



● Astronomer Mr Gerry Lacey with the bottles found at the observatory.

AMATEUR ASTRONOMER Gerry Lacey is hoping scientists will uncork the mid-19th century secrets of glass bottles discovered in the laboratory of a Welsh pioneer of photography.

The bottles could contain traces of chemicals or just plain Victorian air—but either way, Mr Lacey, a member of Swansea Astronomical Society, believes they are worth investigating.

The bottles, two of them firmly sealed by their heavily-corroded metal caps, were discovered in the annexe to an observatory built by John Dillwyn Llewelyn in the grounds of his estate at Penllergaer, near Swansea, in 1851.

The grounds is now part of Eliw Valley Borough Council's civic centre and the bottles are being cared for on the council's behalf by the society. They are, at present part of an exhibition at

the centre into Dillwyn Llewelyn's interest in photography astronomy. Dillwyn Llewelyn's wife Emma was a cousin of photography innovator Fox Talbot, and she and her husband were the first photographers in Wales.

Mr Lacey believes the bottles could be of modern scientific interest. A group of American scientists are reported to be looking for 19th century brass buttons to compare samples of air trapped inside with present-day air for any difference in levels of chemical pollutants.

"We suspect that the annexe

was used as a laboratory and it is a reasonable assumption that the bottles could have contained photographic chemicals," said Mr Lacey yesterday. "Analysis could tell us how sophisticated or crude they were in terms of purity."

He also believes analysis of air in the bottles, particularly if they had been thoroughly cleaned before the caps were put on, could provide information on pollution in the 19th century.

Mr Lacey is now hoping that the challenge will be taken up by a university.

Old bottles may uncork secrets