perhaps representative of the work of Neil the Butchers' ancestors before they moved to Llanedeyrn. Jest aside, there is much evidence to suggest eating out as a very social matter for those very early

inhabitants of Roath. The belief that the Pen-y-lan axe came from afar may also indicate that extensive trading took place in the Lower Palaeolithic. Possibly Roath representing the first market place in what was to become a suburb of Cardiff. Long before Cardiff Central Market and Ashton's appeared on the scene.



**Map showing the approximate position of the 300,000 year old Penylan axe head find**

Map credit: ©  
OpenStreetMap  
Data available under the  
[Open Database Licence](#)

There is also sound archaeological evidence of the Mesolithic period in South Wales in the years 10,000-5,500 BP. The find of an end scraper of white patinated grey flint at Roath Park was believed to have been of pre-neolithic character. A small group of late Mesolithic flints were

discovered as surface finds at Cefn Rhos Gair in the Rhondda Cynon Taff area by forestry worker, Phil Shepherd, better known as The Flint Finder of Wales, who has collected many finds over 25 years. They were dated by the National Museum of Wales from 7,500-4,000 BP and were believed to have been left behind by a hunter who had been making a spear.

Footprints were also discovered at Port Eynon on the Gower Peninsula believed to be those of a Mesolithic hunting party. So I think we can safely assume that those hunter gatherers also roamed what became Roath. As the sea level rose and the coastline retreated in Mesolithic times those gatherers would have had ready access to the fruits of the Bristol Channel. What they gathered would not have been their sole source of food. (Sorry, no pun intended!) In that period the climate was warmer and damper and much of the landscape was heavily wooded with oak, elm, birch and hazel trees. There would have also been a few of the conifers that are now associated with today's Welsh forests. There can be no doubt in my mind that the Mesolithic people did their hunting and gathering in what became Roath probably also going about their work in other parts of what became Cardiff and further afield in Glamorgan. They were an itinerant lot.

Whilst there is much evidence of Neolithic activity in Cardiff West at Caerau and in the Vale there is no archaeological evidence for activity of that period in Roath in that late Stone Age era. There are many theories about the origins of the word "Roath". Before the Normans arrived what became Roath was variously referred to as Raz, Raht, Rad, Rahat, Rottie and Rothe as told by the RLHS. The most popular explanation is that it derives from the ancient Gaelic word, "Rath" or "Raath" which



means an earthwork or enclosure with surrounding rampart. Possibly there was a motte and bailey in Roath but if we stretch speculation could it refer to a Neolithic causewayed enclosure such as at Caerau, Ely? The late 19th century housing development that took place in Roath could well have removed any trace of such an enclosure. Setting aside conjecture it is most likely that it refers to an enclosure established around Norman times possibly located in Plasnewydd. Or on the site occupied by Roath Court Funeral Home once the location of Roath Manor.

What there can be no doubt about is that the Neolithic period saw the introduction of agriculture into the British Isles. Roath in those times must have been very attractive to those early farmers. Much later Robert Fitzhammon gave much of his newly acquired land in Glamorgan to his followers but kept Roath for himself. He established Roath Manor as the "home farm" for the Castle. Later a mill for grinding corn was built nearby close to St Margaret's parish church. Even later in 1841 Roath was made up of a few farmsteads. So I believe it highly likely that Neolithic farmers

were at work in the Roath area. The find of the upper part of the skull of an Auroch when Roath Power Station was being built could support my belief that farming was taking place in Roath some 6,000 to 4,200 years ago.



#### **Auroch bull skeleton from Denmark**

Photo credit: Vig [CC BY-SA 2.0](#)

In sum what is now Roath could well have been a very active area in prehistoric times when dinosaurs roamed the land, the ancestors of homo sapiens introduced butchery into the area, Mesolithic people hunted and gathered and the Neolithic people practised agriculture. Although the late Stone Age period may not have always been a peaceful time. Perhaps one day excavation may add more.

In Part 2, which I hope will be ready for the January Newsletter, I'll cover my understanding of the archaeology of Cardiff and nearby areas from the Bronze Age to the coming of the Romans.



## Alec Keir founder member of the RLHS – a memoir

We have recently been sent a copy of Alec Keir's personal memoirs and permission to share them with a wider audience. Here is the link to the relevant page on the RLHS website: [‘My Life Story’ by Alexandre Joseph William Keir](#) / The memoir provides a fascinating insight into Alec's early life and should interest anyone with an interest in local and social history.



The memoir recounts Alec's families' origins, his school days in the 1930s, work in the Civil Service and wartime experiences in Cardiff, Yorkshire, Scotland and St Athan.

It ends with some extracts from a BBC Mass Observation Project carried out in 1937, when the 16 year-old Alec recorded his day to day activities. There is also a link to a radio recording made by BBC Wales in 2008 about Alec's diaries.

