

The Welsh Society of Vancouver

Cymdeithas Gymraeg Vancouver

Society Newsletter: Special Edition

Cyschgrawn Gymdeithas: Rhifyn Arbennig



Celebrating the 90th Anniversary of the
Cambrian Hall, October 2019

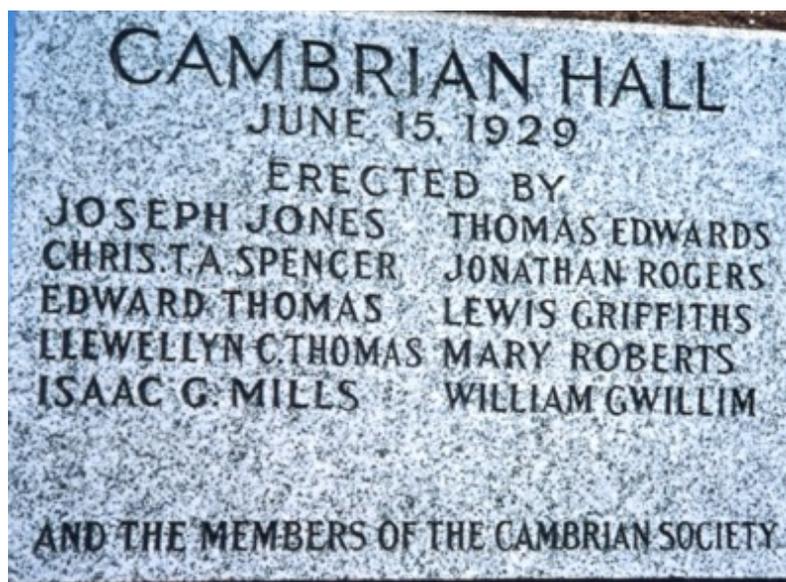
The Cambrian Hall: A Short History

By Eifion Williams

This year we are celebrating the 90th Anniversary of the Cambrian Hall, which was officially opened in September, 1929. However, Welsh immigrants had been coming to this part of North America for many years before that.

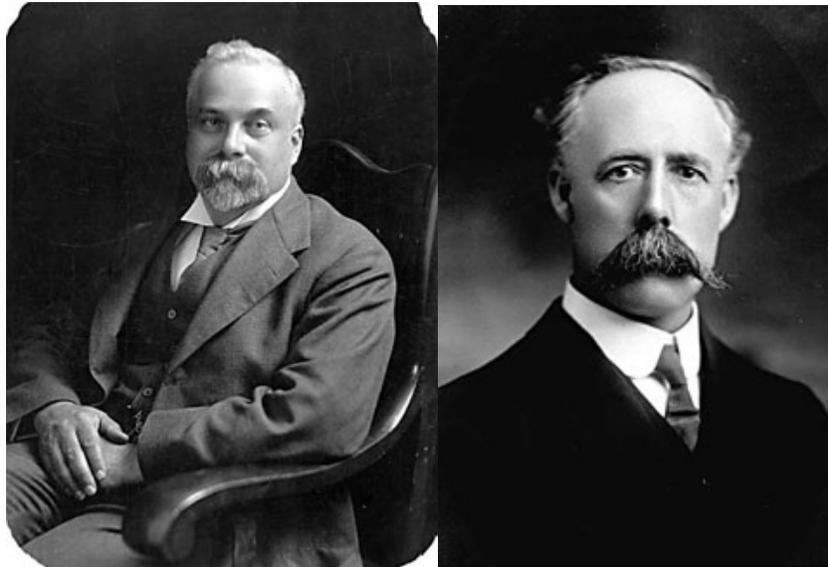
Thousands of immigrants arrived during the gold rushes along the Fraser River and the Cariboo and, although very few realized their dreams of untold wealth, many stayed and settled and helped build the Province of British Columbia. It was frequently the case that the main beneficiaries of a gold rush, whether here in British Columbia, in California or in the Yukon, were not the prospectors or miners but the entrepreneurs who built businesses that sought to profit from their efforts.

