

MADAME DESPARD

Llanidloes has a fine tradition for radical politics, support for the 19th century Chartist movement being perhaps the best known. The 20th century saw a strong Labour Party movement here but being a small town with everyone relying on each other for support, many social and welfare needs came from within the community long before they were installed as a matter of national policy. We have indeed read in previous editions of PenCambria, about the War Memorial Hospital inaugurated in 1921 and the Llanidloes Social Services Male Voice Choir created in 1928. From the 1970s there has been a firmly established environmental movement which maintains a keen interest in matters varying from the promotion of green energy to the dumping of nuclear waste. Llanidloes is renowned as a place that will produce a lively debate and spirited defence to anyone who wishes to introduce a controversial policy about which Idloesians feel strongly. The prospective closure of the hospital and the installation of the tetra mast are but the latest in a long line of spirited campaigns.

In December 1912 Llanidloes hosted a "Votes for Women" meeting at Bethel Hall to hear the guest speaker Charlotte Despard, who was one of the leading suffragettes, state the case for 'Women's Suffrage'. However, while the large crowd lived up to the town's reputation for outspokenness, a vociferous number did not add to its credit in this tradition. Of the principals at this meeting, Charlotte Despard was a friend of the Pankhursts and a sister of John French, Earl of Ypres 1852-1925, who was in supreme command of the British Expeditionary Force in France in 1914-15. Unlike her brother, Charlotte Despard (1844-1939) was a social reformer, socialist and pacifist.

Edward Powell, at whose invitation Mrs Despard came to Llanidloes, was a Newtown solicitor who was son-in-law of the Conservative M.P. Sir Pryce Jones. He was Liberal in politics, had been a candidate in two general elections and he was a strong advocate of women's rights. He was related to the noted Chartist Thomas Powell of Newtown (1802-1862) and uncle of the late film critic Dilys Powell. He it was who owned one of Montgomeryshire's first cars and his initials EP became the Montgomeryshire car registration code for many years.

Mr. A.E. Humphreys-Owen was the son of Montgomeryshire's Liberal MP Humphreys-Owen of Glan Severn, Berriew. He represented the county as such, from 1890 until his death in 1905. He owned much landed property in the county. As chairman of this meeting, he bore the brunt of all the unruly behaviour.

Mr Jones Williams was a well-known figure in Llanidloes, a prominent Wesleyan Methodist living in a Garden Suburb. He was an excise officer.

Bethel Hall, in Bethel Street, was once a large Methodist chapel but from 1872 it was a large public hall where meetings of many kinds were held. Best known latterly as Benbows, from the 1920s until the 1990s it was a large ironmongery business where you could get just about everything.

Below is a transcription of the report of the meeting and the editorial comment that appeared in the Montgomeryshire Express, 6th December 1912.

VOTES FOR WOMEN MEETING AT LLANIDLOES Duel between Mrs Despard and the Galleryites

The noisy attentions of suffragettes at meetings of Liberal Ministers on all occasions have long rankled in the minds of Idloesians. In Bethel Hall, on

Thursday Night, Mrs Despard had to undergo similar treatment, which caused her to leave the platform in a fit of temper. Suffragettes don't "go down" at Llanidloes, and even after listening to a strong speech in favour of Women's Suffrage from Mr. Edward Powell, and some emotional remarks at the tail end of the meeting, the majority were not convinced of the efficacy of "votes for women" towards alleviating all the social evils which beset the country and its inhabitants.

At the height of an election a leading Liberal orator could not have attracted a larger crowd at Llanidloes than was packed into Bethel Hall on Thursday night. It was the event of the week and was looked forward to with great interest. The large audience was divided into two portions on the floor pacific, in the gallery turbulent. The latter portion, early on, gave evidence of their jubilant spirits in snatches of the "Land Song" and "Down the Strand", and it was plain that trouble was brewing here for the chief speaker.

Mr. A.E. Humphreys-Owen ascended the platform at 8.20, and was greeted with cheers and cries from the gallery of "Why didn't you come alone?" and "What did you want to bring her with you for?" He was followed by Mrs. Despard and immediately the cheers turned to jeers, hoots and groans, with counter-cheers from a small body of suffragettes on the floor. Mr. and Mrs. Edward Powell afterwards came up on the platform, and were warmly cheered. Mr. Humphreys-Owen rose to speak, when a man approached the platform, and asked him if he was in favour of women having votes. Amid cries of "sit down" and "turn him out", the man kept repeating the question, when Mr. Humphreys-Owen called out "Are you the chairman or am I?" Three or four men attempted to remove the interrupter and were rewarded with cries from the gallery of "Let him alone", "Leave him alone, baldhead" and many other such sallies. The interrupter would not budge.

