

# **Cwmbyr Uchaf**

## **A Lost Farmstead on Mynydd Medart, Risca**



## **A History**

1750 -2014

Robert Jeffrey Southall

**Dedicated to Dai Davies (1922-2003), the last tenant of  
Cwmbyr Farm**

**Cover painting 'A View of Cwmbyr Farm' courtesy of Mrs Joyce Davies of  
Crosskeys all other photos credited.**

**Plan and description of Cwmbyr Uchaf © 2020 Paul R Davis used with  
permission**

**Text Copyright © RJ Southall 2020**

# **Cwmbyr Uchaf, a lost farmstead on Mynydd Medart**

## **Introduction**

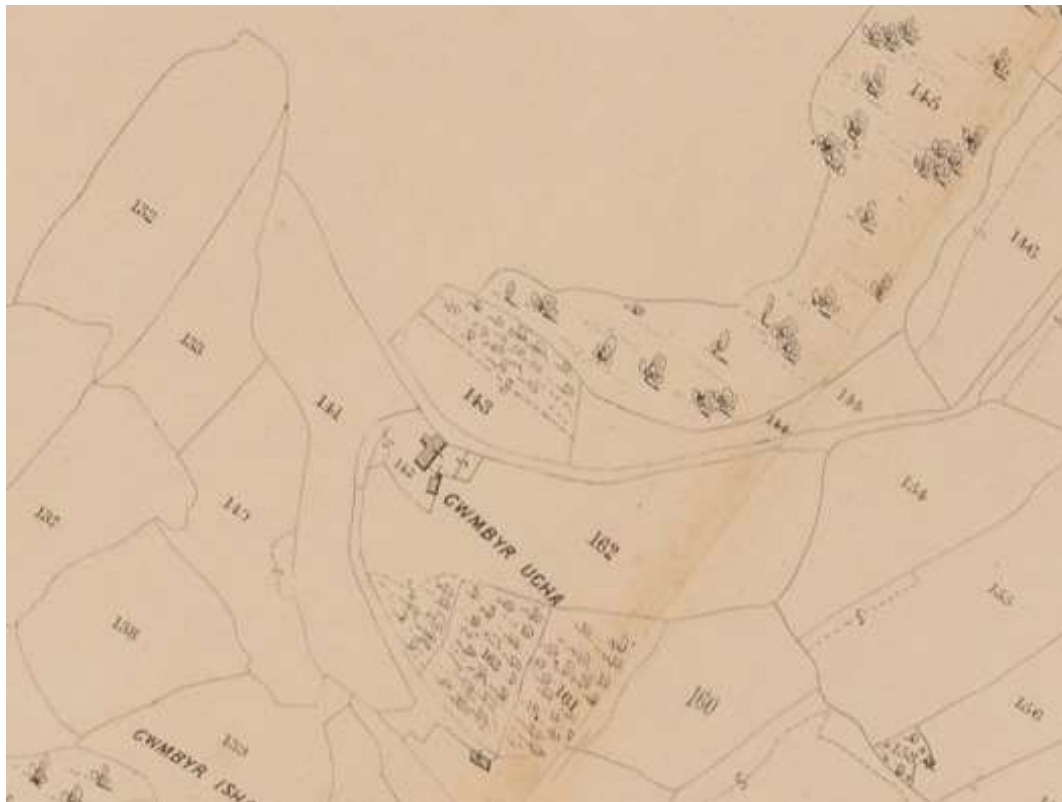
Mynydd Medart (summit 384m, ST 2350 9290) forms the terminal point of the Mynydd Maen ridge, which starts with Mynydd Llwyd in the north and includes Mynydd Twyn Glas, Mynydd Henllys and Twmbarlwm. The Medart Mountain extends from a point near old Cwmcarn farm at the bottom of Pegwyn y Bwlch in the Nant Carn valley, down to the top end of North Road Pontywaun and from there following the Crumlin arm of the Brecon and Monmouthshire canal down as far as Wysom's Wharf on Darran Road, where it terminates at the stream. It is delineated in the north by the Nant Carn, in the west by the Ebbw and in the south by the original channel of the Nant Darran. Osborne & Hobbs (1999) believe that the name Medart is of ancient origin and may be derived from a Welsh personal name. They note that

...the following name-forms have been recorded: Medarth (C14) and (1679) Meadarth (1654) and Medart (1814). Since Medarth appears to be the original form, a derivation from Welsh (g)arth 'hill' might have been anticipated. However, the *Vita Sancti Cadoci* (Life of St. Cadwg) refers to Medgarth apparently as a personal name, i.e.: 'the court of Medgarth with the homestead of Medgarth' and 'the plain of Medgarth', and the name Medgarth is also mentioned by Doble in his *Lives of the Welsh Saints*. Nothing appears to be known about Medgarth, but this personal name seems to be that from which the name of the local mountain, Medart, appears to have been derived. Medgarth has become Medart, by loss of g, in the same way in which Gwengarth, a name also found in the *Vita Cadoci* and in the *Llandaff Charters*, in more modern Welsh becomes Gwengarth (cf *Llanwenarth*).' (Osborne & Hobbs (1999) *Note On The Names And Locations Of Two Granges Of Llantarnam Abbey: Makenel (Machenlleth) And Torald*)

The small valley known as 'Cwm Byr', Welsh for 'short valley', is a dingle which lies on the west side of Mynydd Medart. The Nant Cwmbyr emerges from a spring located just below the forest road at grid reference ST 22967 92295 and after only about 300/400 yards the valley through which it passes terminates abruptly and the brook runs through fields before joining the Crumlin arm of the Mon & Brec Canal.

