

ATGOFION O'R BORTH

Cymdeithas Ddinesig Bro Porthaethwy

Menai Bridge and District Civic Society

MEMORIES OF MENAI BRIDGE

Memories of Menai Bridge

Volume 14

HELEN ROWLANDS (Helen o Fon) 1891 - 1955

Our previous issues of 'Memories' have recorded personal recollections of Menai Bridge. This time we are looking at someone from Menai Bridge, but with recollections from others about their achievements. Fairview Terrace,

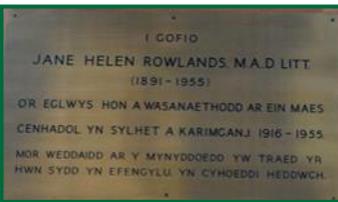


Photo of the Memorial in Capel Mawr where she was a member. With kind permission of Capel Mawr.

where Helen was born was given the additional name of Bro Helen Rowlands in her honour in the 1970s. History Point's website has some information but quite limited due to lack of space. Much fuller information is given in the Dictionary of Welsh Biography website by the National Library of Wales - an outstanding scholar, linguist and administrator but above all a missionary. These days, in this country perhaps we shy away from the idea of missionary work? Are we embarrassed, consider they were too supportive of the Raj in India, are we no longer a religious society? You cannot really understand the work and dedication of the Welsh Calvinist missionaries unless you recognise the intensity of the religious revivals in Wales in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and their importance to the development of the Nation. But to go back to the beginning - Helen was one of three children of Master Mariner Jabez Rowlands, and his wife Martha. Her two brothers were well educated and became ministers of religion. One became Canon of Bangor Cathedral and the other a missionary in Australia. Unusually for the times Helen was well educated too (perhaps with the help of Robert Davies (Menai Bridge ship owner and philanthropist?). From Beaumaris Grammar School she won a scholarship to the University College of North Wales Bangor, obtained a First Class Degree in French and a scholarship place at Newnham College, Cambridge. She didn't complete her time at Newnham and

returned home to decide what to do next. She sought the advice of the Rev Thomas Charles Williams, Minister at Capel Mawr; a charismatic and powerful preacher. She spent some time teaching French and in 1913 was appointed teacher at the Girls Central School in Newtown where she met Gwilym Williams, a fellow teacher and young poet from Carmarthenshire. She became deeply involved in church work and by 1915 resolved to dedicate herself to missionary work. Gwilym joined the Royal Welsh Fusiliers shortly after and sadly was killed in France in May 1916. In October 1916 she sailed from Liverpool to Calcutta and then on the Sylhet (map overleaf) The journey itself fraught with danger as this was at the height of the German U-boat campaign. Helen served 10 years in the Sylhet district, taught in the Williams Memorial School and became its Head in 1918. She became fluent in Bengali mastering both the spoken and written word. She was invited to become the head of the language school in Darjeeling (under the auspices of the Bengal and Assam Christian Council) and seconded to Calcutta University to study for a MA in Indian Vernaculars. On furlough in 1930 she registered at the Sorbonne to study for a doctorate and



Helen Rowlands with Gandhi, on his visit to the School in Darjeeling. Copyright photo by kind permission of Anglesey Archives.

Mae Cymdeithas Ddinesig Bro Porthaethwy yn diweddarau ei chofnodion, ffotograffau a'i Gwefan er mwyn ei gwneud yn haws i'r aelodau eu gweld. Byddwn yn ceisio ychwanegu at y rhain yn gyson drwy gydol y flwyddyn ac yn cyhoeddi pigion gyda'ch Cylchlythyr. Mae croeso mawr bob amser i gyfraniadau newydd, yn ogystal â help i adnabod pobl yn y lluniau.

Ewch i'n Gwefan yn www.menaibridgecivicsociety.org.uk

Menai Bridge Civic Society is updating its records, photographs and Website to make them more accessible to members. We will try to add to these regularly throughout the year and publish extracts with your Newsletter. New contributions are always welcome, as is help with identifying people in photographs.