Mr. Humphreys-Owen, in the course of a lengthy non-committal speech, made himself heard with great difficulty, owing to the growing tumult in the gallery. After referring to Mr. Churchill's visit to Belfast, and drawing a parallel between that and his visit to Llanidloes that night, he said he had never heard of a man shouting at a lady if he had never heard her before. Everybody was in favour of the principle of giving votes for women. They knew that they had them for school board and county council elections, so that that question was settled. He dealt at length with the present unsatisfactory state of the register, and expressed himself in favour of manhood suffrage on a broad basis. In conclusion, he said they must see they did not get too many smart ladies on the register, but must get a good many of the ladies who worked for their living (applause). He then called upon Mrs Despard to address the meeting.

This was the signal for a tremendous uproar in the gallery. Hooting, caterwauling and singing was continued without a break for some considerable time, Mrs Despard meanwhile standing by a table holding in her hand a piece of paper containing the resolution she was there to move and support. She tried to make herself heard above the tumult. "The resolution I have here is of great interest -". Beyond this she failed to go. Mr. Humphreys-Owen appealed for order, and he said he would not allow anyone to speak until they had heard Mrs. Despard. The response was "Send her home,, "We don't want her," and

"Go home, ma." During a lull in the storm, Mrs Despard essayed again to speak. She said "I will leave the resolution for a few moments, and speak to you as friend to friend. It seems to me rather an extraordinary thing that you are not prepared to listen to reason" (cries of "Oh, what about Mr. Churchill at Belfast?"). At this juncture the names of two young men in the gallery were handed to the Chairman, who announced that there was trouble brewing for them. This exposure made matters much worse, and their companions in the gallery urged them to wait upon the Chairman for an apology. This they were not long in doing, and their presence on the platform was greeted with resounding cheers. Mrs Despard had to wait while they gesticulated in front of the Chairman for a few minutes. After they had left the platform and regained their point of vantage in the gallery, Mrs Despard renewed her effort to get a hearing. "This subject I am going to speak about is Parliamentary representation." A few sentences she managed to put together, when the cries were renewed in the gallery and the singing of the "Land Song". Mrs Despard defiantly shouted to the gallery, "No, I won't speak about that." After the strains of the song had died down, she again attempted to speak. She had gone a little way when "cheers for Lloyd George" drowned her remarks. Hisses and groans filled the hall, and some gentlemen went up and appealed for order, and to advise Mrs Despard to "give up the ghost." Shaking her hands up and down, she frantically shouted, "No, I will not be put down. I won't, I won't." Renewed cries from the gallery greeted this outburst, and Mrs Despard unceremoniously left the platform. Mr Jones Williams, rising in the body of the hall, made a strong appeal for order. Mr Edward Powell, in a very polished and peacemaking speech, restored order, and at the end of his remarks, made an appeal for a hearing for Mrs Despard. She afterwards spoke for a short time and had a good hearing. Votes of thanks concluded the meeting.

SUFFRAGETISM AT LLANIDLOES (Editorial Comment)

While strongly deprecating the indefensible behaviour to which Mrs Despard was subjected at Llanidloes on Friday evening, we are not altogether surprised, nor are we inclined to profess righteous anger with a demonstration of what, after all, was not an unnatural protest against the unwomanly conduct of militant suffragettes. Mrs Despard is certainly not one of the shrieking sisterhood whose brutality has, to some extent, defamed womanhood, but her public appearance cannot very easily be disassociated from the memory of female hooliganism which has drawn the blood of ministers even favourable to their cause, has smashed up meetings organised for charitable purposes, and otherwise indulged in a saturnalia of vicious lawlessness disgraceful and disgusting beyond description. The respectful hearing offered to Mr Humphreys-Owen and Mr Edward Powell is a clear interpretation of that protest, which Mr Jones Williams sought to reprove with an admirable display of piety, but with an equally cool disregard of all that prompted it. Nothing can warrant maltreatment of any woman, but since human nature has its limits, it was clearly folly on the part of the organisers of that meeting to deliberately court the inevitable.

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