



A Description of Llangwm in 1900

*with particular reference to the building of
the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel*

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Down in a remote corner of Pembrokeshire, picturesquely situated on a reach of the beautiful River Cleddau, which can boast of scenery equal to that of the Scotch lochs, with at least eight historic Norman castles upon its banks, is found the village of Llangwm, whose people present an unique and most interesting study of a state of things fast passing away. Their houses are mostly tiny, two-roomed, whitewashed places, similar to the cottage dwellings of other parts of this western country. The only other two buildings of any pretensions are the humble church and the handsome new Wesleyan chapel.

There is only one public-house in the village, and that on the outskirts. The lord of the manor, being greatly opposed to these snares of the wicked one, has closed five or six within living memory. Subtle attempts have been made to induce him to allow an "hotel" to be built; but Mr. Lort Phillips is too wise and benevolent a landlord to yield on this point.

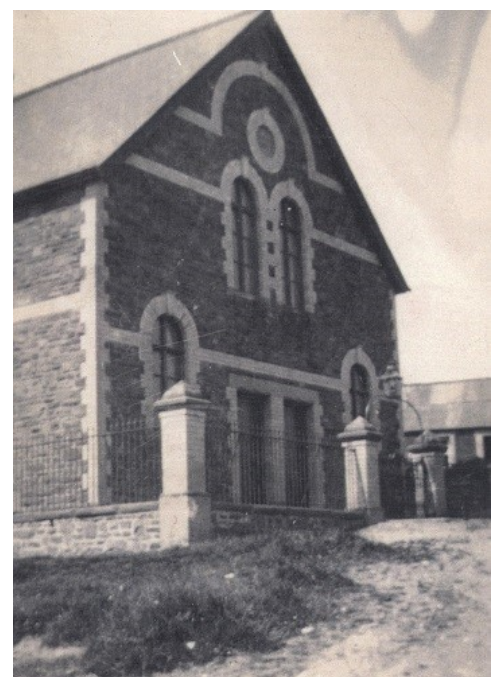
The time-honoured occupation of the Llangwm people is that of *fishing*. They fish in three ways.

- With the "seine" net. One man stands on shore while two go out in a boat, and taking the net with them, describe a curve, and sweep round back to land. The other end is then drawn up. When the fish appear, the good are gathered into baskets and the bad cast away.
- Another method of fishing they call "drifting." In this case the boat is allowed to drift down the tide with a net hanging over its side, one edge being floated by means of corks, the rest being under water. The net is drawn up and examined eight or ten times in a night.
- Line fishing is only practised now by a few old men, who go out by day in a boat, and let out a line with forty or fifty baited hooks attached at intervals of an arm's length. Every hour these are hauled in, but the work is very unremunerative, only six to a dozen being the usual catch.

Of late, indeed, these primitive fisheries have almost entirely failed. Some think the cause is the increased traffic on the Haven, and the churning of the waters by steam trawlers, Irish packets, and men-of-war. Whatever the cause may be, it is fortunate that about two-thirds of the Llangwm men have been able to find a more satisfactory means of livelihood at H. M. Pembroke Dockyard.

Oysters used to be very plentiful in the neighbourhood, till within the last year or two. To catch them, an iron-framed dredge is dragged along the bottom of the water. In this way as many as 400 or 500 a day used to be taken, but not now, for they seem to have destroyed the seed.

The Llangwm women are a short, thick-set race, with a distinctive Flemish appearance. They wear very short, thick quilted



An early photograph of the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel

skirts, striped shawls, and men's soft, clerical hats, a modification of the old Welsh conical beaver which used to be the fashion. The carry immense weights of fish in panniers on their backs for very long distances, to sell them in the neighbouring towns of Haverfordwest, Milford, Pembroke and Tenby. What wonder if they try to get as much for them as they can! Even so the occupation can hardly pay for shoe-leather, or rather clog-wood. The youngsters seem to be of this opinion, for these antique customs are not much followed by the rising race.

