



**Alderman James John**

**An Uncrowned King**

By Bill Richards



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# An Uncrowned King

He was a rapier disguised as a knobbly old walking stick.

*- Description applied to Sam Ervin, the American Chief Justice who dealt with the Watergate affair.*

A slightly stooped figure in a well-used trilby hat and mackintosh who walked with a limp and spoke in broad Pembrokeshire accents which he never ever tried to disguise - that was Alderman James John, Justice of the Peace, County and Rural councillor and un-crowned King of Llangwm, who was known throughout the county and particularly in Haverfordwest. Because of his modest demeanour many people under-estimated James John. They could not have made a greater mistake, and some of them lived to regret it.

James John came of humble Llangwm stock, who were working class and proud of it, and he had the minimum of formal education. But by the time he had reached middle-age he was a man of great local influence and went on from there to become one of the most extraordinary figures in Pembrokeshire public life. He wielded tremendous power, was feared by those who stepped out of line in any way, respected by most of his colleagues in public life, and held in affection by his close friends, of whom I counted myself fortunate to be one. In his native Llangwm and the surrounding area his popularity was unique. He was The Godfather (in the most benevolent way) and, indeed, scores of local people called him "Uncle Jim". This, I was assured, was not so much due to any filial bond as to the fact that in some way or other he had helped them along life's path. It was not just coincidence that so many Llangwm men and women held good jobs in public and other spheres! All this is not to say that Jim John did not have his opponents. They, too, were legion and no wonder when one considered that, when he felt the occasion demanded it, he was disconcertingly outspoken and a ruthless manipulator. The truth was that Jim John just didn't give a damn for anybody. He was completely without fear. He was never embarrassed by any situation or in awe of anyone's presence. Only once I saw him angry and then he was very angry indeed. But even that lasted for just a short time. Sometimes when he had been particularly controversial I would warn him to be cautious. He always gave the same reply - "Why should I worry?" They can't sue me because I haven't got anything, and they can't bribe me because I don't want anything". This, I believe, was absolutely true. He belonged to that extremely rare breed who genuinely have no interest in acquiring worldly wealth. He had no money or possessions, and this gave him more strength than the man striving for personal gain.

His courage was illustrated in many ways. When he was made a Justice of the Peace back in the twenties, he turned up at the Shire Hall for his first Court dressed in a jacket which had seen better days and a pair of corduroy trousers. Having never been in the Shire Hall before he stopped at the door and asked a senior police officer the way in. "Straight in through the passage" replied the officer brusquely adding, "And defendants sit at the back". There was a quick change of attitude when Jim said he was one of the new magistrates. Many years later I saw him stand his ground with remarkable tenacity in exchanges with Mr. Justice Wilfrid Lewis, a very well-known High Court judge who lived at Henllan, near Narberth, who was presiding over a Pembrokeshire Quarter Sessions business meeting of magistrates at the Shire Hall. These business meetings never took long: recommendations were explained briefly by the chairman and were then accepted with little or no discussion. There was, therefore, some consternation

when James John rose before a full assembly to challenge a proposal that Major Hall Morgan, a fairly junior magistrate, should be appointed to fill a vacancy on the important Appeals Committee. Patiently, the Judge explained that it was a proper proposal and that the person recommended was fully qualified and suitable for the position. Normally, this would have ended any argument and clearly the meeting expected that it would on this occasion too, but Jim was not so easily put off. To everyone's astonishment, and to the embarrassment of some, he was on his feet again and said to the chairman "I don't accept what you say. There are many senior magistrates here and one of them should be appointed to fill this vacancy. It is not a job for an inexperienced magistrate". Some further exchanges ensued and the upshot was that the proposal was withdrawn and James John himself was appointed to fill the vacancy. I thought his acceptance of the office was a mistake. He should have proposed some other senior magistrate. But his courage in standing up to the top brass was admirable. Such things were just not done in those days.

When on the offensive, James John never gave in. On the defensive, he used every trick in the book and often "got away with murder" without even being logical. I remember an occasion when some delicate matter concerning the Fire Service was due to come up at the County Council, and before the meeting members were saying that the Fire Brigade chairman (James John) was in for a rough passage. But when the moment arrived and a member got up and asked the awkward question expected to be the prelude of a long discussion - the redoubtable member for Llangwm, without rising from his seat, replied "Don't be so quizzzy" and the meeting, in an explosion of laughter, passed on to the next business. Behind the press seat, I heard a member mutter "My God, Jim's got away with it again".

The story is now well-known how Jim John scored repeatedly under cross-examination by two noted barristers, Mr Hopkin Morris and Mr. Roderic Bowen, both MP's and Queen's Counsel to boot, at a public inquiry into the Pill Parks sport ground scheme. The inquiry was held in Llangwm, so Jim was on his own ground, and the hall was packed to the doors with locals, all rooting for him and expecting great things. They were not disappointed. Jim was on top form. To my ever-lasting regret I did not retain the full shorthand note I made of exchanges between the two eminent counsel and the local councillor. It would have made fascinating reading today! To every question, Jim John had a ready answer, not necessarily a relevant or logical answer but one which appealed to the audience every time, if only because of the quick wit that was involved. It was a rare example of natural home-spun philosophy overcoming formal learning. Mr. Roderic Bowen, who was MP for Cardigan at the time, questioned him at length about Llangwm's contribution of £5,000 towards the scheme (a lot of money in those days) and it ended like this:

Counsel: And you say that Llangwm could find this money?

James John: Oh, yes.

Counsel: Without any trouble?

James John: No trouble at all.