At first Victoria and then Vancouver benefited from the business acumen of these men, many of them Welshmen, and they and later Welsh immigrants seized the opportunities afforded by the rapidly expanding city of Vancouver and were instrumental in the building of the Cambrian Hall. They were rich, they were charitable, and they were our benefactors – but, above all, they never forgot that they were Welsh. The names of the most prominent of them are enshrined on the corner stone at the front of the building.



First, there was Chris Spencer, whose father, David Spencer, originally from St. Athan in the Vale of Glamorgan, opened a dry goods store in Victoria during the Cariboo gold rush. David Spencer was a staunch Welsh Methodist and by all accounts did not believe in allowing customers to buy on credit or to consume alcohol. The Victoria store eventually expanded into a chain of BC stores called David Spencer Ltd. And they were run by his son Chris. Chris was a major financial contributor to the University of British Columbia, a founding member of the Vancouver Art Gallery and the Vancouver Symphony and for a time was President of the Vancouver Board of Trade. In addition to his impressive list of community services just mentioned, Chris Spencer was one of the main contributors to the building of the Cambrian Hall.

The Spencer's Department Store chain, which was apparently famous for its window displays and Christmas decorations, was sold to Eaton's in 1948. The original building is now the Harbour Centre in downtown Vancouver which houses the downtown campus of Simon Fraser University.



Two of the founders: Chris Spencer and Jonathan Rogers

Another name on the corner stone is that of Jonathan Rogers, from Plas-Onn near Llangollen, who grew up speaking only Welsh. In 1887, armed with a legacy from an aunt, he sailed to Montreal and crossed Canada on the first transcontinental train to Vancouver. With his inherited legacy he bought four lots in what is now the heart of downtown. Within a few years he made a fortune from the city's first major real-estate boom and became a prominent philanthropist and Vancouver civic leader.

In 1893 he built an architect-designed 2-storey building near Powell Street which featured three electric elevators, the first installed in Vancouver. The following year he built two new identical buildings on Hastings Street. Jonathan would almost certainly be unhappy with the current use of these buildings; today they house the offices of the Marijuana Party! In 1916 he was the main Vancouver organizer of the People's Prohibition Association. It successfully lobbied for Prohibition in BC, which lasted from 1917 to 1921.

In 1898 he built the second Rogers Block on Hastings Street and in 1903 built the Royal Bank of Canada building. Following these constructions Rogers became involved in all kinds of construction work – offices, banks, hotels, manufacturing plants, all during the city's first building boom, and all before he was forty years old. In 1902 Jonathan married Elizabeth, a girl from Oswestry and they lived close to Stanley Park at 2050 Nelson Street in a large, elegant house named *Argoed*. Elizabeth became one of the founders and early benefactors of the Vancouver Art Gallery and the Symphony Society.

Rogers went on to build one of the most expensive buildings the city had ever seen – the Rogers Building. The newspaper *BC Saturday Sunset* reported at the time, “The building will be a monument to Alderman Rogers, whose faith in the future of this city is exemplified in the erection of a building which, when completed, will represent an expenditure of \$600,000.” By the outbreak of the First World War Jonathan Rogers was a very wealthy man and a prominent public figure in Vancouver. He was elected an alderman twice, served for

26 years on the Parks Board, and was Chairman of the Board of Trade as well as being involved in a variety of charitable causes. He died in 1945 and left a large sum of money to various causes in Vancouver. The largest bequest was to the City of Vancouver for a neighbourhood park. Jonathan Rogers Park was opened in 1958 on 8th Avenue in Mount Pleasant.

Thomas Edwards, a miner's son from Llanelli, was another benefactor of the Hall. He arrived in Vancouver in 1889 followed in 1898 by his future wife Margaret from Llangyfelach. They were married in the Presbyterian Church in Cumberland, Vancouver Island. Trained as a carpenter and joiner, he became a pioneer builder and prominent businessman in Vancouver and later a highly respected funeral director. Like Jonathan Rogers, he was a deeply religious man; Welsh Society member Ann Bosch, Thomas Edwards' granddaughter remembers her grandparents as very devout individuals who eschewed any form of theatrical entertainment except for once attending a showing of *How Green Was My Valley*.