If you enter a Llangwm cottage you will generally find the brick floor and the deal furniture scrupulously clean. A table, two settles, and a rack well covered with crockery, with a few pans, comprise most of the furniture of the room. There is, however, in addition what appears to be a cupboard about the size of an upright piano. On opening the doors of this Pandora's box, a bed falls down, providing sleeping accommodation for the night. There is no doubt that when the family is growing, a very serious state of overcrowding prevails here and throughout the country districts of Pembrokeshire. Sanitary arrangements are very primitive indeed. In 4,000 cases reported by the sanitary authority this year they were as entirely absent as among the Israelites in the wilderness. When the hearthstone and doorstep have been cleaned they are often marked out with a border drawing of chalk.

The fuel used is "*culm*", a slaty kind of anthracite which they dig from "measures" or mines in the neighbourhood. It comes up as a fine, black dust, is mixed with river slime, and stored in heaps by the wayside or in the garden for use. When required, a portion is slaked with water, well-kneaded with a shovel, and placed on the fire wet, a draught hole being made in the middle with a poker.

At certain time of the day the woman of the house rolls balls of the wet mixture in her hands, and pushing the main part of the fire backwards, places these behind the bars. They soon become white and



The Chapel in the middle of the 20th century - though the Chapel remains mostly unaltered in the present day, the number of visible cars has most certainly not!

glowing with heat. The process is called “balling up.” (The Chinese use a similar mixture, drying the balls in the sun.)

Culm fires are often kept burning for years, and only allowed to go out when the grate requires repair. One advantage of this custom is that no sticks are required for re-lighting – another that the fire can be poked up at once, at any hour of the night, thus giving a warm and cheery welcome to the belated fisherman. Culm costs seven shillings or eight shillings a ton, or including carting and slime, eleven shillings and sixpence, when coal is at twenty-two shillings.

The older women, when cleaned up and dressed for the afternoon, with caps and starched ruffles round their heads, have a very picturesque and foreign appearance. When the minister suggests prayer, they hastily spread an apron on the spotless floor for him to kneel upon.

Methodism has taken well at Llangwm, and claims by far the most adherents in the village. *The Society classes are unique*, each composed of some twenty members, who almost all, without exception, meet weekly, all pay, and all speak, the men with manly courage and thoughtfulness, the women with characteristic feminine tenderness and emotion, and all with the brevity which is the soul of wit. After every three or four testimonies a verse is started and sung from memory with great heartiness. A good many of the congregation cannot read.

The favourite tunes are peculiar to the place, and never heard elsewhere. The *singing* of the Llangwm people is famous for its heartiness and strength, though reading music is not understood. Hence some of our standard tunes suffer alterations and adaptations to local taste. The altos sing mostly in even thirds from the soprano, which leads to a not infrequent sacrifice of true harmony. Singers also lay accent upon unusual syllables as “Simply to Thy cross I cling.”

The *names* of the Llangwm people are few. Fathers, and sons, and grandsons; mothers, daughters, and granddaughters are content to be known by the same Christian as well as surnames. When I ventured to air one of my pet theories there, viz., that every child should have a distinct individuality preserved for itself, and by no means be named after a parent or near relation, they seemed a bit shocked at such a heathenish notion. The surnames John, Lewis, Morgan, Brock, Thomas, Evans, Skyrme, Jones abound, as also the Christian names Elizabeth, Ann, Mary, Annie. There are Thomas Johns, William Morgans, John Thomas’s innumerable, so that they are driven to take refuge in nicknames – more humorous than gratifying to the holder, one would think – as Candles, Bucket, Pinchers, Doctor, Brother, Jack, Davidge, Tar, etc., etc.



