

From dung collecting to buying the world's most expensive diamond

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Dyddiaduron Richard Burton Archifau Richard Burton, Prifysgol Abertawe

Actor, lover, drinker: possibly the first three words that come to mind when thinking of Port Talbot born film star and heartthrob, Richard Burton. But he was also a prolific writer and diarist, recording his private thoughts from the age of fourteen. Now, thanks to National Lottery players, young people in Port Talbot are using his extensive collection to uncover the social history of the town and its inhabitants from the 1930s to the present day.

Students from Neath Port Talbot College will delve through the star's writing and find out what it was like to grow up in Port Talbot and see how different – or not – the issues facing a young Burton were from those experienced by today's local youngsters.

As part of the £34,000 Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF)-supported Burton @ 14 project, the students aim to create lasting resources for other local people and schoolchildren, utilising training in video recording, oral history, archiving, digital and arts skills to re-tell the town's story.

Eirwen Hopkins of Swansea University, who is running the Burton @ 14 project, explains the background: "The Richard Burton Archives at Swansea University holds an extensive collection of Burton's original writings, and the young people quickly realised that some people in Port Talbot have little idea of the real man, despite hailing from the same streets as he walked.

"Burton's stardom left a huge legacy for the town, but the town also impacted strongly on him as a young man growing up in south Wales. We want to use his private diaries to reconnect local young people with the history of personal, social and artistic change that is right on their doorsteps."

Dung collecting and selling

After his mother's death when only two years old, Burton - or Richard Jenkins as he was at the time - was taken in by his sister and her husband. There was little spare money in the family, so to earn enough to visit the cinema Burton collected newspaper wrapping for his fishmonger aunt as well as collecting and selling dung from a nearby hillside to a local fertilizer merchant. After Richard showed artistic promise in school, English teacher Philip Burton took him under his wing, giving him acting, elocution and language classes before becoming his legal guardian when Richard was 18 – and Richard took his mentor's name as his own.

It was from this childhood wrought with change that Burton's acting career was built, with Burton going on to achieve worldwide fame and fortune, enough to buy the world's most expensive diamond in 1969 for his film star wife, Elizabeth Taylor.

Crucially, Port Talbot played the backdrop to Burton's personal and dramatic development.

Richard Bellamy, Head of HLF in Wales, believes the project can give a new insight into life in the industrial area: "For today's local young people, seeing life in the town through the eyes of an adolescent Burton in the 1930s and 1940s will prove an interesting journey. It is a unique opportunity to view a community's historic development but to do so through the eyes of a global icon."

A community showcase

As well as gaining technical skills, the young people will also visit local landmarks that were important to the young Burton, and watch some of the films that were showing in cinemas at the time. The project will culminate in a lasting resource pack being created for the community, as well as a series of events to share and showcase the group's findings.

Aberavon MP Stephen Kinnock added: "Connecting young people with the history of their local area is important, and taking advantage of as rich a local resource as the Richard Burton Archives should provide a wealth of material with which Port Talbot can be better understood, from such a unique viewpoint. Having worked with HLF earlier in the year on a funding fair, it is heartening to see the success of local groups as a result, and I would encourage others to take advantage of the opportunity to discuss ideas with HLF staff in Wales. "

Neath Port Talbot is one of the Heritage Lottery Fund's priority areas in Wales and if you want to find out more about how HLF can help get your idea off the ground, contact the Wales team via email: wales@hlf.org.uk or on tel: 029 2034 3413.

Notes to editors

The Burton @ 14 project is a partnership between the Richard Burton Archives at Swansea University, Neath Port Talbot College (NPTC Group) and Neath Port Talbot Library Services.

Further information

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