

St Nicholas' Area Traditions

First of all, two questions -

- 1) How wide is an area?
- 2) What does 'tradition' mean?

There is no intention, here, to try to answer one or other of the questions, just to say briefly that -

- 1) the following information comes from the parishes of St Nicholas, Granston and Llanwnda.
- 2) the information comes from old newspaper articles, informal discussions and books about the history of the area. There is a bibliography at the end.

Enjoy!

Traditionally, there was a tea party held, once a year, above Porth Sychan cove which brought many families and friends together from a wide area for the day. This tradition may be related to the pilgrimage that many worshipers made, long ago, to 'Degan's Chapel', which once stood above the cove.

It is said that St Degan was one of the four who escaped the rising tide as 'Cantre'r Gwaelod' sank beneath the waves. They came to Pencaer to find peace and quiet. The priest, Degan, set up a hermit's abode. People came to him for cures as the water from his well was good for sore eyes. After his death, a piece of his habit was long regarded as a religious relic, before it was sold to people from away, and then was lost.

A member of the Morse family, who lived in Tai Bach, near Porth Sychan, remembers carrying water from the well to strengthen her grandmother's eyes. The old woman lived in North Pole cottage, and asked specifically for the well water for her eyes. She had faith in its ability to heal them.

Unfortunately the old chapel is no longer visible above Porth Sychan, although the site is shown on old maps. 'Capel' is the name used by the Lewis family, Tresinwen, for the land where it stood, to this day.

According to tradition, Mr Mortimer, the farmer at Llanwnwr, was the first in the area to see French ships as they sailed towards Carreg Wastad in February 1797. Although at first they tried to dupe the Welsh by flying British banners, Mortimer knew by their rigging that they were foreign ships, and he warned the locals. Very shortly, the British flags were taken down and the 'Tricolour' was hoisted. (1)

'Wreca' (collecting firewood from flotsam on the beach) was a common practice in the area, with Pwll Deri, Pwll Crochan, Pwll Ddawnan and Cwm Felin being exciting places to beachcomb. In the 1950s and 60s, when a 'spin on the motorcycle' was popular with young men in all areas, it was a tradition among some families for the men to spend Christmas morning at Pwll Deri while their wives or mothers saw to the turkey! A trip to Pwll Deri would be an easier option than the alternative for some Fishguard lads!

There has always been much talk of secret activity in Pwll Deri, in the dark hours of night during World War II. At the time, an Irish lady lived in the house which is now a Youth Hostel. There was some discussion that light signals appeared between the house and German ships off the coast. Nothing was proved at the time, but it was entirely possible that the crews of submarines ventured into quiet coves at night in search of fresh water to replenish their tanks.

While beachcombing, after the war, one local gentleman found a wooden box on the shingle. The box contained a pair of high quality, high specification binoculars. Inside the cover, the owner's name was written. This was a German name.

According to tradition, a mermaid was carried from Aber-bach to Tresysyllt farm. Carried from the sea, she warned the locals that if they didn't return her to the waves, some awful event would smite the area. She was quickly returned. This is J Howard Hughes's version of the tale in his book 'O Fryn Dioddef' published in 1966. There are several other versions of the story. Some speak of the mermaids curse leading to no children being born in Tresysyllt for decades.

There is a tradition that Trefaser was named after Bishop Asser who wrote the story of King Alfred. But Asser is not the only bishop to be raised in the area. Bishop John J A Thomas, Bishop of Swansea and Brecon in the 1960s was born and brought up at Trefaser Shop. (1)

The magpie has a reputation for being an unlucky bird in many areas. So it was when the children of Llanwnda parish walked to school at Henner, a century ago. Dewi Emrys James, the poet (brought up at Rhosycaerau) noted that the long and lonely walk from Rhosycaerau to Henner was made shorter by chatter and play with friends whom he would meet along the way. They would soon lose track of time and begin to hurry. They knew that the headmaster's punishment for being late was 'the cane'. They feared that. If a magpie happened to fly across their path, they immediately started to run, as it was a bad omen. (8)

--

It is said that a servant from Gilfach farm, in 1828, brought the first load of stone to build Harmony Chapel. Carrying stones on a horse and cart was heavy work, and by the time they arrived, it was three o'clock in the morning! His name was James George, known as 'Shemi Harmony' because he spent his life near the chapel.1

Another servant at Gilfach farm, who lived at 'North Pole' was William Edwards. He composed a poem for Tremarchog chapel -

In a small village in a quiet spot,
The beautiful Chapel stands;
I have sat listening here, many times
Sitting at the door.