The Chapel played a significant role in the cultural life of Llangwm; this is a photograph of the Wesleyan Male Voice Choir in the early 20th century

The name Llangwm means “Church in the vale.” The church which gives its name to the village is very small. It contains a side chapel, or transept with two ancient and worn effigies lying in canopied and crocketed recesses, one male, in Crusading armour, supposed by Fenton to be a De Roch, and one female. There is also a canopied holy water stoup in the same style close by. Report says that there used to be a castle adjoining the church (was it a priory?) connected by an underground passage with Nash Castle, about half a mile off, the ruins which now form part of a farmstead.

There is no doubt that *the Llangwm people are of Flemish origin*, though their names suggest an early intermixture with the Welsh

of the soil. They are to be traced to the trading families which came over with the Norman and Flemish mercenaries of Henry I. (1100-1137), when the "Little England beyond Wales," with Haverfordwest as capital, was settled and fortified with numerous castles round the arms of Milford Haven, and the Welsh were either subdued and absorbed, or driven back to the country beyond the Prescelly mountains, a further line of castles being built from Roch in St. Bride's Bay to Narberth and Tenby. As the friends of the conquering invaders, they naturally adopted their language; but by close intermarriage from that time to this they have preserved their original appearance, dress, and manners to a surprising extent.

The women have distinctly the ascendancy over the men, and often retain their maiden name all their married life. The husband is then "Ann Brock's man," and almost loses his masculine dignity altogether, if ever he had any. Quarrels between women of the village over their children are sadly too frequent.

There is also a "real dull" and fatal fondness for litigation among the Llangwm people. A short time ago a man was having a house built, but forgot to mention that he required a staircase up to the loft under the roof. On indicating his further wish the staircase was added, and the item, of course, charged as an extra. This would not do at all. Off to lawyer the incensed party goes, and the upshot of the quarrel is that man has to pay for his staircase and the expensive costs of legal proceedings as well.

The people are frugal and saving to a degree, and it is still customary to requisition the minister in making the will. Too often, however, they forget to make one at all, in which case unpleasant family broils are sure to follow, and again a lawyer comes in for a good picking.

The *grit and go* of the Llangwm people were remarkably shown in the building of their beautiful new chapel, the stones of which were laid in May, 1897. This they did "with both hands earnestly." The site obtained by the Rev. R. E. Bamborough is a prominent and elevated spot in the middle of the village, adjoining the front of the old chapel. Here the people showed conspicuous devotion and enthusiasm in erecting their city set upon a hill, which cannot be hid. "Fair unto God" the temple stands, built of dark, native stone with yellow brick dressings and ornamental lines. What a noble monument of love and zeal it is!

For this, fishermen, after being out all night, away from much-needed sleep and stormed the stone quarries; dockyard men also, on Saturday afternoons, gave their labour free of charge. Farmers sent their carts to convey the blocks to the site, where the sturdy women and girls unloaded and piled them ready for the builders. The total cost with the exception of £30 grant and a loan of £100 free of interest, was raised in about two years, all in small sums, for there were only three gifts of as much as £10. The rest was obtained by liberal offerings of the hard-earned savings of the poor, by subscription teas, collecting books, and singing bands, even the married women forming a choir carol of their own. The smallest gift consisted of two half penny stamps given out of "his own money" by a little boy who wanted to have a brick in the concern. The opening services took place on November 25th, 1897, and ever since then, on Sundays the sound of praise and prayer and testimony has scarcely ceased from early morning till late at night.

It only remains to mention the funerals of the Llangwm people. In common with their Welsh neighbours, they make much of these occasions, when an immense concourse of friends and relations seems to take a peculiar kind of joy in the conspicuous display of its grief. The custom of hymn-singing, heartily approved by John Wesley at funerals, is freely observed here, and what can be more fitting as an accompaniment to Christian burial than the singing of hymns of faith and hope?

May the Llangwm people ever continue, as now, to crowd their beloved chapel, to live in the faith of Christ, and die in the sure and certain hope of the heavenly rest beyond.