



THE BLENHEIM BOMBER MEMORIAL WALK.
by Judy Cox and Ken Clark
adapted from The Beacon

On Sunday 22nd September 1940 in the early afternoon, a Bristol Bomber returning to base while on a training flight from RAF Upwood, Huntingdonshire, crashed on the Blorenge Ridge near Garn Clochdy between Goytre Wharf and Abersychan. The crew of three were killed; Sergeant Hubert Henry Wilson, 22, from London, pilot; Pilot Officer Anthony Drake Copplestone, 29, of Hampshire, observer; Sergeant John November, 20, from Birmingham, wireless operator/air gunner.



The weather was poor, damp and misty and the crew would have been flying on instruments without visibility. The Blenheim Bomber was an extremely uncomfortable plane with an alarming accident rate.

People living in Varteg reported hearing a low-flying aircraft approaching from the northeast followed by a loud “crump”. Mr Ken Jones and Mr Jack May reported hearing the plane then the crash but the poor visibility prevented them seeing the ‘plane; however people did report seeing a red glow reflected in the sky as the fuel burned. Next day the crash site and the people working there could be seen clearly.

PC Earnest Clarke, stationed at Varteg, heard the crash and reported it to PC Tom Jarvis at Abersychan Police Station who informed his sergeant Sgt G Davies and was then instructed to go to Garn Clochdy to investigate. He was not the first on the scene; several men and young boys from Cwmafon were already there. The moorland was badly scarred, wreckage scattered over a large area and the bodies of the three crew members in and beside the plane. These they wrapped in parachutes and transferred to a nearby barn, later they were transported to the mortuary at Panteg Hospital by farm cart then ambulance. PC Clarke gave one of the young boys a note and a threepenny piece to run down to the Ffrwd Arms to ask the landlord to phone the contents of the note to the Sergeant at Abersychan Police

Station. He then spent a very wet night in heavy rain trying to find shelter while guarding the wrecked plane.



The following day the RAF removed the wreckage using a large trailer, which had great difficulty negotiating Waterworks Lane, then a rough, muddy lane. Two significant pieces of equipment were missing from the wreckage, a machine gun with its ammunition belt and an aircraft rear wheel, a search of the area failed to find them! However, some weeks later, the gun and ammunition belt were found in a house in Varteg and then a policeman saw a man wheeling a homemade wheelbarrow, the wheel was the missing aircraft wheel. Both men later appeared in Court at Pontypool. One of the RAF recovery crew was Freddie Mills who became the world middleweight boxing champion.

Although the crash resulted in quite a lot of damage to the moorland at the time, there are no signs today. The only indication of the crash is an inconspicuous brass plate lying on the ground under a small heap of stones.

Those who walked the Ridge and knew the history thought this an inadequate memorial and so the Pontypool Ramblers Group decided that a new stone and plaque should be placed in time for the sixtieth anniversary of the crash.

The Abersychan and Garndiffaith Local History Society then took over the

organisation. They researched the history of the flight, identified the families of the dead crew, arranged with Torfaen County Borough Council that Brian Arthur, the Countryside Warden, together with Jonathan Howells would find and erect a large limestone slab, and commissioned a fine steel plaque; this is mounted on the west face of the stone, the small brass plate is mounted on the east face. The site is within the Brecon Beacons National Park and planning permission was required to erect the stone on the common, this was given priority treatment!



On the morning of Friday 22nd September 2000, the sixtieth anniversary of the crash the stone was dedicated. It was a brilliant sunny day. Groups of schoolchildren, local people, former airmen and ex-servicemen, local representatives, walkers and one horse rider made their way to the site. Coaches brought the schoolchildren, still not an easy journey up Waterworks Lane, Land Rovers ferried people across the moor and groups walked up from Abersychan and from the Horseshoe Inn at Mamhilad. Father Ron Jefford, the Mayor of Torfaen's Chaplain and the Rev Ken Morgan officiated at the ceremony. At 10.45 am a Hawker jet from RAF Valley flew across the mountain, circled low dipped its wings and flew away. The schoolchildren released red, white and blue balloons. Each balloon carried a tag to see which balloon travelled the furthest. The winning balloon reached Lincolnshire but,

amazingly, it landed on the lawn in front of an old Blenheim Bomber propeller kept as a souvenir.



Relatives of the crew were traced and two were able to attend the ceremony, Mrs Brenda King, from London, sister of Sergeant Wilson and Mrs Clare Jeffries,

from Birmingham, sister of Sergeant John November. For them it was a most moving ceremony held amid beautiful weather and superb scenery. The Mayor of Torfaen, Cllr Gwyneira Clark, entertained the relatives and organisers to a lunch at the Civic Centre.

Since 2000 on Remembrance Sunday, the Brecon Beacons Park Society together with the Abersychan and Garndiffaith local History Society have walked to the stone and laid wreaths together with a wreath from the Mayor of Torfaen. Ken Clark gives a short history of the crash and stone and there is a two minutes silence; he also writes to the relatives with an account of the ceremony and photographs – if the weather is kind. It is a quiet and moving ceremony.