It has 7 verses. (1)

In February 1797, at the time of the French landing, the Revd Henry Davies is said to have suffered a personal attack by French soldiers near his home, Panteirig. He was the minister of Capel Llangloffan at the time, but was returning from the Annual

Meetings at Rosebush, in the Preseli area. The soldiers took his watch from him, and the half-crown he received at Rosebush for preaching. (1)

Another tradition from the period of February 1797 is that the French were led to the Pencaer peninsula as an act of hatred and revenge by one of their own. His name was Johnny Williams, and he was deported to France as a punishment for stealing a sheep. Because of this, he was keen to gain revenge, and created a map of the coast of the Pencaer area to facilitate the landing of the French army. He was not a member of the army, nor one of those who accompanied the ships. Some go so far as to say that Napoleon Bonaparte himself was on board one of the ships! (1)

Many know the legend of the French soldier shooting at the Brestgarn clock. However, not everyone knows that the Revd David Bowen was living there at the time.

In Cotts cottage there was a mother and her newborn baby when the French came. They did no harm to either.

In Caerlem, Mary Williams was shot in the leg while trying to flee and was abused. She received a pension of £40 a year from the government for her trouble, and lived to enjoy it for over half a century afterwards.

The government paid almost £ 1,000 compensation to the area after the French invasion.

he soldiers burned and robbed at St Gwyndaf's Church, Llanwnda parish. One of them tried to sell a silver communion plate while in prison in Haverfordwest. He tried to explain that the Latin words on the plate were French. (2)

Who was Sisyllt from 'Tresisyllt? One tradition holds that he had a connection with the Sisyllt that was spoken of by Gerald of Wales while on his journey through Wales. Sisyllt Long Legs was a young man frightened by toads. They were the plague of his life. His friends tied Sisyllt into a sack and hung him up high to protect him from the toads. However, he died and was commemorated in a small toad statue at Trelyffant Farm near Moylegrove. (3)

Killing pigs. One local man who carried out this work was the storyteller Shemi Wade. Many others, before and after Shemi had been involved with killing and butchery. Author Llewelyn Jones, in his book 'Schoolin's Log' talks about the tradition in the village of Tremarchog. In broad terms, this would be the process:

One small, slim knife for killing with a cut across the throat. A larger, broader knife for cutting after the pig was hung from the beam and bled. The liver and kidneys were roasted, the lights were boiled for the fowls, and the bladder was emptied. It was blown big before being laced with a leather thong to close it and left to dry. This 'football' would be durable enough to endure a winter of kicking by the village boys.

After dealing with the heavy, odorous gut and carefully separating everything, cold water from the well would be used to wash the pig. A potato was put in the mouth to keep it ajar.

he next day, the pig would be pulled down and the work of cutting and apportioning would begin - a job for three men. The head and feet were removed, the torso halved along the spine with a hatchet and pieces neatly cut and shaped.

When jumping on his bicycle at the end of the process, the butcher would have five shillings payment in his pocket and a joint of meat for his family's supper. The rest of the meat was shared out among the community, taking care to 'pay back' for cuts of meat received from friends in the past. (7)

There is a stone in the lane leading from Brestgarn to Llanwnda which is bare of all vegetation, summer and winter. The stones around it are all mossy, and there is a myth that the effect is which is on this particular stone.

Henner School reputedly stands where Jemima captured twelve French soldiers, before driving them to Fishguard. There was a great deal of effort expended to ensure that this school was free of Church control when it was first opened. Prior to its construction, early schools were held at Dan-y-Castell, Llanwnda and Harmony Chapel. (1)

It is said that a very good lady used to live in Caerlem by the name of Mrs James. She was keen to help the area's poor families educate their children and was very

supportive of schools. Seeing that children lacked suitable clothes for going to school, she bought a roll of canvas to cut and sew into clothes for them. Many, many local children attended their first day in school wearing pinafores sewn by Mrs James, Caerlem. (1)

Some years ago, William and Mari Harries lived in Ginon. William was a great chapelgoer and used to sing hymns all the way to Chapel and all the way home. Mari was a midwife for the area, and also served as a nurse, when needed. Arianglawdd, the poet, wrote a six-verse poem in her memory. (1)

Martha Wiliam of Penffordd (between Harmony and Trefasser) was a very poor widow at the end of the 19th century. This was at a time when the Workhouse and 'living on the parish' were misfortunes that were much feared. In order to make ends meet, Martha would knit for others. She would be sent a ball of wool and would send back the knitted socks. On one occasion, a small child arrived at the door with a ball of wool so small that she was at a loss how to use it at all. She sent the child back to her mother with the exclamation. 'Did your mother think that, if there were spare wool, I would eat it?' (1)

At Llanwnwr farm, are the remains of two graves. Traditionally, they are the graves of two French soldiers from 1797. On the other hand, there is a tradition that there was a chapel, at one time, at Llanwnwr, and possibly the graves belong to an earlier period.

