



My Llangwm, circa 1935

Raymond Palmer

This piece was handwritten (in a mostly elegant hand) in about 1984, by Raymond Palmer, a native of Llangwm, as a note for his young grandson, Jonathan Whitticombe. Jonathan has kindly allowed me to transcribe the document for “Bygone Days”. I have done my best to preserve the text and punctuation of the original but have inserted an addendum written by Raymond (describing his father’s aviary, the tramps around the village, and his “blooding” by the Master of Foxhounds) in what I thought was the intended (and most appropriate place).

Dai Stephens (January, 2025)

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Sycamore House it was called – a terraced house in the Main Street. Solidly built of local stone, it had three bedrooms, kitchen, parlour, and a dual-purpose room, a parlour/dining room. A frontage court was enclosed with ornate railings and a gate – part of the area was grassed. Outside and near the house was one of the village taps. At the rear, a sloping garden of black acidic earth nurturing an established Victoria plum tree and a Blenheim Orange apple tree. Also was a garden shed that served as an aviary and dog kennel. And a wooden and corrugated iron small shed that served as a toilet (and supplier of organic material). The aviary housed about 20 canaries and a number of goldfinches. We also kept a greyhound and a whippet.

There were numerous tramps roaming Pembrokeshire – some of them fearsome-looking and a number of them paid frequent visits to Llangwm and neighbourhood where they slept ‘rough’ in haystacks and farm outbuildings. In general their behaviour was very good – housewives never felt threatened during their visits. So many men in 1935 were “on the dole” in the village that had tramps resorted to intimidation tactics they would have been dealt with unmercifully.

Tickling trout, bird nesting, nutting.

Following the hounds was always an interesting experience particularly so for me. On one occasion I was the subject of a ‘blooding ceremony’. Following ‘a kill’ the Master drew the fox’s tail across my face which was left smeared with blood. “That will bring you good luck, me lad!” he said. I think he was the Master, a Mr Kenneth Walker who lived in a country mansion at Boulston on the banks of the western tributary of the River Cleddau three or four miles from Haverfordwest.

In June of this year, the ‘health’ nurse paid a visit to the school. A search of the children’s heads revealed a minor outbreak of ‘nit infestation’. I was one of the unlucky few. At home after school, the Daily Herald was spread on top of the kitchen table over which my head was placed. My scalp was then ‘raked’ with a small tooth comb – there they were, dozens, nay, hundreds of white nits marooned on the newspaper pages. Following a thorough Sunlight Soap shampoo I went to the local village hair cutter and he virtually scalped me. In the months following, my scalp underwent numerous vinegar massages and coconut oil nutrition.

I was ten years old at the time and had been told I had passed the Scholarship Examination for entry to Haverfordwest Grammar School (September 1935). My headmaster was so flabbergasted he checked with the Examination Board. I remember one question in the Arithmetic paper – “If ten men can dig a trench in 6 days, how long would it take 15 men to do the same job?” (How would a ten-year-old boy cope with that today?). I had lived in this house by this time for ten years – the previous tenants, my mother’s sister and husband had gone to Portsmouth where the latter worked in H M Dockyard.

My grandparents’ house was next door, Richard and Jane Palmer and on the other side Willie and Janet Stokes, superbly sandwiched between people who represented all that was good in the Llangwm bloodstock – Richard Palmer because of his Pembroke Dockyard connections, was a Freeman of Pembroke.

Further up the street were two bakers - one of whom, Johnny John, was my mother’s first cousin. There was another General Store and baker further down the village run by Edwin Palmer, another Pembroke Freeman. Here one could buy anything from a safety pin to a garden spade. This house, a mansion-type place, had a bathroom, the only one in the village. When the wind was in the right direction, one could smell the dough being baked in the “stick” ovens – what a marvellous smell, and tasting the finished product was even better. Crusty bread and salted farm butter with cured bacon and fresh eggs was the normal breakfast. Oh! Those were the days! Mother used to say, “Doctor Bowen from Harfat said that bacon fat is good for us – look at your Dad; he’s strong as a horse and fit as a fiddle”.

The rear garden was fully cultivated – dug over with an “evil” in October with good helpings of compost from the garden ‘miskin’. When cropped, ‘taters were stored in tumps of earth especially the Arran Banners. Vegetables were available all the year – cauliflower, broccoli, etc. Bread, meat, paraffin, culm and milk were all delivered by horse and cart – horses’ droppings still steaming in the road were shovelled up into buckets and put on gardens. Groceries were available at the three village shops – but some grocery treats were delivered by Home and Colonial, and Melias, in vans from Haverfordwest. From here also, horses and carts delivered ice cream and chips in summer and winter respectively. A Mr Jenkins from Portfield was the man who made the long trek in all weathers.