See our Website at www.menaibridgecivicsociety.org.uk

upon the special recommendation of her professor presented her thesis in a year and was duly awarded her degree, 'Docteur de l'Universite de Paris'. She was offered Chairs in Bengali by Universities worldwide but chose to return and teach, and evangelise in Karrimganj, Assam, accepting an honorary professorship at the Indian Government college there. Putting academic brilliance aside for the moment what sort of person was she?

She was a keen writer keeping in touch with friends, contributing to the press especially y Cenhadwr, Y Goleuad and her reports to the Foreign Mission. Most of these are archived (I hope!) in the National Library in Aberystwyth but if anyone has copies do please let the Civic Society know. It would be fascinating to look at them in detail as they cover one of the most turbulent times in India's history - from the aftermath of WWI to WW2 where intense battles at Kohima halted the Japanese advance through Burma, to the partition of India in 1947. Karimanj was right on the border and Helen witnessed the dreadful events of that time.

She was trusted and respected by her congregation and local population. On 15th August 1947 on the first day of Independent India she was invited by the new authorities to attend a ceremony to release the prisoners from the town jail. Not all missionaries supported independence but Helen was seen as supportive, a Swarajist (a believer in church freedom and self-government) She had certainly translated and been a strong advocate of the work of Rabindranath Tagore, a nationalist poet and R Kanta Sen. She is believed to have known Gandhi personally and mourned with others in Karimanj when he was assassinated in 1948. She was however sufficiently regarded to be invited to read from the Bible, together with Hindu and Muslim clerics, to the immense crowds who gathered to mark his passing.

As she was well thought of by the Foreign Mission (Calvinist) together with the British Administration—perhaps diplomacy should be added to her skills. One Administrator, W. R Owain-Jones OBE MSc, wrote in his article, 'The contribution of Welshmen to the administration of India', published by the Honorable Society of Cymrodorion, "To have been in India without visiting the Welsh mission field in Assam and north-east India would have been an unpardonable omission for a Welshman, particularly one brought up in the Presbyterian faith.....at the end of 1951 I visited Haflong as the guest of Dr Helen Rowlands, one of the best-known and best-loved missionaries in north-east India.... Her knowledge of Bengali never failed to attract the attention and appreciation of such litterateurs as Sir Jagadish and Lady Bose ...And yet her Welsh, the language of the Monwysion, was as impeccable and beautiful to listen to as it was on the day she had left Anglesey. On that day in 1951 we reminisced nostalgically of Anglesey and I could almost feel the sea breezes" More recently Nabanipa Bhattacharjee wrote about her in the North East Review (of India), "She also published evangelical (WCMC) works and relentlessly continued to train poor, rural women to

become self-reliant. The economic independence of women, Rowland ardently believed, was the mainstay of a just, egalitarian and free social order. No wonder she dreamt of and struggled for it all her life.

Rowlands Memorial High School was established in 1986 in the loving memory of Madam J.H.Rowlands. Its aim is to provide it's students with all-round development i.e. both academic & co-curricular activities. It is run by the Mizo Synod board in Mizoram. It is a missionary school following the Presbyterian methodology of Protestant Christianity..."



Khassia Hills—around the town of Shillong, river is the Brahmaputra, leading to Calcutta. Myanmar (Burma) and China to the East and North.



Photo: from Rowlands Memorial High School website

In Karimganj she established 'Dipti Nibash' - Home of Light - a home for widows and orphans of the area - where

they could gain education and skills, such as spinning, in order to earn a living.

Jane Helen Rowlands died suddenly in Karimganj on 12th February 1955 and her grave is there in front of the chapel. The library of Karimganj college is named 'Rowlands Hall' in her memory. Many thousands attended her funeral to pay tribute to a 'humble woman' who decided to serve others and to help the weak and the poor.

Much has been written about her and is being written by PhD scholars in India. A full Bibliography will be given on our Website together with a full version in Welsh. If you have any memories of this multi-talented missionary do please get in touch. **Liz Moyle**