Llanwnwr fools. This is a very old tale of which there are many versions. The Llanwnwr farmers buy a cheese at a fair. In going home, the cheese is dropped and rolls downhill. The fools follow, one of them jumping over a hedge and running on the other side, as is done to get in front of cattle. The cheese leaps over a precipice. The fools agree that they can get at it by one taking hold of the feet of the other. When all is ready, the top fool says, 'Let me spit on my hands,' and down they go. 5

In another version of the story, they walk stock to the market in Haverfordwest to sell. Because of the distance, they arrange to rest their cattle overnight in a designated field, halfway along the route. But instead of staying with the stock, the fools walk home to Llanwnwr and have to get up much earlier in the morning to walk the full distance to Haverfordwest again.

Cultural activities at the school or chapel were a tradition for many years. An Eisteddfod or 'Penny Reading' at Easter, would be very popular. There can be no better way of sampling the flavour of these events than scanning the contents of a newspaper report summarizing the activities.

26 May 1910 The County Echo

BETHEL, ST NICHOLAS.

On Whitmonday, the Sunday School of the above place held its annual festival. In the afternoon, they marched through the village, preceded by a flag. After that they went to the schoolroom, enjoyed an excellent feast of tea and bara brith, and shared sweets among the children.

The children's sports were started after tea, but soon came lightning, thunder, and rain, and they had to be given up. By seven o'clock the storm had passed, and the schoolhouse was full to hear the youngsters. They went through an extensive program, but no one got tired of the operations because of how interesting it all was. The inspector was Mr S Mabe, and the conductor was Mr D Owen, Pwllcrochan. Great credit is due to these two brothers for their unstinting, yet highly effective efforts. The president of the meeting was the generous and hard-working gentleman Mr W G James, J.P., Llysyronen. It is worthy of note that he and his excellent spouse, Mrs James, do their part excellently with all good organizations. We also saw Mr W R Williams, Egypt; Mr A B Williams, solicitor, Fishguard and Miss Hill, from London. The meeting was led and the competitions judged by the Rev. W Rees (Ariangawdd), Harmony.

The program of the meeting: —

Reading Psalm 24-, Miss A Maddocks and her class;

'Little children, come to Jesus,' Willie John;

'Jesus the Good Doctor,' Hilda Roberts;

'The little bees', 'Sally Roberts;

'Bessie and her doll', Mary Rees;

'The orphan's plight', Martha E Thomas;

Tune from the choir;

Debate - 'Competition', D Jenkins and Tom Lloyd

'Fear of the Cow,' Tom John.

'Teach us to keep quiet with Aaron,' John Rees;

'The Child's Prayer,' Tom Rees;

'Tom's new horse', Willie Roberts;

Solo, Martha John

'Gentle Jesus, meek and mild' S J Mabe;

'I love Jesus' story,' Wm. Owen;

'Better late than not at all', 'Maggie George

'Little girl,' Hilda Roberts;

'A word or two on Jesus,' E A Price,

A Tune from the choir.

'Aberdyfi Bells, 'H M Price and Maggie George;

Questionnaire from Miss A Maddocks and the children;

Debate - 'The camouflaged creature', D Rees and W Williams;

'Spring,' E Morse;

'Sessions in Wales,' Arthur Davies

'Today and tomorrow', E A Price

Solo, Maggie Thomas

Debate,' Yr Iaith, 'Edgar Morgans and John Williams;

'George the Blacksmith's Forge' W Williams Debate, 'The penny and the three pence,' MA John and Maggie Thomas

Questionnaire by Miss A Maddocks and her debate class,

'Sharing the cake,' Dora George and EA Price

'The Shipwreck', W Roberts;

Tune, J Morgan and his party, but because of Mr J Morgan's inability to attend, he was replaced by Mr J Roberts

Conference - children by year,

W Roberts party;

Solo, D Owen

Best 'simultaneous reading' competition,

-best, Miss MA John, Tremarchog

-secondbest, Miss Maggie George, Cranged.

Reading a 'passage without punctuation'

- best, Mr W Roberts;

A speech on the spot, - best Mr David Rees.

Having paid the usual thanks to the ladies for their valuable service with the tea, and also to the president, inspector, conductors of both singing and the event, the choir sang a tune, and everyone left in full satisfaction of an afternoon spent in a meaningful and constructive way.

March 23rd, 1904 The County Echo.

ST NICHOLAS. Eisteddfod.

An eisteddfod under the auspices of Bethel Sunday School was held in the Schoolroom last Friday evening, and a very successful meeting was had in every sense. The crowd enjoyed lively competition in singing and recitation.

The Squire of Llysyronen presided, and everyone knows that he always does his work in a skilful and praiseworthy way. The minister was the Rev. Ifan Davies, Llangloffan, and "Mabon" and "Gomer" never did a better job in one eisteddfod. The musicians were judged by the able-bodied Perkins, of Hendrewen, who understands his work perfectly, and does it honestly and conscientiously. The same can be said of the famous Arianglawdd, who judged the recitation, & c. Mrs James, Llysyronen, and Miss Lewis, Trellys, were the judges of the prize bags, and these ladies did their job to everyone's satisfaction.