There were once at least two ancient farmsteads situated in this cwm, or side valley: Cwmbyr Uchaf (ST 2349208), which we will look at in this paper; and another smaller farmstead at Cwmbyr Isha which was lower down the hillside and on the north side of the brook. In addition to these farmsteads there was once a cottage, or small house, on the same side of the stream as Cwmbyr Uchaf but lower down the hill side

not far across the small valley from Cwmbyr Isha. This was just off the track up to the farm but its existence in the distant past is now only confirmed by the name of the field in which it was situated, Cae'r Hendy (old house field). This old house may already have been unoccupied and partially ruined by the time of the Risca tithe map was drawn up in 1842



**Fig. 1 Cwmbyr Uchaf (Ucha) from the Risca tithe map of 1842 (Source: NLW)**

## **A History of Cwmbyr Uchaf**

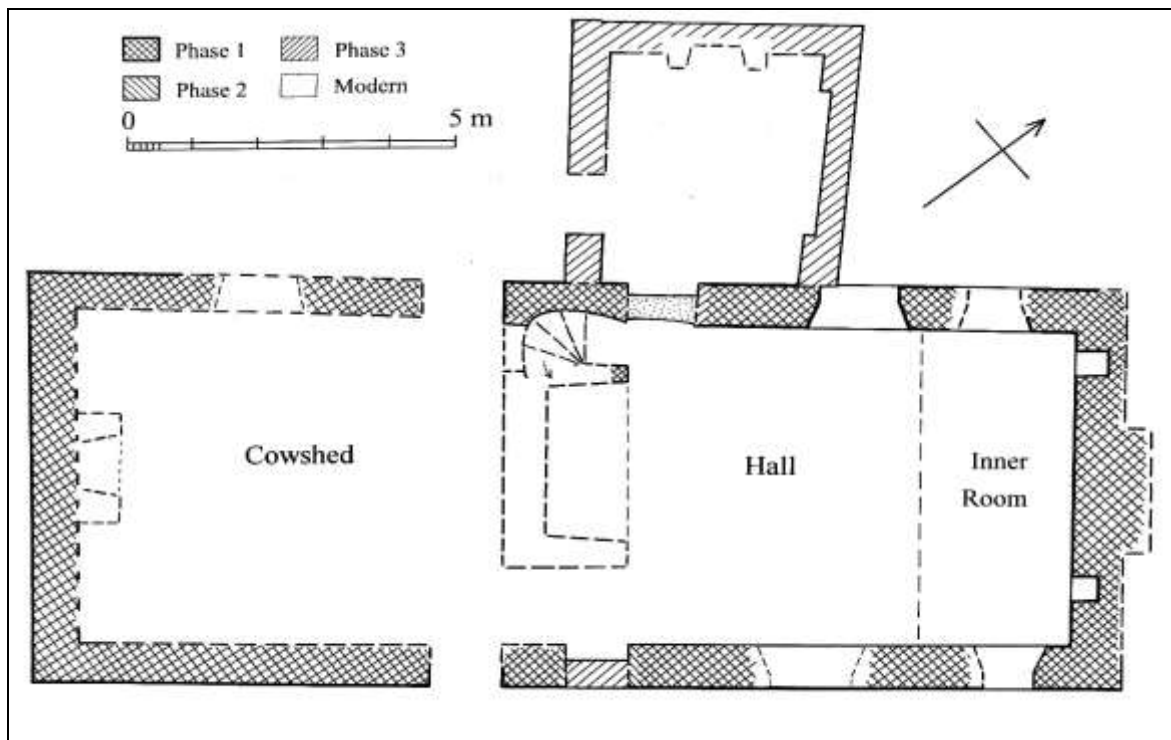
Cwmbyr Uchaf (or Ucha) was known as Cwmbyr farm and was popularly referred to as 'the Deaf and Dumb' by local people, in reference to William Edwin Roberts and his elder sister Sarah Ann, who resided there in the first half of the twentieth century. Both brother and sister were deaf and dumb.

The farmstead is thought to have been a Welsh longhouse (Davis 1992), quite possibly dating from the mid seventeenth century. Paul Davis (1992/2020) describes it as follows:

A long-ruined farmstead on a shelf between steep slopes on the east side of Cwm Byr, Risca. All the buildings have been reduced to rubble with some wall faces visible, and (apart from the house) their function is unclear. The abundance of brick indicates some may be modern. The plan on page 5 was based on a survey carried out in 1992, supplemented with details shown on paintings by Joyce Davies of Crosskeys, presumably done before the house was demolished.

The farmhouse consists of a large downhill-sited range comprising a cowshed, hall and inner room in line. A later cross-wing has been added on one side. This was probably a kitchen as it has a gable fireplace, and was built before 1843 since it is shown on the tithe map. Cwmbyr was evidently a longhouse and the cross-passage entry way was still detectable, but the ruined state makes it impossible to say if the house and cowshed were contemporary, or whether the latter was an addition. The paintings show that it had a lower roofline to the house, and that it had been converted into domestic use as a thin chimney is shown on the lower gable. The original entry into the house was presumably through the end gable wall beside the fireplace, but this part was buried under a heap of rubble. There is a blocked lobby entrance in the front wall (but though this could well be a later modification to the original plan). Beside the fireplace are traces of a stone winding stair to the upper floor, part way up and this had a doorway broken through to access the cowshed loft. Another doorway had been cut through the side wall to access the kitchen wing, although it also had its own entrance from the yard.

The length of the hall and position of windows suggests there was an inner room (or more likely a pair of rooms) at the upper end. There are two stone-lined wall cupboards in the gable wall, which also had a projecting stack to support a first-floor fireplace. It is impossible to suggest a date for the ruin as no diagnostic features remain, though the size, thickness of the walls and the projecting chimney stack might point towards the earlier seventeenth century.



**Fig. 2 Plan of the layout and development of Cwmbyr Uchaf longhouse. Phase one may have started as early as 1600 (© 2020 Paul R Davis)**

The farmstead certainly existed in the middle of the eighteenth century as Roberts (1986) in 'A View from the Hill' describes early Baptist meetings held at the farm.

The indefatigable Miles Harry of Penygarn also continued to hold occasional services at Risca, and he could be remembered by old inhabitants, years later, preaching in the house of John Thomas at Cwmbyr, under Twm Barlwm. (JHA Roberts 'A View from the Hill' 1986 page 45).