Counsel: Llangwm is a small village and £5,000 is a lot of money.

James John: We'd find it easy. We're not in Cardigan y'know.

The room rocked with laughter at this sly dig at the Cardls' alleged meanness and Mr Bowen flushed with anger.

James John's guile in fighting for things for his beloved Llangwm - houses, services, jobs etc. was unbelievable. When a demand for, say, half-a-dozen Council houses for Llangwm was expected, the RDC would find him supporting a demand for some other area and even speaking, sometimes, in support of a member known to be antagonistic towards him. Those who didn't know him used to say "Old Jim must be slipping." I heard this phrase used more than once. What they didn't know was that "Old Jim" was just biding his time, waiting for more favourable conditions and gathering allies to his side so that eventually Llangwm would have a far better deal. I saw this sort of thing happen time and again. Jim was always thinking at least three moves ahead! Because he was so controversial, and sometimes outrageous, he always got a good press. He loved the publicity and made no bones about it, always making a point of thanking me when his activities got big headlines in what he called affectionately "the old Guardian". This was a welcome change, for most public men of my experience were equally keen on publicity but always pretended they didn't care about it and never said thank you when they got it. But he wasn't above trying to manoeuvre the press for his own purposes. At one time he was very keen on getting reporters to attend the meetings of Llangwm Parish Council. I told him it was impossible for staff reasons but he kept on about it and one day said: "The Telegraph are sending a reporter to Llangwm for Monday's meeting. I wouldn't like the old Guardian to miss out on anything". I then telephoned a friend on the Telegraph and asked if they were sending a reporter to Llangwm. "No" he replied "but Jim John told us the Guardian was sending one and he didn't want the old Telegraph to miss out on anything".

Jim John had a quick mind and a ready tongue. But he also knew when to remain silent. Once, at a County Education Committee he did something which greatly upset Mr. B. R. Lewis, the volatile member for Fishguard. After the meeting Mr. Lewis went for him on the steps outside the Shire Hall accusing him of humbug, hypocrisy, nepotism and goodness knows what else. The Fishguard man was really in high dudgeon. There were about a dozen councillors and others standing around and some feared it might even come to blows. But not a bit of it. Jim John just looked at his man with a half smile on his face, listened to the insults for a few minutes, then turned and walked down the street without uttering a single word! It was a classic lesson on how to get the better of an argument without opening your mouth.

He was particularly proud of being a magistrate and served faithfully on the old Roose Bench. After the chairman, Alderman J. W. Hammond, resigned from office to go to Australia for a six-month holiday. Jim was confident of being elected to succeed him because he had been vice-chairman for some years. But when the Justices met to make the appointment, he had a shock. Alderman R. S. Wade was elected. I remember clearly the magistrates coming into Court after their meeting and, to everybody's amazement, Alderman Wade taking the chair, with Alderman John sitting beside him looking pale and visibly shaken. Jim told me afterwards "I was taken completely by surprise. But I found out that Dick Wade had canvassed every single member of the Bench for their votes. The b-----r ought to be shot".

During the last war and for some years afterwards, James John was the caretaker of the Masonic Hall, Haverfordwest, then used as offices by the Ministry of Agriculture. He had a room downstairs where all sorts of important people used to call to discuss Council and other affairs with him. Jim loved "holding court" in this way. But one day there was what he interpreted as an unpleasant occurrence involving the Deputy Chief Constable, Superintendent C.B. James. This was how Jim described it to me "D'you know that C. B. James? Pig of a man. Came in to see me the other day with some summonses to sign. I said 'Good morning' but he didn't answer. He threw down the summonses on the desk and I signed them all, gave them back to him and off he goes. As he went out I said 'Good Morning' again but he didn't answer.

He never said a word. So I went straight to the telephone and phoned the Chief Constable. I had a bit of trouble but eventually I got through to Evans (Mr. A. T. N. Evans, the Chief Constable). I told him what had happened and he said he was sure Mr. James didn't mean to be offensive and all that old rubbish. So I said 'Look here, Mr. Evans, please remember that I am one of His Majesty's Justices of the Peace and I will not have this sort of thing from you, your deputy or anybody else, so now you know how things stand'. I don't know what happened about it, but a week later I met C. B. James on the New Bridge and he gave me a magnificent salute and said 'Good morning sir'. In retrospect, Jim John was much amused by this incident. He certainly held no animosity towards Supt. James, whom he regarded as a very able police officer.

There were times when even James John's closest friends couldn't make out what he was getting at. I remember attending a meeting of Haverfordwest Grammar School Governors when, under "Any other Business" and completely out of the blue, he started asking questions about the school caretaker. What were the caretaker's exact duties? Was he expected to perform extra duties at times? Did he ever get overtime? And so on. The questions were answered and the meeting broke up with no explanation given as to what it was all about. A few days later I asked Jim about it.

"Why, don't you know? he said. "Old Lang (Mr. R. S. Lang, the headmaster) is keeping pigs at the back of the school and the caretaker is looking after them for him. I frightened him a bit I know, for after the meeting he followed me out and asked me to come to his study for a talk but I shrugged him off". Why Jim wished to get at the Headmaster in this indirect way I never found out. My guess is that he wanted a lever to get somebody a job on the Grammar School staff. What a man!



A family triumvirate! Top, James John J.P., the 'uncrowned king of Llangwm' and his two sons, Cecil John (left), schoolmaster, councillor and Labour Party stalwart, and Osmonde John O.B.E., County Councillor, Pembrokeshire representative on the Welsh Rugby Union for many years, and also a prominent member of the County Labour Party.