The program and the winners were as follows-

Solo for children under 12 years old, "Pan ddaw'r Iesu," "Bessie Lawrence, Caersegan; and Annie Mathias. New Mill.

Recitation under 12s Ruth Maud Harries, Felindwarch, and Elizabeth Higgon, Cranged.

Baritone solo, "Pinnacle of Honor", Richard John, St Nicholas.

Commentary, for children under 12, Annie Mathias, New Mill; Tom Rees, Rhydyferem.

Prize bags, ten competitors, and since there was little difference between three of them, the Chairman added 2s 6p to the prize, so three awards were given as follows 1, Martha Ann Bowen, St Nicholas; 2, Annie Mathias, New Mill; 3, Phoebe A. Griffiths, Tresissillt.

Recitation for the elderly, 1, David Owen, Tresissillt; Chairman again donates one shilling to Pollie Davies, Tresissillt.

Soprano solo, "Is My Name Down;" a good competition on this piece, and out of three Mary Williams, Trevelgarn, was awarded best.

Read a passage without commas, B. John, Trellys.

Tenor solo, "My father's little yellow cottage," B. John, Trellys.

Duo, "The two sailors", B. and J. John, Trellys.

Spelling Bee for the elderly, best J. D. Lewis, Trellys.

There were two parties [led by Mr J. D. Lewis, Trellys, and Mr B. Mathias, New Mill] - competing on the piece "Drying the Tears," the prize being awarded to Mr Mathias's party.

Wm Harries, Felindwarch, was the winner on the short speech.

The usual thanks were paid to the Chairman, Conductor and Judges for their services; also to the Rev. Isaac Jones (rector) for the loan of the schoolroom and Mr T. W. Jones (schoolmaster) for his skilful service as accompanist. The secretary was Mr B. F. Mathias, New Mill, who deserves credit for his efforts in making the movement a success. — The meeting ended with Mr B. John, Trellys, singing "Hen Wlad fy Nhadau."

--

The founder of the 'Seren Cymru' newspaper, was born at Trellys y Coed on December 10th 1822. His name was William Morgan Evans. He was also the founder of the Carmarthen Weekly Reporter and the Carmarthen Express and was the publisher of a number of non-fiction and religious books. He died at Carmarthen in November 1884. 6

At the far end of the beach at Abermawr, are the foundations of two old houses from the distant past. In one of the houses William and Phoebe Lewis raised a family. William was a weaver by profession, and was highly regarded as a good and honest worker. He was more skilled than all the neighborhood workers. He is said to have had the most elaborate carpet on his loom when he died. This was decorated with some most beautiful patterns. William died before finishing his work, and there was no other weaver in all the locality who could finish it. The carpet was intended to decorate one of Tregwynt's finest rooms.

However, William is not primarily remembered as a weaver. He wrote several of Wales' favorite hymns, namely -

'If I owned the gold of Peru.'

'There are treasures of grace.'

'Recall the righteous Jesus.'

'The name of the gentle Lamb.' and so on.

He would walk four miles to Llangloffan for every chapel service, and then four miles back to Abermawr, in all weathers.

The variety of traditions relating to Royal celebrations are vary varied, but The County Echo for 19th June 1902 carries a short report one one local man's efforts to celebrate Edward VII's coronation -

'At Driitwg, Pencaer, Mr James Rowe has erected a fine flag staff on the rocks in front of his house near the sea coast for the coronation. A white flag of peace will be hung therefrom and other ensigns of a patriotic kind will also float in the "coronation" breeze.

(Drittwg was a small holding near Penrhyn, on the coast, near Trenewydd. It no longer stands)

The families who lived at these small remote cottages above the cliffs at one time, were large, and mothers had to be inventive in the way that they managed their brood. At one time, the wife at Penrhyn would tether her small children with rope to a stake, like goats. This may seem excessive until you stand near the clifftop beside the cottage. It is then, easy to see her motive.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1 J Howard Hughes – 'O Fryn Dioddef' published in 1966, Gomer Press.
- 2 E H Stuart Jones - 'The Last Invasion of Britain' 1950.
- 3 H Thornhill Timmins - 'Nooks and Corners of Pembrokeshire' 1895
- 4 Giraldus Cambrensis - 'The Itinerary through Wales - 1188'. Dent, London 1908
- 5 T Gwynn Jones - 'Welsh Folklore and Folk Custom' 1930.
- 6 Seren Cymru – 21-11-1884
- 7 Llewelyn Jones - 'Schoolin's Log' . Michael Joseph Press, London. 1980
- 8 Eluned Phillips – 'Dewi Emrys'. Gwasg Gomer, 1971.