**Fig 3. Travelling non-conformist preachers commonly visited farms to preach between the seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries. Sometimes they travelled on foot and at other times on horseback. (Source: pinterest.com)**

### **About Miles Harry**

**HARRY, MILES** (1700 - 1776), Baptist minister; b. in Bedwellty parish, Mon., of good yeoman family, on 1 Jan. 1700. He was baptized at Blaenau Gwent in 1724 and ordained there in 1729; in 1731 he was appointed assistant to his brother, JOHN HARRY, minister of the church. In 1732 he became the first minister of Pen-y-garn, Pontypool, and he held the charge until his death on 1 Nov. 1776; there too he was buried.

Miles Harry was probably the outstanding Welsh Baptist minister of his time, and a man of note in public life. His strong personality, vigorous mind and tireless energy made him widely influential. Religion was his primary concern, and for its propagation he spent his strength and substance. A popular preacher and powerful Baptist apologist, he was a liberal, independent thinker in theology, treading a middle path between High Calvinism and Arminianism. He established several new churches; helped to found and to supervise the Trosnant Baptist Academy; promoted the setting-up at Pontypool (1740-2) by Samuel and Felix Farley, Bristol, of the first

printing press in Monmouthshire; wrote countless letters to London and elsewhere in the Baptist interest. It was chiefly through his efforts that Howel Harris, when charged with causing a riot at Pontypool, was acquitted at the Monmouth Assizes in Aug. 1739. He collaborated with his brother John Harry and with John Phillips in a Welsh version (1725) of Alleine's *Some Discoveries*. He has had no biographer, but his successor at Pen-y-garn, David Jones (1741 - 1792) (q.v.), wrote an elegy: 'Marwnad y Parchedig Mr. Miles Harries o Drosnant' (Carmarthen, 1777).

**Bibliography:** Trafodion Cymdeithas Hanes Bedyddwyr Cymru 1926.

**Author: Rev. Edward William Price Evans, M.A., (1887-1972), Pontypool**

This religious connection appears to have continued for some time as Hugh Roberts also describes Methodist meetings held at Cwmybyr around 1800:

Calvinistic Methodists had started meetings at the turn of the century at Cwmybyr farm. They later moved to an old house near Cwmybyr Isaf, and, growing in strength, then built Old Zoar Chapel in 1810. (JHA Roberts 'A View from the Hill' 1986 page 92).

The old house mentioned by Roberts is likely to be that situated in field number 164 Cae'r Hendy. The name of the field in which it is situated is Cae'r Hendy. Cwmybyr appears to have been historically a possession of the Manor of Rogerstone. This was held by the Morgans of Penllwyn Sarpf but, after the 1750s, came into the possession of John Jones of Llanarth through marriage. This was as a consequence of the marriage of Florence Morgan to John Jones Esq of Llanarth Court in 1722 and, over 30 years later, her widowed husband's inheritance of the manor following the passing of Florence's brother Henry Morgan, the last male heir, who died intestate in 1757. Mary Thomas, who may be John Thomas's widow, is listed as one of the Manor of Rogerstone's tenants on a mortgage document at Gwent Archives between John Jones and Jane Hanbury of Pontypool dated 4 November 1766 (D.1078.235). A document in Gwent Archives (D.1078.110) further lists the following:

**D.1078.110 1762-1816 Draft Abstract of Title.**

Jones v. Morgan.

To Lot 4 of estates sold pursuant to a decree being Tyr Cwmh(b)yr, par Risca, manor of Rogerstone.

**Cwmybyr Uchaf in the Land Tax Records**

The earliest land tax records for the parish of Risca, unearthed so far, date from 1798 and, although Cwmybyr is unnamed, on these records we can pick up the trail of the farm because it was consistently assessed at the same value of one pound, two shillings and seven ha'

penny from 1798 to 1824. In 1798 the owners are named as Messrs Rogers & Edwards and the occupier is Thomas Thomas who also tenanted and farmed nearby Gelli Unig farm throughout this period. Rogers and Edwards may have purchased that portion of Cwmbyr in which the farm is situated and other properties locally from the Manor of Rogerstone (Jones of Llanarth Estate) in order to exploit coal or clay reserves. It is likely, but unconfirmed, that 'Edwards' is Thomas Edwards of the town of Pontypool, co. Monmouth, gent who is named on two 1818 leases for Coed y Garn Risca, also for the purpose of mining coal and clay.

Cwmbyr Uchaf appears by name for the first time on the 1811 land tax records. It is referred to as 'Cwmbyr farm' and owned and occupied by Thomas Edwards Esq. On the 1812 record Thomas Edwards had also been renting a house and land nearby since at least 1805, possibly at Coed y Garn, to a Phillip Cocker. By the following year John Cocker (1782-1830), possibly a brother of Phillip Cocker, has taken up residence at the farm. John Cocker was a son of Jane Cocker, Widow, and the lessee of the Church House public house. He had taken over the Lease of the Church House Inn from his mother in 1808 and by 1813, at the age of 31, he obviously decided to try his hand at running a small hill farm. However his tenure at Cwmbyr was brief as by the following year, 1814, he was leasing the much larger Risca Farm, in the meadows adjacent to the Ebbw River (modern day Crosskeys), from Sir Charles Morgan. He would continue as a successful farmer and victualler until his untimely death at the age of just 48 in 1830.

After the Cockers had vacated Cwmbyr, Thomas Edwards Esq is recorded as renting the property to Thomas Jenkins (1819) and Thomas Thomas (1824 and 1829). In 1843 Thomas Edwards Esq is still named on the Parish of Risca tithe apportionment as the owner of the farm and its associated lands but by this time there is a new tenant at the farm who was a member of one of Risca's most prominent families of the Nineteenth century.

### **The Duffields at Cwmbyr**

Edward Duffield Jr was born in Risca in 1806, the son of Edward Duffield Snr and his wife Jane. Edward was to remain at Cwmbyr farm from at least 1843 until after 1881. The Duffields were one of Risca's most prominent families in the first half of the nineteenth century with interests in farming, public houses, a malt house and various properties in several parishes. The patriarch of the family was Edward Duffield Snr (born 1781) publican, innkeeper and maltster of the Bridge End Inn. Edward Senior obviously made a considerable amount of money during his life time and his draft will of 1848 describes his property at that time.

