

# LLANGWM VILLAGE NEWS

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## *LITTLE VILLAGE, BIG RESULT*



Llangwm women re-create the days of the WW1 Red Cross Working Party, knitting socks and scarves for the men at the front line, in a memorable scene from the recent Village Opera, which played to full audiences and great acclaim in Llangwm and beyond.

*Read the full story behind the production on the centre pages.*

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# LITTLE VILLAGE, BIG RESULT

## The story behind the Llangwm Opera

What chance a little village in the middle of West Wales composing and producing a professional standard opera? Seemingly low, you might think.

The original idea, hatched by a small group from Llangwm Local History Society, was to organise an entertainment to mark the anniversary of the outbreak of World War 1 - an evening of music hall perhaps, like the recruitment concerts of the time. And they knew just the person to write it, local composer Sue Howley, the power behind the successful local choir Village Voices.

But Sue had other ideas.

"I'll write you an opera" she told the stunned committee members.

To their credit they went along with what seemed to some a hare-brained scheme. Sue recruited poet and author Peter George from Newport as librettist and they got to work writing an original opera, consulting together by phone, email and in person. *WW1: a Village Opera* was born.



*Sue Howley, composer and musical director (left) and Peter George (writer/librettist), photographed with Jamie Owen in the Cardiff studio of BBC Radio Wales.*

The plan began to come together with a grant of £9,900 from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), the result of an application painstakingly put together by Liz Rawlings. Other funders joined in: £7,000 from the Ministry of Defence's Community Covenant as well as sums from Milford Haven Port Authority and Llangwm Community Council.

But how to give the opera a local feel? The idea was to portray a village and its people - in this case Llangwm - through the course of the war, on the battlefield and at home. Society members began their research: the local man who'd died on the first day of hostilities, the 'butter war' when feisty Llangwm women successfully resisted attempts to put up prices in the market, the two young brothers who lost their lives in the same incident on the Western Front, the chapel teas for soldiers from the nearby Hearson training camp. Peter incorporated them all in his beautifully-worded libretto, aided and abetted by Sue's music, in turns light-hearted and heart-rending.

Singers were recruited, most from Llangwm, a few from further afield, and rehearsals became a time-consuming part of all their lives. A talented director, Carol Mackintosh, came on board.

### WW1 memories on show

But it wasn't just the opera. The HLF grant had also covered an exhibition of World War 1 artefacts. That meant collecting mementos and information from local people, working out how to display them, and putting together information boards telling the story of the war and Llangwm's part in it. Altogether there were 62 boards, professionally produced with the help of Mark Thomas from the county museum.

From the start the intention had been to add an audio-visual aspect to the exhibition. History Society member Pam Hunt, a former independent film producer, put together a remarkable film incorporating footage from the Imperial War Museum and the Fleet Air Arm interspersed with film of two local men Graham Stephens and Richard Palmer reading excerpts from relatives' diaries, in Graham's case his great great grandfather's diary and in Richard's his pilot uncle's flying log books.

The exhibition, in a transformed village hall, was a success. Hundreds of visitors dawdled through it in the seven days it was open and afterwards wrote their comments in the visitors' book: "a lot of hard work but a wonderful exhibition", "amazing", "fascinating", "brilliant". One teacher wrote: "I brought my class of 10 and 11 year olds - a fascinating experience for all of us - comprehensive and compelling".



One 'character' from the exhibition in particular received more than his share of publicity: Richard Palmer's uncle David Sambrook starred in several newspaper and magazine stories with his exploits in rickety WW1 flying machines over the fields of the Western Front. He, fortunately, was one of those who survived the war and returned eventually to Llangwm. But those who were never to return were also on village minds on the day the exhibition opened, with the re-dedication of the roll of honour, listing some of the 17 local men who lost their lives. It now has pride of place above the entrance to the Village Hall.



## The opera takes shape

So what of the opera? Well, preparations reached fever pitch with a dress rehearsal the night before the opening performance on November 12 at Cleddau Reach VC School, with ITV's *Wales at 6* in attendance plus a comprehensive feature on the BBC's *Good Morning Wales*. Local papers had also been supportive throughout the run-up and on the morning before the first performance the *Western Mail* topped them all with a full page feature and photograph of the two young lovers at the centre of the story (in real life Louise Hales and Dave Moore). Sue and Peter featured on Radio Wales's *Jamie Owen Show*, and Sue did an extended interview (alongside two slightly more famous musical stars conductor Carlo Rizzi and tenor Adrian Thompson) on *The Arts Show*, also on Radio Wales. Reporter J P Devlin from Radio 4's *Saturday Live* spent an evening with the cast and made national stars of several members. There was

also an interview on Radio Cymru - in Welsh - with wardrobe mistress Ann Donovan.

So what with all that, it had to be good. Which brings us back to the opening question. Can a small village in West Wales really compose and produce a professional standard opera? And little Llangwm, population 800, really did, against the odds, pull it off.

Most of the performances played to full houses, with standing ovations, and the emotional intensity of Sue's music, Peter's words and the singing of a committed cast was such that anyone who'd sold Kleenex at the door would have made a killing. The five performances - at the school, Newport's Memorial Hall and the Merlin Theatre - were seen by nearly 900 people. One opera buff commented afterwards that with its 'fabulous music and great singing' the opera was 'up there with the best of them'.



*The Battle of the Somme: one of the most moving scenes portrayed in the Llangwm opera - some would declare, in any opera.*

So, an artistic success, but what else did little Llangwm's opera achieve? Cast members speak of the community coming together, not only in terms of the camaraderie of those involved, but in focussing the attention of the whole village on the event. For many it was a source of personal satisfaction and pride, of discovering new talents and new friends. Sue's music, said one observer, had raised musical standards, giving individuals a platform for their best performances. And Peter's libretto, the foundation of it all, had formed a "firm trellis on which many people blossomed."

How to cap that? Well in the best traditions of theatre there's now a film, put together by Pam Hunt and local cameraman Mark Evans, plus an exhausted cast the day after the final performance. It premiered in a special showing for cast and crew at the Merlin in early February - with evening dresses and bow ties much in evidence.

**If you missed the opera, or just can't get Sue's tunes out of your head, the DVD is on sale for £10 at Llangwm village shop, Victoria Bookshop Haverfordwest, or from Jane Mills (tel 890147).**

*Report by Heather Payton*