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# MID WALES

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## Bonfire Night

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One of Hay's oldest residents **Phyllis Morgan** remembers the thrills and excitement of the 5th of November when she was a child growing up in the town, almost a century ago.



“ When we were children, bonfire night was one of the special nights of the year. As soon as October came in, there was overwhelming excitement as we started our childish preparations.

When school was over, we would go down the Warren by the river Wye to gather sticks to build a bonfire. This collection went on and on with some of our friends joining in.

To add to our pile, Mr Robert Williams gave us off cuts of dry wood from his saw yard. His yard was on the Hereford Road just a little further on from where Hay Station used to be.

Another benefactor was Mr George Newton, he was an excellent carpenter. His workshop was situated at the bottom of the lane that leads to the Caemawrs.

The floor of his workshop was a feast to our greedy eyes. It was covered with lovely curly shavings which he allowed us to fill our sacks with. It never entered our heads that we were doing him a favour by cleaning up his floor in very quick time!

My brothers were rather good at making things out of scrap materials. They made a truck out of odd pieces of timber and a set of discarded pram wheels. This was used to collect the sacks from Mr Newton's.

Now that that bonfire was ready, the days didn't go fast enough. For us, we thought November the fifth would never come.

At last, the big day arrived. The school teachers must have had their work cut out trying to control our excited chatter in order to get the lessons done. All our thoughts were centered on how much we had to spend and what fireworks we were going to buy.

A relative had given us two shillings and six pence towards ours - in old coinage, this silver-coloured coin was called half a crown. Its value in those days was thirty pence (pennies).

To add to this amount, we got our money boxes down from the high mantelpiece and off the dresser. With the aid of a dinner knife thrust into the slot of the boxes, our pennies tumbled out on to the kitchen table.

We gathered up the money and ran off to Mr Grants or Mr Moxon's shops to buy squibs, cracker jacks, bangers, jacky

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jumpers, sparklers, coloured matches, and Catherine wheels. Most of these in old money cost half a penny or one penny each.

Present day children will have difficulty in believing that we could get so many fireworks for that amount of money.

In those days, the fireworks were not so sophisticated as they are today neither were they so dangerous, also you could purchase them at any age.

The final excitement was the burning of the tar barrels. In those days, Hay had a railway station. Near the station was the gas works. The people in charge were responsible for sufficient gas for local use.

My brothers usually managed to get an empty tar barrel from the boss of the works. They carted it home on the truck they had made.

We called this truck a 'bodge'. This word bodge must have been applicable to Hay locals and also the country folk because I find no mention of it in the dictionary.

When the boys got the barrel home, damp shavings were put in the bottom of it to prevent it burning too quickly. The barrel was then filled with sticks and anything that would burn.

A metal chain was fastened around its middle to which was attached one of dad's scaffolding ropes. The barrel was then set alight.

Two of us caught hold of the rope and, pulling the blazing barrel behind us, we ran from 1 Church Street, up Oxford Road, down by the Baptist Chapel, then into Zion Street, finishing up at the Town Clock. Some children in other parts of the town would do the same. Policemen, adults and children would gather round and watch until the barrels burnt out. I remember one year in particular - there were four barrels burning at the same time. It was a wonderful sight, with the red flames leaping up in all directions.

I was talking to one of my brothers the other day when he jogged my memory about a certain incident that took place on bonfire night. A number of the town children, including ourselves, had built a bonfire in the Council Meadow.

When the police got to hear of it, two of them arrived on the night to stop it being lit. As the policemen chased them, the boys kept striking matches and throwing them onto the wood pile. Most of the matches went out before reaching the pile.

Eventually it caught light and as the flames shot up the children's cheers were deafening. The police were powerless to do anything but stand and watch - the same as the rest of us and the surprise was that no-one seemed to have a summons or were taken to the police station.

Whilst looking through a book the other day, I came across this interesting information concerning Catherine Wheels. They were named after Catherine of Alexandria who was a saint and martyr. She lived in the fourth century and tried to convert Emperor Maxi minus to Christianity. Because of that she was scourged, imprisoned and then tortured on a wheel.

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Perhaps some readers, like me, didn't know this.

*Written by Phyllis Morgan from Hay-on-Wye*

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#### your comments

**Jill Preston from Hay on Wye**

When i was a child in Hay we lived and played on Black Lion Green where my uncle Mike Barrell still lives and my uncle Bob Knight lives at the old police station over looking Black Lion Green. The people who lived there were like one big family even if they were not related. We had a bonfire on the green for the peope from that end of the town, Mrs Ivy Price always made the guy and us children would start collecting boxes and anything that would burn in the half term hols, we would also get Colin Price to come with us over the Dingle where he would cut branches out of trees and we would drag them back to be the main supports for the bonfire. My nan and grandad Bill and Ety Barrell lived on the Green and they would keep watch over our bonfire as it was not unknown for it to be set alight if others thought it was better than theirs. The men always set of the fireworks and we would roast spuds in the fire we all stood around the fire one huge happy family talking, laughing and being happy just to look into the fire and feel the warmth it gave off the men always made sure it was safe before we went home and then my nan and grandad would watch it the next day to be sure it burnt out, when it had gone cold it would be cleaned up, I wonder sometimes where these wonderf! ul times have gone, but i am so lucky to have wonderfully happy memories.

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