*..... he bequeathes all his freehold, copy hold and leasehold heredit unto Edward Duffield and John Duffield, his sons viz , his freehold house called the Bridge End Inn with the coach house, stable, garden and premises situate at Risca subject to and charged with the payment of the sum of £100 to his son*



*George and £100 to his son Thomas, he bequeathes unto Edward, :he bequeathes unto John Duffield the freehold malthouse and small house adjoining situate at Risca and also a small piece of land, copyhold of the manor of Rogerstone situate near Maesmawr, par Risca for his own absolute use and benefit. He gives unto his son William Duffield, the two tenements situated under the canal bank, par Risca. Various financial bequests charged upon premises in Newport.*

In addition, his wife and daughters were bequeathed other properties earlier in the 1840s:

*3 leasehold tenements with appurts situate in Commercial Road in Newport upon various trusts various financial bequests. he bequeathes 3 mess and premises, leasehold under the Tredegar Wharf Co. situate in the Commercial Road Newport unto his 3 daughters. He bequeathes all his personal effects to his wife.*

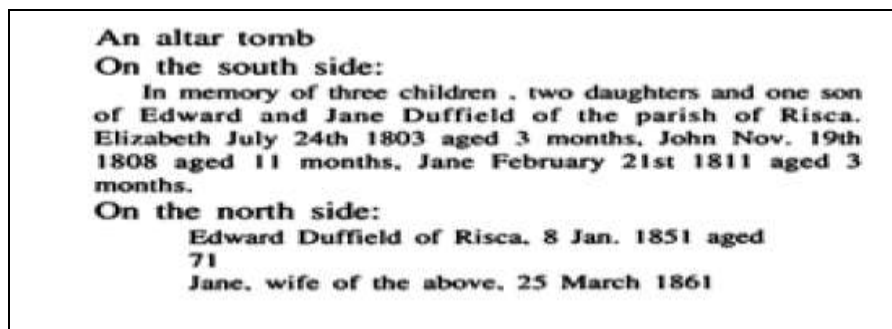


**Fig. 4 The Church House Inn at Risca as it appeared around 1870. The couple on the left of the photograph may be George and Mary Duffield, the leaseholder and innkeeper at the time (Source: Risca Museum)**

Edward Duffield Snr owned other properties in Pillgwenlly Newport, one of which was occupied at 15/- rent per week by the Honourable Board of Ordnance as a military hospital in the early 1840s. Interestingly the row of houses adjacent to the Bridgend Inn is called Duffield's Row in the 1851 census and close by is another public house called The Star, where Thomas Duffield resides with his wife Ann and their two young children. Thomas (b. 1816) is listed as the publican. Another son, William Duffield, (b 1818) later lived at Mill Cottage and was the owner of Risca Mill and the Risca House Inn, which may have been named in honour of his wife Mary, who was a daughter of William Phillips, known as the 'Hunting Squire of Risca'. The Phillips, a wealthy land owning family, resided at Risca House, the sixteenth century manor house that once stood above the canal,

at the top of what is now Manor Road. Another son of the Duffields, George, (b. 1821) was a blacksmith and later the innkeeper at the Church House Inn. There is little doubt that the Duffields were a wealthy and prominent family in Risca at this time and were to remain so up to the end of the nineteenth century.

Edward Duffield Snr died in 1851 and was buried in Machen parish church, where the altar tomb below is situated.



### **Tithe Apportionment of 1843 and Field Names**

Edward Duffield Jr is listed on the 1843 tithe apportionment for Cwmyr as resident; however, Cwmyr Uchaf is once again in the ownership of Thomas Edwards Esq. On apportionment Cwmyr farm is described as consisting of 99 acres and 37 perches and is valued at 1 pound 7 shillings and 9 pence, for payment to the perpetual curate and 1 pound 18 shillings and 2 pence for payment to the appropriator. The largest area of land (131) is a pasture called the Graig (rock) at 63 acres and 28 perches. The other fields are variously named Cae Ucha (upper field), Cae Llwydon (possibly pale field), Cae Glas (blue or green field), Graig Fach (little rock), Cae Main (slim or slender field), Cae Ffynnon (spring field), Graig Fawr (great, or big, rock), Cae Gwyn (fair field) and Cae'r Hendy (field of the old house).

The land is generally a mixture of pasture (over 72 acres), meadow (around 7 acres) and arable (12 acres) and there is just over an acre of woodland, which would have all been native broadleaf species at this time. At the time of the apportionment, Cwmyr Uchaf would have been a mixed farm with sheep, cows, chickens, a small number of pigs, and a few working ponies. The arable may have been a mixture of corn, potatoes and other greens, but most would probably have been given over to fodder crops such as turnips. Likewise the meadow would have been maintained to provide hay for use as winter fodder for the animals.



Fig. 5 Both Cwmbyr farms from the Risca tithe map of 1842 (Source: NLW)

LANDOWNERS	OCCUPIERS	RATES PAYING TO THE PARISH	NAME AND DESCRIPTION OF LANDS AND PREMISES	STATE OF CULTIVATION	QUANTITIES IN STATUTE MEASURES	PARTS OF THE CUMMULATION OF THE LANDS						REMARKS	
						PAYABLE TO			PAYABLE TO				
					Rural Sanitary			Appropriation					
					a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	
Edwards Thomas Esq. Duffield Edward Jnr			131	Graig	Pasture	63	27		11	5	A		
			132	Coe rcha	it	2	14		2	5	A		
			133		it	1	2	19	1	4	A	5	A
			134	Coe Lloydon	it	2	2	23	2	9	A		
			135	Wood	Wood	1	25		9		A		
			135	Coe Glas	Arable	2	29					4	6
			140	Wann	it	2	34					4	6
			141	Graig Jack	Wood & Brake	2	3	20	1	3	A	3	11
			142	Hemlock Lane 4			3	10	1		A		
			143		Arable & Brake	1	1	22				1	11
			144	Coe Main	Arable	1	1	7				2	6
			146	Coe	it	2	1	14				4	2
			147	Coe Hymen	it & Brake	2	1	29				5	
			150	Graig fair	Arable	1	1	22				2	8
			161	Brake	Brake		3	32		3	A		
			162	Coe Gwyn	Meadow	4	25		2	4	A	7	1
			163	Wood	Wood		3	24		10	A		
			164	Coe's handy	Pasture	2	2	30	2	9	A	1	3
					99	37		1	7	9		1	15

Fig. 6 The Cwmyr Uchaf from the Risca tithe apportionment of 1843 (NLW)

Edward Duffield would have come into a not inconsiderable legacy following his father's death in 1851 and at least some of this may have been invested in modernising Cwmyr farmhouse. Around this time it is possible that Edward bought the house and land, and as a result of this investment, the cow house at the downhill end of the building was converted into a parlour. In addition a door was installed through the stair recess to give access to what was to become the main living room. It also seems likely that a new modern staircase was constructed to replace the old stone spiral stairs and new toilet facilities were built outside the enlarged house, near the top of the track up from the canal, on the western edge of the property.