Edwards provided the building materials for the building of the Hall. He was also the first Leader of the Overseas Welsh at the National Eisteddfod of Wales, beginning an annual tradition of a ceremony welcoming Welsh exiles to the Eisteddfod. The bardic chair that year was paid for through contributions by the Welsh of Vancouver. It was made of Canadian black walnut and, in addition to a Welsh dragon design, bore symbols derived from the early totems of the West Coast First Nations. The Chair that year was won by poet Dewi Emrys who won a total of four bardic chairs at the National Eisteddfod but had a habit of losing or selling them to finance his dissolute lifestyle. Last year, David Llewelyn Williams traced the location of the Vancouver Chair to its present location in London.

Edwards was one of the first to make a donation on behalf of himself and his wife to cover the cost of a fully equipped field ambulance for service during the Second World War. Thomas Edwards belongs to the roster of those successful early Welsh immigrants like Chris Spencer and Jonathan Rogers who were long-time patrons of the Vancouver Welsh Society and who also made valuable contributions to this city and their adopted country.

Another Welsh immigrant, Joseph Jones, a dairy farmer, donated the land on which the Hall is built for a nominal sum of one dollar. The actual building of the Hall was done mainly by volunteer labour. It was officially opened in September, 1929, and committed future members of the then Cambrian Society, previously the Cymrodorion, to a sacred charge - the preservation of a unique asset for the future benefit of the Welsh in Vancouver. It is still the only facility of its kind in North America.

Throughout its history, the Welsh Society has held an Anniversary Dinner to commemorate the opening of the Hall. The Cambrian Hall has also faithfully maintained Welsh traditions such as the *Gymanfa Ganu*, monthly religious services and an annual St. David's Day Dinner. Throughout the lean years of the Depression and the Second World War, largely because of the determination and devotion of members of the Society, the Hall remained a welcome home to the Vancouver Welsh community.

However, over the years, the expense of maintaining the Hall spiraled and there were frequent fears that the Hall might have to be sold. It was saved by the voluntary efforts of members who carried out numerous repairs, including the building of a new stage. In the late 1970s the Lower Hall was renovated to provide a venue where members and guests could hold social gatherings. A bar license was also obtained to help pay the Hall's costs. This work made the building rentable, easing the financial burden on the Society.



The building of the new stage (above), and the renovation of the lower hall in the late 1970s

The magazine for the Overseas Welsh, *Yr Enfys*, has over the years published monthly reports on the activities of the Vancouver Welsh Society. They make interesting reading. For example, in 1953 it was reported that “the Cambrian Society held its Annual Anniversary Dinner early in October. There was a full house for the excellent dinner served by our menfolk, who are expert Chefs and Waiters.” In 1955 it reported that “On October 5 we all enjoyed a wonderful Anniversary Dinner prepared by our menfolk, under the wing of Mr. John Ellis (Denbigh),” and in 1964 the Vancouver correspondent reported that “A wonderful roast beef dinner was prepared and served by Chef John M. Williams, the President, and his hard-working male staff. It was delicious. Then upstairs [the festivities moved] to the Main Hall for a musical treat given by the Women’s Choral group convened by Mrs. Gwilym A.

Williams. The program covered the songs of many nations and included Penillion Singing by Mrs. Jack Roberts (Penygroes). *Noson hynod o hapus* it concluded.”

I don't know if having the men serve the Anniversary Dinner was a Society tradition but another *Enfys* report by a member in 1965 recounted: “The Anniversary Dinner held on Tuesday, October 2, was an outstanding success. It was served by the men. This is no sexist put-down but we ladies all agreed that it was the best hot turkey dinner ever consumed at the Cambrian Hall.”

There are two other traditions noted in all the reports on events at the Cambrian Hall. It appears that at that time married women were regarded as extensions of their husbands. In addition to the two women already mentioned, the Society's executive in 1964 included Mrs. Wilfred McKinnon, Mrs. William George, and Mrs. William Rennie.

Another Welsh Society convention was to indicate in brackets the original hometown of members in Wales. Among the Society's officers in 1969 were Mrs. E Edwards (Caernarfon), Mr. Ifor Roberts (Penygraig), Mrs. David Morgan (Builth Wells) and Mr. Milton Morgan (Pontardawe). By 1980 these conventions had disappeared. Another change, which occurred in 1973, was the renaming of the Society. Previously known as the Cambrian Society, it was renamed The Welsh Society of Vancouver.

