Duel fought in Aberystwyth

By Will O' Whispers

— Excitement filled the air in Aberystwyth one December weekend 145 years ago, when it spread that a duel was to be fought in the town between two gentlemen.

There was no local newspaper in those days, but the event did attract the attention of The Cambrian, a newspaper printed in Swansea but reporting news about all parts of Wales.

Sensational headlines were hardly invented back in 1839, the newspaper merely prefacing its report with three words: "AFFAIR OF HONOUR!"

"On Saturday evening last," it reported, "a dispute arose between two young gentlemen of Aberystwyth, and as nothing would settle the affair but a duel, a challenge was given and accepted."

"Seconds were chosen, and Bullith (Buichert?) Mawr, a large adjoining the town, was the spot chosen for the bloody arena..."

"Accordingly on Monday morning the parties, accompanied by their seconds, proceeded to the ground. And as soon as the day began to dawn, a distance of 12 yards was measured."

The combatants took their stations and at a given signal fired—happily without effect. The whole of their courage not having been exploded with their pistols, another round was fired—with the same success."

"When the two heroes, having given the most undebatable proof that they were gentlemen, shook hands, and the dispute was ended."

I am indebted to Mr. Brian Llwyd, of 41 Cyn Aur, Llanilar, for drawing my attention to the reference in The Cambrian..."

Duelling had, of course, been an established custom for several hundred years by this time, but the practice was fast dying out by 1839.

Judicial duels, or trial by battle, had been introduced to England by William the Conqueror, and were actually a part of English law until 1819. Ridiculous as it may seem today, defendants could appeal for a duel to settle a case and could get off scot free if they won.

In 1818 one Thomas Thornton was accused of murdering Mary Ashford. He threw down the gauntlet in court and claimed his right to challenge his accuser, Mary Ashford's brother.

The court allowed the suit, but the challenge was not taken up. The law was still intact. Thornton escaped. Soon after this, judicial duels was abolished.

However, the British military code authorised duels until the 1840s when ten celebrated cases caused a change in public opinion, the formation of an anti-duelling association and the eventual amendment of the military code to forbid duels.

The first case was in 1818 when the Earl of Cardigan shot Captain Harvey Tuckett. The earl was tried by the House of Lords and acquitted. The second case was three years later when a Lieutenant Alexander Munro shot his brother-in-law, Lieut Col David Fawcett.

But British traditions, however silly, die hard, and duels continued to be fought by "gentlemen" who mercifully slipped across the English Channel to Calais or Boulogne to settle a matter where one party had insulted the other. In the 19th century, some well-known public figures took part in duels: William Pitt, Charles James Fox, the poet Sheridan, and Duke of Wellington, for example.

Perhaps the best known local case of a duel is that recounted at Llandyfrynog, when the Earl of Carnarvon, a 34 year-old man, his tombstone has the simple epitaph "Alas poor Heslop."