Edward and his wife Elizabeth (b. 1812) had one daughter, Mary, who was born in 1838. Several female servants also lived at Cwmyr with the Duffields. These included Mary Davies (20) in 1841, Louisa Howell (20) in 1851 and finally Ann Rogers (28) who was present at the 1861 census and was to remain with the family into the 1880s. Edward Duffield and his household appear for the last time on the 1881 census. On the tithe apportionment the farm's acreage is given as 99 acres and 37 perches. However, over time, the size of the farm seems to have fluctuated and it contracted from 104 acres in 1861 to just 40 acres by 1881. Edward died on 11 November 1885 and by this time he had already retired from farming and moved out of Cwmyr into the care of Mary, his daughter, at the nearby Bridge End Hotel, once his family home. At that time the Bridge End was kept by her and her husband Edmund Woodroffe (b 1823). Edmund and Mary had married in 1859 and subsequently tenanted farms in Newchurch East, Monmouthshire. The entry in the Diocese of Llandaff probate calendar for Edward reads that he left a personal estate of £154 6s, a quite considerable sum for the 1880s. The entry is as follows:

22 December. The will of Edward Duffield formerly of Crombyr (sic) but late of the 'Bridge End' Hotel both in Risca in the County of Monmouth Farmer who died on the 11 November 1885 at the said Hotel proved at Llandaff by Mary Woodroffe (wife of Edmund Woodroffe) of the said Hotel, the daughter the sole executrix

### **The tenants of Cwmyr Uchaf between 1890 and 1920**

By the 1891 census, William Jenkins (born Tidenham Gloucester circa 1853) has taken residence at Cwmyr Uchaf along with his wife Sarah Ann (35), and their children William (16), Arthur (13), Elizabeth A (11), Francis H (6), Thomas J. (3), and Alfred (1). All of William's family, including his wife, were born in Risca. William is described as being employed as a woodward. In the 1881 census William is listed as a woodman and he and his family live on the Cwmcarn Old Road – between Pontywaun and Cwmcarn. William Jenkins is listed as a 'farmer, Cwm-byr', in the 1891 Kelly Directory entry for Risca, so the family may have already resided at Cwmyr for several years prior to this. He is also featured in the 1901 edition of the same publication, proving that William and his family stayed at Cwmyr for over a decade. However, by the time of the 1901 census the Jenkins family had moved on and Solomon Chubbs, a coalminer (born in Bampton in Devon in 1856), along with his wife Lucy (35) their children Eliza A (11), Sarah (4), Gladys (1), Solomon's brother, William (42), who was a farm labourer, and a boarder, Thomas James (60) a timber haulier from the Forest of Dean, are all listed as residents. By the 1911 census Solomon and his family have relocated to 2 Cromwell Road in Risca and he is employed as a timberman underground.

John Sibley (or Siple) and family appear on the 1911 census for Cwmyr. John had been born at Crewkerne in Somerset in 1853 but had probably moved away from the predominantly agricultural south of the county in the early 1870s in search of work in the new industries. He married Gwendoline, known as Gwen, who was born at Ynysddu in 1851. Their first child, Susan, was born in Swindon in 1876. Two years later another daughter, Elizabeth, was born at Cheltenham in Gloucestershire and by the time of the birth of their son John in 1880 the family were residing at Machen.

The family may have already settled by this time at Ynysddu where they appear on the 1881 census, with John's employment described as labouring in the colliery. By 1891 the family are resident at Babel Row in Cwmfelinfach and another three children have appeared: Margaret (8); Maud (6); and Oliver (2). The family are still living at Babel Row at the time of the 1901 census, although only two children, Oliver (12) and Joseph (8) remain with their parents, while John is described as a coalminer/hewer underground. Gwen Sibley died in 1902 at the age of 50 and it appears that, sometime later, John's daughter Margaret Amelia returned home to keep house for her father.



**Fig. 7 A painting of Cwmyr Uchaf (Source: Mrs Joyce Davies)**

The 1911 census finds the family resident at Cwmyr and John Joseph Sibley, now 58, is described as a haulier underground and widower. His daughter Margaret Amelia (28) is described as housekeeper and Frederick Joseph (18), the one son still remaining at home, is employed as a coalminer/hewer. John Sibley appears on the 1913 and 1915 electoral registers for Cwmyr and John did not finally pass away until 1931, although by this time he and his daughter had moved on to pastures new.

### **The Roberts Family at Cwmyr**

During the early twentieth century it was not always the case that the tenants of Cwmyr were involved in the mining industry and the dawning of 1920s saw a return to farming as the farmstead's prime activity. William Edwin Roberts, who appears on the autumn 1922 electoral register for Cwmyr, had been born and brought up in the area around Cwmcarn village. His parents were James and Patience Roberts, who had occupied Cwmcarn Mill Farm for many years. Both had originated at Devauden in the Parish of Newchurch East near Chepstow. James had been born in 1827 and Patience, also known as Blanch, in 1828. Prior to coming to the Nant Carn valley, the family had lived at Clytha in the late 1850s: they had moved to Cwm, adjacent to Ebenezer Baptist Chapel, in the Parish of Llanhilleth before the 1861 census. At this time James had worked as a woodsman. They also lived at Cwmcarn (then in Mynyddislwyn parish) for several years from about 1864.

