

Legend which spread from ... Butter Hill!



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Those of us who have self-indulgently lollled our lives away amid the seductive splendours of the Premier County have almost invariably been loyally ready to proclaim for our native heath some link with distinction.

Those parents who, during the 1920s, occupied the neighbouring hamlets on the Burton-Llangwm parish boundary were certainly not reluctant to do that. Often enough for it to be recalled later, when their restless offspring railed against the banality of their surroundings, they would proudly insist that no less a person than Arthur Mee had once been a regular and contented visitor to Guildford House, Butter Hill.

Unlike most claims which are either true or false, this assertion managed to be both.

Butter Hill was originally a farm of smallholding proportions, which extended from the Turnings (the corner below the renamed Honey Hook Farm) to Guildford Bridge, and which was part of the Williamston estate of the Phillips – turned Scourfields.

TENANCY

For over 50 years, the tenants of the farm were successive members of the Randell family, three of whom are buried near the main door of Burton Church.

During the mid-19th century, probably soon after the death of 52-year-old Sarah Randell on December 2nd, 1854, the tenancy was taken up by a couple from outside the district.

The new arrivals were James, a former farm bailiff, and Letitia Phillips, who had been married by special licence at Wiston Church on February 7th, 1833. They had previously resided at Cleddauside, Boulston, near Haverfordwest, the birthplace of at least two of their three children – Elizabeth (1834), Henry (1838) and Mary Ann (1841).



Guildford House, Butter Hill, taken in 1950 by Mrs Margaret Sanzovo, who with her late husband Guido, was the tenant for nearly 40 years.

Very quickly, the family became actively involved in the affairs of the first Galilee Chapel, which in April 1831 had opened on a site (now the Chapel car park), which had once been part of the farm.

The younger of the two daughters developed into one of those worthy Victorian spinsters, who was splendidly devoted to family obligations and zealously committed to religious and philanthropic objectives.

Widely respected as 'Miss Phillips of Butter Hill' by a population which was too deferential ever to resort to her Christian name, Mary Ann became known to the wider public through the hugely popular Sunday School anniversaries which she organised at the chapel.

With the death of her mother, the sole running of the house devolved upon her, and since she had only her father to take care of, she was able to accept the 23-year-old Rev David Owen Davies, the Dowlais-born and Manchester-trained minister, as a lodger.

In spite of the relative brevity of his ministry (1881-82), the Rev Davies ensured for himself a significant niche in the annals of the Llangwm community.

He officiated at the funeral of David Herbert, a Main Street naval pensioner, on December 4th, 1881, and in so doing he became the first Nonconformist minister to conduct the interment rites in the new Anglican Park Way (Cemetery Road) graveyard.

Though she had a brother living in Burton, the death of her father in 1888 obliged the Butter Hill spinster to live in not very splendid isolation. It was probably not so much developing feminist convictions as the desire to discover a more positive role in life which prompted her to contest the first Burton Parish Council elections in April 1886, as a Liberal candidate.

She received a very creditable 51 votes, but her achievement of 16th position out of 21 placed her among the non-elected.

But it is not the curriculum vitae of Mary Ann, but that of her sister which sheds light on the Arthur Mee trail. It was she who married George Samuel Mee, the first son of a Carmarthenshire farmer, who, after a brilliant academic career at Glasgow University, became the minister of a Baptist Church in Aberdeen.

His conspicuous talent for pulpit rhetoric secured for him a considerable following, and he was referred to at some length by Sir Robertson Nicoll in his 'Life of James Macdonald.'

The union of Elizabeth and George was blessed with a son Arthur Mee, who was born in the Granite City on October 21st, 1860. The father's health was never robust, and it was this which prompted him to abandon the pulpit for journalism.

After a period in the North of England, working as the editor of 'The Bradford Observer', he moved to Llanelli where he became editor and part proprietor of a local newspaper before his death on November 27th, 1876.

Their son, Arthur Mee, seriously considered the medical profession, before he opted for journalism prior to his marriage with Claudia the daughter of David Thomas, of Llanelli. In 1892, the couple moved to Cardiff, where they took up residence at Llanishen.

For the rest of his working life, this Arthur Mee was a regular contributor to the 'Western Mail' in a range of capacities, especially as 'Idris' in the 'Wales Day by Day' columns.



The re-named 'Butterhill House', Llangwm, in January 1983 after it had been tastefully and extensively renovated by the present owners, Mr and Mrs N. Watts.

SCIENTIFIC

Far from being a run-of-the-mill reporter, he became such a high profile figure in the public life of the Principality that he was awarded a considerable entry in 'Who's Who in Wales' for 1920. A more than

talented dilettante, he was interested in such diverse subjects as astronomy, Welsh antiquities, genethliacal astrology, and Esperanto, and he was the author of several books and pamphlets on themes extracted from a wide spectrum of study.

A member of the British and French Astronomical Societies, he wrote articles for a range of erudite scientific magazines which included 'Knowledge', 'The English Mechanic', and the B.A.A. Journal and Transactions.

There is no doubt that this was the Arthur Mee who spent many extended holidays with his mother's family at Butter Hill during the second half of the 19th century. The name lingered in the local consciousness, and it is very understandable that later generations confused Arthur Mee, the outstanding journalist, with the famous encyclopaedist.

For the record, the latter – Arthur Henry Mee (1875-1943) – was the second of ten children of Henry Mee, a railway fireman, of Stapleford, Nottinghamshire, and his wife Mary. After his marriage to Amelia Fratson of East Cottingwith, Yorkshire, in 1897, he moved to Kent which was to be his adopted county.

His 'Children's Encyclopaedia' appeared in fortnightly instalments after 1908, and he devoted much of his last twelve years to his 'Kings of England' series.

The Butter Hill Arthur Mee legend outlived the Phillips occupation of the farm for at least 20 or 30 years. By July 1910, the tenancy had passed to George Barnett, a native of Burton Hawn and a carpenter on the Williamston estate and his wife Mary (nee Morgans), whose brother and two sisters lived at Orchard Row, Guildford.

The likelihood is that they bought the farm when, after the death of landlord Sir Owen Scourfield, in February 1921, the Williamston estate came on the market.

Unfortunately, the death of 58-year-old George, on March 10th, 1925, left his widow with the impossible task of running the unit. After 1930, the fields were rented to the neighbouring Mr George Scale, of the Barn Farm, and several young couples began their married lives living in rooms at Guildford House.

With the death of the stocky, bespectacled 86-year-old 'Auntie Mary', on August 21st, 1949, Butter Hill, the house and the fields, were purchased by the late Mr W. G. Thomas, who renamed the Barn Farm 'Honey Hook'.

It was during 1951 that a revision of the boundary, somewhat controversially coinciding with the installation of the sewerage system in the district, transferred Guildford, including Butter Hill, to the Llangwm Parish. By such time, Arthur Mee had been forgotten ... almost!

W, Grenville Thomas, 1996