The Cambrian Hall was well-used and a boon to the Society under both names. Some names kept recurring, names of individuals who must have given prodigious service to the Society – such as Mrs. T. Lloyd Roberts, Gwenfyl Jones (Llanelli) and Annie George (Glynderwen), who ran the Women's Auxiliary for many years. The Cambrian Hall has also welcomed and/or entertained many visitors over the years. In 1954 the Welsh team for the Empire Games was entertained at the Hall. Several Welsh rugby teams, including the Welsh International side, were also welcomed at the Hall.



The Welsh Society rugby team in the early 80s. Recognize anyone?!

During the Vancouver Centennial in 1986 the Welsh Society hosted a *Gymanfa Ganu*, a concert, church service and open house at the Cambrian Hall. Ann Roberts served as coordinator of events during British Week at the festival. Among other guests were Mr. Meredith Davies, newly appointed conductor of the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra and Miss Janet Jones, hostess for the Welsh Tourist and Holidays Board. In 1969, another National Hostess of Wales, Miss Stella Mair Owen was welcomed by the Cambrian Society at the home of Mr. and Mrs. K. Owens, Highbury, Vancouver. It was reported that “it was a

most gracious setting. [B]eautiful arrangements of daffodils, warm fellowship [and] *siarad yr hen iaith* all added to the gaiety of the evening.”

At the Anniversary Dinner on 28 September we will remember those who were involved in the building of the Hall and all those past and present members who have helped preserve the building over the past 90 years through their voluntary efforts. The Society is proud to maintain the integrity of the Cambrian Hall in honour of the dedication and foresight of Vancouver’s early Welsh pioneers and the generations who have preserved and disseminated Welsh culture and traditions from within its walls.

Photo Gallery

The upper hall and Red Dragon have hosted many activities and functions over the building’s 90-year history, including dances, drama productions, children’s Christmas parties, *noson lawen*, *gymanfa ganu*, festivals and much more. The following photos record a small selection of them:



Members of the Cambrian Circle Singers, a scene from one of the Society’s *Twmpaths* and a visit with Santa at a Society Children’s Party



A visit to the Red Dragon from the *Mari Lwyd* and a view of the Society’s popular Spring Fair



A lively performance by the Vancouver Morrismen and a well-attended performance of Dylan Thomas's famous play, *Under Milk Wood*

To celebrate the 90th anniversary of the Cambrian Hall we are having a Welsh weekend, on October 4 – 6:

Friday 4 October

We will begin the festivities with a **Noson Lawen** (Merry Evening / Pub Night) at 7:30 pm in the Red Dragon.

Saturday 5 October

In collaboration with the Vancouver Orpheus Male Choir, a "**Welsh Celebration Concert**" will be held at West Point Grey United Church. The concert will begin at 7:30 pm. For details please see the poster below.

In addition to the Orpheus choir, we have a wonderful line up of soloists; **tenor, Samuel Wyn-Morris from Wales, mezzo-soprano Nerys Jones, originally from Wales and now living in Seattle, and Vancouver's own Leanne Page, Celtic harpist.**

Tickets for the concert are available from both the choir's and the Welsh Society's webpage as listed: www.vancouverorpheus.org and/or www.welshsociety.com Tickets are also available from Gillian Rogers (phone 604 742-1378 or GillianRogers67@gmail.com) and Lynn Owens-Whalen (phone 604 970-6434).

Sunday 6 October

The third event of the weekend will be the **Gymanfa Ganu on Sunday Oct. 6**, at the Cambrian Hall at 2 pm, and both concert soloists will be there as well. If you enjoy singing, this is an event for you!

It promises to be a great weekend, and we're hoping that you will be able to join us!

Cambrian Hall 90th Anniversary

Welsh Celebration Concert

VANCOUVER
Orpheus
MALE CHOIR

featuring

**Tenor
Samuel Wyn-Morris**



**Mezzo-Soprano
Nerys Jones**



**Harpist
Leanne Page**

Saturday, October 5, 2019

7:30 pm

**West Point Grey United Church
4595 West 8th Avenue, Vancouver**

Tickets: \$30 Seniors \$25 Students \$15

On line at www.vancouverorpheus.org and www.welshsociety.com