The 1871 census records the family as residing at the Philanthropic Inn at Pontywaun, where Patience is named as 'Blanch' in the entry. James is employed as a labourer at this time. At the 1881 census the

family are living in Cwmcarn, probably in one of the cottages between Graig House and Abercarn Fawr farm, Patience is called Saluna in the census entry but that is almost certainly a copying error. James Roberts, aged 60, is described as a farmer when the family appears for the first time in the census entry for Cwmcarn Mill at the 1891 census. His wife Patience is now aged 63. Of their sons and daughters, Sarah A (29) is described as a dress maker, Patience (26) as a milk carrier, Elizabeth (19) and Edwin J (15) as farm servants. William Edwin Roberts is now 21 years old and is described as a helve maker.



**Fig. 8 Risca Grist Mill, the later Cwmcarn Mill Farm, was situated near Cwmcarn colliery on the left in the photograph above.**

### **Helve Making**

Helve making is the craft of making wooden handles for tools such as axes. In the nineteenth century, when William learned the trade, it would have still been considered a woodland craft and a helve maker would have been both a woodsman and an essential associate of a blacksmith – one to forge the head and the other to carve the handle. Of course, an axe is not just an axe to a woodsman: there are several types: a felling axe, with a broad, relatively thin blade, the same thickness from the helve to the blade; an undercutting axe, with a heavier head, and thicker where the helve enters the head, so that the back of the axe tends to fall when it is swung horizontally, and the cut is upwards; and a splitting axe, more wedge-shaped, for splitting a log. A two-edged bladed axe was an essential tool for the woodsman as it could be used for both splitting and chopping.

Prior to the 1920s, when William was working his craft, axes and other tools didn't come with handles, so patterns were meticulously sketched out on boards, hung on workshop walls, and were guarded and handed down like good cake recipes; and helves made by hand were considered better and stronger than those which were turned on a machine, as the outline conforms more closely to the grain. Before the dawn of the industrial lathe most helves were made straight, without the swell knob at the end for added grip. The style of axe with a swell was figuratively described as "the fawn's foot" design.

American hickory, of the same species as the walnut tree, was the wood of choice in all axes, especially for the felling axe; however this would not have been available in south Wales. The perfect wood here is a good fibrous hardwood species such as ash, oak and elm with the best being a 'straight grain ash' that has been fairly fast grown. 4-6 rings per inch is considered perfect but if there are more than 6-8 rings per inch it becomes much more brittle. A hewing axe is nearly always used one handed and the handle does not get the same stress as a felling axe so helve makers would use pretty well whatever wood they had to hand, though with a preference for more closely spaced rings if ash was unavailable. After the cutting, carving and shaping, the helve was dried for a few weeks. Both ends were sealed to keep them from drying faster than the rest of the wood and splitting. A cheap way to do this was to mix equal amounts of white glue and hot water, then smear the paste on the end grain. Then, the helve maker would hang it up and let it dry. When dry, the handle could be further finished by sanding, scraping with a piece of broken glass, or smoothing with a spoke shave. Finally, it was treated with a couple of coats of boiled linseed oil, thinned with turpentine.

**Reference:** RJS from diverse sources

The Roberts children appear to have suffered from some form of congenital deafness, some from birth and others from early childhood. On the 1871 census Martha, aged 12, one of the elder girls, is described as deaf and Sarah Ann is described as deaf and dumb. Significantly, on the 1881 and 1891 censuses two of William's sisters, Sarah and Eliza, are described as being deaf and dumb from birth. However, this did not stop Eliza from marrying and having her own family. In the 1901 census she, named as Lizzie Miles, is recorded as visiting the mill along with her son John H Miles, then just a month old. Also on the 1901 census is another nephew called John Davies, aged 15 and described as a milk boy. The Roberts had an elder daughter, Mary Ann, who was born in 1859. She appears on the 1881 census as Mary Ann Davies aged 22. She had subsequently married David Davies (alias David), who was twenty two years her senior and the miller at Cwmcarn grist mill. By the 1891 census, the Davies have taken residence at 3 Twyn Carn Road Cwmcarn and David is employed as a miner. The family would later move to Llanhilleth where David worked as a haulier underground.

There is no way of knowing why David Davies gave up the corn mill in the Nant Carn valley. However, it seems likely that business had declined because those mills powered by water, like Cwmcarn, were unable to compete with the newly introduced mechanical mills. Interestingly, the elder Roberts both farmed and milled at Cwmcarn mill and as a result of this may have been better placed to keep the business viable when other watermills in south Wales were rapidly becoming redundant.

**ROBERTS** Patience of Mill Farm Cwmcarn Monmouthshire widow died 30 March 1908 Probate **Llandaff** 17 February to Patience Roberts spinster and Edwin James Roberts farmer. Effects £348.



Both parents died between 1901 and 1911 and by the time of the later census Patience (39), who remained unmarried, is described as the head of the household at what is now known as Mill Farm, Cwmcarn. Of her younger brothers, William (38) is named as 'Farmer', while the younger brother Edwin (36) is described as 'farmer's brother working on the farm'. In addition they have a boarder called George Morgan (66) a married foreman platelayer on the railway who had originated in Hereford. Significantly, the 1911 census is the first to describe William as 'deaf when very young.'

William, known as Bill, could not have remained at the Mill for long after 1911 because by the time of the 1913 electoral register his brother Edwin and Patience are listed as the only voters. During this period William may have resided with other family members in the area around Cwmcarn and Risca. In 1922 William is listed on the electoral roll along with Charles Thomas Attwell and Patricia Attwell. It seems likely that these were a married couple, possibly relatives, who were lodging with William at Cwmbyr. The Attwells remained at Cwmbyr with William until around 1928, when William's unmarried sister, Sarah Ann, and a William James Roberts, possibly a relative, appear on the register along with a married sister Elizabeth and her husband John Miles, who may have lodged briefly with enlarged family as they only appear on the 1930 register.

Mary, John and Ethel May Davies, appear for the first time on the 1934 electoral register for Cwmbyr. Mary Davies, was Mary-Ann Roberts, William's eldest sister who had married David Davies, 22 years her senior, of Cwmcarn Mill in the late 1870s. Mary would have been around 80 in 1939 while her son John Davies would have been approximately 50 years of age. Ethel May is John's wife and David, who appears on the 1939 census below but not on the electoral register, their son. Sarah Ann Roberts, Williams's sister, and William James Roberts appear on the 1936 register for the last time. It is likely that Sarah-Ann, Williams's deaf sibling, passed away around 1935.

