

Memorial Unveiled To Miners' Hero



Posted on Thursday 23rd October 2014

Hopla family members Karen Godfrey, Andrew Webb, Tara Evans and Sylvia Letherby, front, Harry Evans 10 and Maris Hopla

A plaque commemorating the life of one of Wales's foremost miners' leaders has been refurbished and unveiled again in Rhondda Cynon Taf.

John Hopla's contribution to the miners' movement is almost forgotten and so was the marble tablet unveiled in his memory almost a century ago – until now.

The John Hopla Memorial Society led by Llwynypia ward Member Cllr Sylvia Jones and historian David Maddox, raised substantial funds to re-discover and restore the damaged century-old tablet.

Together they led a lengthy "treasure trail" for the tablet which was unveiled in 1916 outside the former Llwynypia Workmen's Institute and Library.

With the demolition of building it was moved to the nearby N.U.M Club but disappeared following redecorating work. Cllr Sylvia Jones and David Maddox approached the Club Committee who agreed to tear down wood paneling and remove the plaque which had been damaged over the years.

Following substantial restoration work, the memorial stone has a new home in the Bertie Engine House of the Rhondda Heritage Park.

A special event took place to commemorate the event with guests including the High Sheriff of Mid Glamorgan, Owen Smith MP, Leader of Rhondda Cynon Taf Council Cllr Andrew Morgan, Mayor Cllr John Watts and BBC presenter Roy Noble.

One of Wales' leading historians, Professor Dai Smith, who once lived in the house next door to the one occupied years earlier by John Hopla, gave an impassioned speech about the life of the miner's leader.

A performance of varied music was also given by the Cambrian Male Choir who led the audience into a rousing rendition of "Cwm Rhondda" as the plaque was unveiled before members of the Hopla family.

Cllr Sylvia Jones said, "Today's generation has largely forgotten the name John Hopla let alone the major contribution he made to the welfare of the miners during some of the most turbulent years in industrial South Wales.

“The restoration of the plaque and rededication is a fitting tribute to a miners’ leader who gave his life to improve working and pay conditions in this the most dangerous of industries. During his days at least 50 Rhondda miners died every year from small accidents in the Valley, let alone the large-scale pit disasters that claimed literally hundreds.”

Leader of Rhondda Cynon Taf Council Cllr Andrew Morgan said, “It is important to remember those leading figures that played such a major role in shaping the history of our valleys.

“We are certainly grateful to the hard work of Cllr Jones and the John Hopla Memorial Society for all of their fundraising efforts over the last year. They should be justifiably proud of their achievements and I’m delighted to see the memorial tablet unveiled in its new home of the Rhondda Heritage Park.”

John Hopla was born in Pembrokeshire in 1882 and his family moved to the Mid Rhondda to work in the mines and Hopla soon advanced to become a Checkweigher at the Glamorgan Colliery in Llwynypia.

As a young activist in the South Wales Miners Union he was at the forefront in campaigning to obtain better wages and to improve the conditions for miners and their families. The respect and trust that his colleagues had for him led to his appointment as Chairman of the Lodge of the Glamorgan Colliery, representing over 3,000 men.

He established a medical scheme in the district to help sick and injured miners and their families.

During the Cambrian Combine Strike of 1910-11, which resulted in the Tonypany Riots, Hopla was one of the foremost of the miners’ leaders and together with Will John (later a Rhondda MP) formed the Cambrian Joint Strike Committee to co-ordinate the strike campaign.

Even in the later stages of the strike with strike funds running low and much hardship he was still prepared to continue the strike and hoped to get lodges across the coalfield in both Wales and England to join in an all out strike for a minimum wage.

Always at the forefront of any action to win the strike he was a main target of the police. A major confrontation in July 1911 outside the Ely Pit, Penygraig where men had started to break the strike and return to work led to violent confrontation with the police and the military had to be brought in to restore order. John Hopla and Will John were both arrested and accused of inciting the riot.

In November 1911 both men were sentenced to a year’s imprisonment. In 1912 the Home Secretary as a show of clemency commuted the sentences to six months.

Both men received a hero’s welcome when they were released. Hopla returned to work but his health was deteriorating and he passed away in April 1916 aged just 37.