



# KNOWING EDNA BONNELL

By  
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## A Bônau Cabbage Patch Supplement

### KNOWING EDNA BONNELL (1907 - 1997)

I don't know how many people left in Pwll will remember Mrs Edna Bonnell who made a significant contribution to Welsh cultural life for most of the last century. She is mentioned by academics who have researched the Welsh Amateur Dramatic movement during her time. I have learnt a great deal from the work of another Pwll-ite, Dr Bethan Clement, whose monograph "Cwmni Drama'r Pwll" covers Edna's writings and the fortunes of the company which she led from the 40's onwards. They performed locally, toured Wales and indeed further afield. My mother and step-father were long standing members of this company, so I knew Edna from a very early age. I watched the company rehearse in Stradey School, travelled to venues with

them, watching backstage while they performed. I even formed part of the company briefly until A-levels intervened and later knew her as a neighbour when she and Brin retired from caretaking at Stradey School and came to live next door to us in Bassett Terrace.

It is only when one is old that one recognises the formative influences in one's life; family, of course, one or two teachers perhaps; education, experiences, and individuals who fit into none of these categories. One such individual for me was Edna. Looking back, I know I always found her interesting, enjoying hearing her talk and watching her at work. She, in turn, showed an interest in me, particularly my schooling, asking questions about my homework, especially if it involved words in which we were both so interested. I was no more than 9 or 10 when we had an exercise to find words ending in -ate.



One definition was "to speak evasively". Edna taught me the word "to prevaricate". I was very impressed and grateful (and now surprised that such an exercise was given to a 10 year old, but it was the 1940's before 'dumbing down'!)

She was not well-educated in the conventional sense. She left school at 14 to go 'into service', but she left with a love of reading and literature which lasted her entire life. She spoke of a headmaster who gave the class some Shakespearean speeches to learn and I can hear her now quoting Wolseley's farewell to the world in "Henry VIII"...

*"O Cromwell, Cromwell  
Had I but served my God with half the  
zeal*

*I served my king, he would not in my age  
Have left me naked to mine enemies"*

When I had my one and only A for a piece of work in Aberystwyth, she asked if she could read it. I think she thought, hoped, it was a piece of creative writing rather than something esoteric about



(Above: The man sitting is Royston Phillips from Pwll. The others are stalwarts of the company Hugh Barney, Edna Bonnell, Brin Bonnell, Edwina Barney. The woman sitting and the man next to her are Megan & Martin Griffiths from Dafen. Martin was a well known actor on S4C)

John Milton's style. She was so impressed by conventional education, and keenly felt what she considered to be her inadequacies. I would love to be able to tell her now how gifted she was.

Quite inappropriately, I was often backstage during performances in remote village halls, and, as well as experimenting with the make-up, I would write reviews of the performances of the plays I had seen being rehearsed and acted so many times. The comments were along the lines of:-

"Mr Hugh Barney gave a very strong performance tonight" or

"The comic scenes did not work so well this evening."

Edna liked reading these naive efforts and told my mother that such activity should be encouraged. My mother preferred me to get on with my homework!

I loved watching the company rehearse in the school hall. Edna would be down in the body of the hall, directing, even though she had one of the main parts. Sometimes, I would be asked to 'stand in' for her on stage; she would say the lines while she kept an eye on the positions and the movements. Her forte was emphasis and tone. She instinctively sensed the nuances of the words - after all, she had written them - and would get quite cross if the emphasis was put on the wrong word or phrase. I'm sorry to say it was Brin, her husband, who was often criticised in this respect! I also remember that she had a habit of labouring the joke; over explaining the punch-line. The rest of the company had to persuade her not to include too many words, and convince her that her expert comic dialogue was best served by an economic approach. I used to love these arguments and am aware now of how collaborative the whole venture was. Like Shakespeare, she used to write for specific individuals; she was the sharp-witted maid, Brin a chaplinesque servant

– wooer, my mother the snooty mistress of the house, while Hugh was usually the character who lent gravitas. Nancy Weller often played the 'grande-dame' to perfection.



(Above: Edna winning the chair in Libanus Eisteddfod during the 70's. The man behind her is the Parchedig Elfryn Jones who was a past minister of Libanus and invited back to the eisteddfod as adjudicator).

Edna had a great sense of the ridiculous. I remember when they were rehearsing "Hobson's Choice" in translation. References to Hobson's daughters having children evoked peals of laughter considering that Edna, Edwina and Brenda (Davies) were too old to be playing these parts, with two of them past child-bearing age! Her sense of humour, however, often eluded her in performances and she used to get very angry if any of the company 'corpsed' on stage (i.e. laughed when they shouldn't). I have a clear recollection of her backstage threatening to bring down the curtain unless my mother and Brin controlled their laughter (I think Brin's false moustache had inappropriately slipped during a serious moment). Edna's wild gesticulations in the wings, which the actors could see from the stage, only served to increase their hysteria. She would later see the funny side and regale company with such stories e.g. the chairman at one village performance who, taking his duties a little too literally, insisted on having a chair on the stage while they performed the play around him. He laughed heartily at all the jokes, clapped enthusiastically, but surely destroyed the 'suspension of disbelief'

which a sophisticated audience is supposed to adopt! There were village halls so primitive that exits and entrances had to be executed via fire places, and where the children in the audience (invariably placed in the front row) were so near the stage that during serious moments, they resorted to pushing their sweet wrappers into the shoes of the actors. It's funny that I should end up in Cardiganshire where so many of these performances took place (e.g. there's a 1952 poster advertising a performance in the chapel vestry in Talgarreg) and to this day I have people who speak affectionately about the visits of "Cwmni Drama'r Pwll" or "Cwmni Edna Bonnell". This was especially evident when my mother came to live in Aberaeron where she was occasionally treated as a celebrity! I came to realise how important the visits of the company were, especially during the dark days of the war.

When the company finished touring, Edna formed "Cwmni Libanus" retaining many of her old stalwart members, but also recruiting a new generation of Pwll-ites. She also formed "Y Parti", a group of singers and readers who performed for local chapels, churches and societies. At the age of 85, she published her one and only novel "Weithiau'n Deg" - an extraordinary achievement. She carried on writing until almost the end and I can still see and hear her at her very old typewriter working away between cooking and cleaning. She was an excellent cook, was very house-proud (e.g. the whole house had to be cleaned from top to bottom before she went on holiday) and never missed sweeping her dusty Bassett Terrace front every day. If she or my mother was under the weather, the other swept the two fronts. They were such good friends, both widowed, with a shared past full of laughter and friendship,

It has taken me many years to appreciate what a strong influence she was on my childhood, and to perceive the

importance of her contribution, and of others like her, dotted in little villages and



(Above: Edna is 2<sup>nd</sup> from the left. The company had obviously won another prize!)

small towns. She played an important part in Welsh life during most of the last century. She has intensified my belief in the importance of education and opportunity, but shown too that talent can flower despite disadvantages. She loved her many siblings - I feel I know them all, so warm and vivid were her proud stories about their successes and those of their children. Her sense of family and community was unwaveringly strong. We'll forgive her being born in Llwynhendy; it was to Pwll she brought home the cups, the accolades and the kudos. We can be so proud to call her one of Pwll's most illustrious inhabitants.

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### Cwmni Drama Elli, Llanelli, 1931



CYMERIADAU:

Tom Morgan Gwenny Hoskin Edna Bonnell Tom Griffiths  
W. I. Morris D. J. Beynon