The 1939 census register taken at the beginning of World War Two provides us with more details of William Roberts and the other occupants of the farm:

Name	Date of Birth	Marital Status	Occupation
William Roberts (head)	April 11 1867	single	farmer
Mary A Davies (sister)	November 23 1854	widow	unpaid domestic duties
John Davies (nephew)	June 22 1885	married	colliery repairer underground
Ethel M Davies (nephew's wife)	July 27 1892	married	unpaid domestic duties
David J Davies (nephew's son)	October 14 1922		Farmer General Work
	record still closed		

William Edwin Roberts died in November 1945 at the age of 75 and after his death only the Davies family remain at Cwmbyr.

## **The Davies Family at Cwmbyr**

David John Davies (1922-2003) is the only person listed on the electoral roll as resident at Cwmbyr in 1947. However, by 1950 David, now married, was living there with his wife Joyce and his parents John and Ethel May, who had returned to the farm. Mrs Joyce Davies was born in 1926 and married David at the age of 21. They moved into Cwmbyr shortly afterwards. Joyce was born at Waunlwyd in Ebbw Vale but at the age of 4 her family moved to Ramsgate in Kent. The Davies were married in 1949 and Mrs Davies was married for 54 years before her husband passed away. They had two sons, who were born in 1951 and 1954, during their time at the farm. Her sons now (2013) reside in Bridgend and Newport. Joyce remembers that when the boys were small she would struggle up and down the track from the farm. You could not get a car up the track so all 'toing and froing' to the farm had to be done by tractor. It was done by a horse and cart before that.

Mrs Davies knows very little about her husband's family apart from the fact that his parents came to Cwmbyr to help the Roberts, who had formerly resided at Cwmcarn Mill. She recalls that the Roberts, who lived at the farm, were an unmarried brother and sister. One or both were deaf and dumb and so the Davies moved in to stop them being cheated by unscrupulous traders. Joyce believes that the elder Mr Davies married a daughter of the Roberts so the residents were a great uncle and aunt to her husband David Davies. William Edwin Roberts later sadly took his own life in 1945. Mr Davies's aunt had died before Joyce married and moved in there, and she believes that 'Old Bill Roberts' became very lonely there on his own with no one to communicate with after the death of his sister – who was 8 years his senior and also deaf and dumb. It was because of the Roberts' brother and sister that the farm became known locally as the 'deaf and dumb.'

Mrs Davies had to attend the inquest for William Roberts's death, something she never wants to do again. This was around the time in the late 1940s that Mr & Mrs Davies got married. According to Mrs Davies, Cwmbyr had been used many years previously for secret religious services. People used to come there on their horses and donkeys to worship. This confirms the historical details referred to by Hugh Roberts in his book.

Joyce's husband David Davies worked at Cwmcarn pit until it closed in 1968 and afterwards worked at a factory in Rogerstone. He used to walk over the mountain to work at the pit when they lived at Cwmbyr. Like many other local farmers he did his work on the farm in between shifts at the pit. The Davies family mainly kept a large flock of sheep but also had cows, pigs, chickens, ducks, and geese at the farm. They had a milk round for a while and would use a yoke and pails and carry the milk down to sell in Risca. Mrs Davies did this once when it

was snowing and she fell on the path spilling the milk – she says that the Davies were more worried about the milk than they were for her.



**Fig. 9 A view of Cwmyr Uchaf dated 1947. This was taken from a field on the opposite side of the Cwmyr brook (Source: Risca Museum)**

The sheep were grazed on the Medart and Twmbarlwm, which were both common land at the time. All the local farmers would work together to gather the sheep. Mrs Davies remembers Ben Owens from the Darran houses. The Owens had lived at the Darran Farm in the 1930s and continued to keep sheep at the 'Klondyke' after moving out of the farm. Mrs Davies remembers Harry Richards living at the Darran Farm, in the late forties and early fifties, and Eddie Lewis at Maes Mawr. Lots of people lived 'around and abouts' and most would help with gathering and shearing of the sheep. Mrs Davies also occasionally helped with the shearing. Mr Davies would pick out the sheep which were accustomed to being sheared, and didn't kick so much, for her to shear. The poor old dog would get worn out too, especially during the hot weather, and he would get a lot of criticism and threats such as being hung up from the tree – this would soon be forgotten about, however, and he would be praised as 'the best dog ever'.

The closest neighbours were the Jones and the Marshes just down the hillside at Cwmyr Isaf (Lower). They didn't keep animals there at that time. It was just a house where the two families lived. The house at Cwmyr Isaf was built of large stone boulders. There was nothing modern in it. Mrs Davies remembers doing the shopping for the Marshes. She recalls that, inside, the farmhouse was quite like Cwmyr Uchaf, although not as big. It was also a nicer house than the larger Cwmyr, although it was really little more than a small cottage. Mrs Davies remembers that after Cwmyr Lower became vacant a local butcher wanted to build houses on the uphill side of the canal

bridge but was not permitted to do so, because of the lack of sewerage facilities there.

The Davies only kept animals and no arable crops were grown on the farm; however all the meadows were cut for hay. All the fields by the canal were Cwmbyr's but they were rented separately from the farm itself. Feed for the cattle was brought in from Mendy Davies's in Risca. They had a tractor at the farm – and they also used a horse and cart. Mr Davies would go down to the canal bridge on the tractor to collect things dropped off for the farm such as feed for the animals. As her husband worked at the pit, the family had their quota of coal delivered by the NCB. This was also dropped off at Greenmeadow Bridge and had to be brought up to the house using the tractor. No one, apart from the postman, would deliver directly to the farm itself.

There was a small garden at Cwmbyr, which was more of an orchard to the side of the farm house. The toilet was also situated in the garden and they would carry a bucket of water to put down there. The dogs were kept in the recess under the big old beech tree that still stands today.