Left: A photo of Alec Keir in his RAF uniform, taken 3 days after his 20<sup>th</sup> birthday

Jeff Childs, RLHS Life President, has kindly provided us with an introduction to the memoir:

*Alexandre Joseph William Keir (or 'Alec' to his Roath Local History Society colleagues) founded the society in November 1978, solidly supported at the outset by his work colleague, Gerry Penfold. I first met Alec a few months later, in February 1979, when I attended my first meeting of the society, then held at Albany Road Junior School. Later that year, he and I formed part of the first cohort of students to undertake a diploma in local history under the aegis of the Department of Extra Mural Studies of University College Cardiff. It was a most enjoyable course, where the members gelled extremely well and I really came to appreciate the importance of primary source material. Both Alec and I took the ecclesiastical parish of Roath as the subject of our respective dissertations,*

where I concentrated on seventeenth and eighteenth century probate records and Alec focused on late nineteenth-century urban development. Alec's study



was extremely valuable, particularly its forensic examination of street formation, most of its findings being reproduced in RLHS's Project Newsletters which Alec so skilfully compiled and edited, and which can now be viewed online via the society's website. His dissertation also helped me considerably when putting together the two separate volumes on Roath, Splott and Adamsdown in 1995 and 2012. As diploma students we hit it off very well and I remember with affection the two journeys we made to Gregynog for local history summer schools as well as visits to the National Library of Wales, Gwent Record Office and Dyffryn House.

The excellence of Alec's writing shines through in his memoirs and diary extracts. They are a perfect blend of seriousness and amusing anecdote with the strong attention to detail and

accuracy which were among his hallmarks. The quality of the reproductions is also very high and I recall clearly him mentioning his Bellisario relations and showing me the great photograph of James Keir, his paternal grandfather, outside his jeweller's (etc) establishment in Castle Arcade, Cardiff, which appears in his recollections. Alec's formative years, covering his education, his early working life, his intellectual pursuits and the war years are also captured vividly in the memoirs with some amazing recall of events during his school years and the places where he was stationed, particularly in Scotland.

I had the highest regard for Alec and valued his friendship and advice immensely. It is most fitting that his memoirs, kindly made available through his son, Donald, will now appear in the newsletter and elsewhere on the society's website.

## FORTHCOMING EVENTS

Elizabeth Morgan, RLHS Programme and Events Organiser

### ROATH LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

**WEDNESDAY, 11<sup>TH</sup> DECEMBER**

**SIMON OSBORNE**

*Actor & Historian, presents ...*

### **THE CREATION OF DICKENS' A CHRISTMAS CAROL**



This costumed, historical performance, will discuss themes that include: How Dickens came to create the characters he wrote about. The success of the book, and its lasting impact on people's thinking. Victorian Britain, and ideas about Christmas we still follow.

**SAINT EDWARD'S MUSIC & ARTS CENTRE**

Pop-up Christmas Café opens at 7.00pm.

Presentation begins at 7.30pm.

**ALL WELCOME!**

For live stream Zoom link, please apply to:

**[RLHSZoom@gmail.com](mailto:RLHSZoom@gmail.com)**

*no later than Monday 9<sup>th</sup> December*

**GUESTS in-person, or online £3.00**

**ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP £13.00**





## OTHER LOCAL HISTORY LINKS

### Rumney and District



### Local History Society

Their meetings are held at 7:30pm on the second Thursday of every month (excepting January and August) at Rumney Baptist Church Hall, Tyr-Y-Sarn Road, Rumney, CF3 3BD.

The annual subscription is £20 and visitors can pay £3 per meeting. Their next meeting, on 12 December 2024 features a film on Llandaff and St Fagans with Ian Malcolm.

Find the Rumney and District Local History Society on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/rumneyhistory>

### The British Association for Local History

The Roath Local History Society is a member of the British Association for Local History. Their website [www.balh.org.uk/](http://www.balh.org.uk/) offers a varied collection of local history stories, 10-minute videos and loads of helpful ways of researching local history. Some is of general relevance, but there are also pieces on very specialised subjects. Have a look at back issues of *The Local Historian* at

<https://www.balh.org.uk/thelocalhistorian> . Members of the BALH are also entitled to a discount on courses. If you'd like the code to obtain the discount, please email me.





## GET IN TOUCH

For newsletter submissions contact:

Jon at [RLHSEditor@gmail.com](mailto:RLHSEditor@gmail.com)

To request loans from the R.L.H.S. Archive, contact:

Geraint at [Denison-Kurg@outlook.com](mailto:Denison-Kurg@outlook.com) or on (029) 2048 8358.

For membership, contact:

Lyn at [RoathLocalHist@yahoo.com](mailto:RoathLocalHist@yahoo.com) or on 07975 751807

For events and programming enquiries, contact:

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Ted at [RoathHistoryWebsite@gmail.com](mailto:RoathHistoryWebsite@gmail.com).