Joyce recalls that the farmhouse at Cwmbyr was very old and quite primitive. There was no water in the house whatsoever. Most water came from nearby springs. This was very pure, as it came straight out of the mountain. In the summer when the springs ran dry they would have to walk over the two fields to get their water from the Darran and carry it back. It was hard work. Some rain water was collected in a big tub. This would sometimes overflow and run down into the dingle. There was no electricity supply to the farm and so oil lamps and candles were used for lighting.

The cowshed had been adjoined to the lower end of the house but by Mrs Davies's time there, it had been converted into the front room. A new barn/cowshed was constructed at the back of the farmhouse, as a separate building. Mrs Davies thinks that the house should have gone to St Fagan's museum. The walls were so thick that when it came to the subsequent demolition of Cwmbyr Farm, they could not knock the walls down: the building had to be dynamited.

### **About the House and Farm at Cwmbyr Uchaf**

There were two rooms downstairs plus a dairy, where milk was kept on a cold slab. The kitchen, which had a stove, was to the left; to the right was the living room which had formerly been the cow house. From Mrs Davies's description it sounds as if the stairs were built into the wall between these two rooms – she says the stairs were on the side on the wall. There was a big fireplace with 'a thing hanging down'. Mr Davies used to put a holly bush, with string attached, down the chimney to clean the soot out. When Mrs Davies lived there they had a stove with an oven on the side. There was also 'a thing on the side where they would put logs'. The old back kitchen was built into the mountain and if it rained water would come through the wall and through the house. There may have been a fireplace in the kitchen but

this had been blocked up by Mrs Davies's time there. There was a big fireplace in the sitting room. This was a great big black-leaded Victorian fireplace. They would bathe in a tin bath in front of the fire. There were great big thick beams with hooks on the ceiling, where they used to hang 'bacon and other stuff'. Her husband used to cut thick joints off the bacon and fry them up in the frying pan. They would eat goose egg with it. Mrs Davies says that she made better cakes in the fire oven at Cwmbyr than she does with modern cookers.

There were three bedrooms upstairs but you would have to pass from room to room to reach the furthest as there was no passage upstairs. A curtain was hung over the doorways, as there were no doors.

### **The Last Days of Cwmbyr Farm**

Sadly as time went on Mr Davies's health started to decline and they could no longer cope with the harsh realities of living on the farm, so eventually they had to give up living there. The fate of Cwmbyr was sealed when, during one very bad winter in the late 1950s, the end part of the house, i.e. the lower gable wall, was blown off. The Coal Board, who owned the property, would not repair the damage and the place started to deteriorate. The Forestry Commission assumed ownership afterwards and it was they who would finally demolish the buildings.



**Fig. 10 The old beech tree, near the site of Cwmbyr Uchaf. The dog kennel is situated in the recess below the tree (Source: Phil Jenkins)**

Mrs Davies said that she cannot remember exactly when they left the farm but she has now (2013) lived in her house at Crosskeys for about fifty years and prior to that the family had lived in Fernlea. However, her sons had gone to school from the farm so it seems likely that they lived there until around 1960. Mr Davies continued to farm there

while residing at Fernlea. David's father, John Davies, disappears from the electoral register after 1953 and David, Joyce and David's mother Ethel May Davies continue to be registered as living at the farm until 1960, but following this there is no further entry for the farm. Former Risca resident Nick Prosser remembers David Davies, who he calls Dai, driving his grey Fergie tractor up over Green Meadow Canal Bridge to the farm every day. He says that when the Forestry Commission made Dai give up Cwmyr he had a farm sale at in the field next to canal where the miners' cemetery is. Mrs Davies says that Cwmyr was a 'lovely little place' and you could go up into the field behind the house and look over all of Risca. But it was hard work walking up and down from there and with the lack of amenities life there was extremely demanding.

After her family moved from Cwmyr Joyce did not visit the old farm for some years. However, following Mr Davies's death in 2003, his ashes were scattered there and a plaque was attached high up the big old beech tree in remembrance of him. Mrs Davies says that her husband's heart was forever at Cwmyr farm.



**Fig. 11 The plaque in dedication to Mrs Davies's husband David placed on the old beech tree adjacent to the site of Cwmyr Uchaf farm (Source: Phil Jenkins)**

## **Bibliography and Sources**

1. Ancestry.co.uk: 1841, 1851, 1861, 1871, 1881, 1891, 1901, 1911 Censuses. 1939 Census Register
2. Ancestry.co.uk: Land Tax Assessments for the Parish of Risca 1798
3. Paul R Davis, unpublished survey of Gwent upland farms: Description and plan of Cwmbyr Uchaf. January 1992 revised May 2020.
4. Rev. Edward William Price Evans, M.A. Trafodion Cymdeithas Hanes Bedyddwyr Cymru 1926. (biography of Miles Harry)
5. Gwent Archives: Land Tax Assessments for the Parish of Risca: 1804, 1805, 1806, 1808, 1811, 1814, 1818, 1819, 1829
6. Gwent Archives - CATALOGUE of documents deposited by Mr. J. Arthurs of Caldicot:
  - (i) D.1078.110 1762-1816 Draft Abstract of Title;
  - (ii) D.1078.235 1766 November 4 Attested Copy of Transfer of Mortgage in Fee
7. National Library of Scotland: Ordnance Survey Maps - Six-inch England and Wales, 1842-1952
8. National Library of Wales : Risca tithe map of 1842
9. National Library of Wales : Risca tithe apportionment of 1843
10. National Library of Wales: Miscellaneous Deeds 48. 'Lease for fourteen years of the beds and veins of fire brick clay under all the lands of the lessor ...,' 1818, March 3.
11. National Library of Wales: Miscellaneous Deeds 49. 'Lease for one year, and thereafter from year to year for not more than four years, of all beds and ...,' 1818, March 3.
12. Osborne & Hobbs (1999) 'Note On The Names And Locations Of Two Granges Of Llantarnam Abbey' from Gwent Local History – Journal of Gwent Local History Council Number 87 Autumn 1999
13. J. H. A. Roberts 'A View From The Hill: A History of Risca and Moriah Baptist Church' Second edition, revised and enlarged (1986/2010)