One church and two chapels served the spiritual needs of the village all of whom had good congregations. A Sunday School trip to Tenby was the year’s treat – Rees Coaches, Neyland.

Llangwm fisherwomen were still very active in 1935 – travelling in donkey carts, they would sell their fish in Pembroke Dock (and) Neyland, and would also walk great distances with their panniers slung over their shoulders – a very hardy race.

My great grandmother - Dolly Palmer - was a well-known personality – strikingly handsome. Her photograph can be seen in museums worldwide. I remember her very well – she died at 90 years old when I was seven.

The women of Llangwm were notoriously house-proud: polished black-leaded grates, scrubbed

topped wooden tables – lustre jug-laden kitchen dressers were focal points in their immaculate kitchens (“Mud belonged to the banks of the River Cleddau, not on mats and flag floors of houses!”) “Oi boy! Wipe your feet, or, better still, take your boots off before you come in here” was a frequent order of the day from women dressed in their clean pinnies and ‘ear-phone’ hairstyles.

At anniversary times at the two chapels women dispensed with their pinnies and wore smart clothes, most of which were bought in Haverfordwest – T P Hughes, Sais’s and Green’s (bottom of Market Street) – “All dressed up in their finery – a sight to see” some of the old men used to exclaim, and then, in the same breath, “and all paid for, thee mind! No hire purchase, for sure!”

Guy Fawkes Night was really a hazardous time for young boys and householders. Only the lucky survived. The old men used to say “There’s devils about here! A good stick across the back, that’s what they wants!” Fireworks, galore – Little Demons, Jumping Jacks, Canonballs, filled the pockets of us ‘varmints’ – and when it got dark, the fun began. It is remarkable how we didn’t set fire to the whole village. Once the fireworks had been used (and lots of them were thrown through letterboxes) we stuffed paraffin rags up drainpipes and set them alight. The noise was ear-splitting, and sparks filled the sky over Llangwm – thank God there were no thatched cottages around. “If I get hold of some of you your Mammy and Daddy won’t recognise you” was the usual cry from the man of the attacked house. We were never caught, however, because we followed the rule – “Never attack a house where the man was currently playing rugby for Llangwm” – Why? – because in a chase, a fit man would have caught up with us! We weren’t so dull!

New Year’s Eve was another time of vandal activity – not directed against you know who – but others where the men couldn’t chase us. We made a few pence singing the favourites but anybody who refused to give us money we took off the house gates and hid them anywhere. We even lifted outside toilets from their bases and moved them elsewhere in the garden.

But rugby was a serious business, especially the tactical talks in the village Institute, known as the “Tute”. These were always held before Home and Away matches. I was too young then to witness any of this but later these talks used to fascinate me. My father was playing at this time and, it seemed, every able-bodied man in the village. Tenby and Neyland were the top teams at this time, though H’west Barbarians had a decent side – Graham Johns, Hywel Williams, Thomas the butcher (he broke his leg in a match at Llangwm. The crack could be heard all over the field) were prominent players. The Neyland match was always a bloodbath – if Neyland won we boys used to pile stones at their bus as it left the village – and we were always on target. Why weren’t we sent to a Reformatory School where vandals were sent in those days? The policeman lived in Houghton, about two miles away. He tried many times to get the evidence but there was no ‘grassing’ in Llangwm in those days (nor now, I believe). In any case, we discouraged him in his enquiries by letting down the tyres on his bicycle a few times. He was transferred in 1935 and was glad of the move I would think – I believe because most of the behaviour in Llangwm went undetected.

The West Cambrian Electric Company at Haverfordwest had started to instal power in the village

and neighbourhood. Meantime we had oil lamps, single and double burners. We had a radio – a Cosser 5 valve which we had bought from Loosemore in Haverfordwest – battery operated which item had to be recharged quite frequently at a garage at Bowlers Corner – this wet battery was supplemented a high tension one and a ‘grid bias’. An aerial and an earth completed the circuit.

My grandfather, my mother’s father, was a seafaring man – had sailed around “The Horn” before he was thirteen years old – ended his career as a skipper of a small coaster and finally the skipper of the Great Western Dredge Boat. “Tomorrow, boy, bring your prawn net with you – we’re going prawning down Pennar Gut.” On the day he would say “Right, boy, now row us down river as far as Lawrenny for a start – remember to feather your oars!”. We were in a boat 13 feet long – carvel built with a drop keel which his sons had built. Marvellous times they were – especially when returning with a large bag of prawns.

There was a lot of activity on the beaches of the village. One would see men making herring nets, repairing boats. Tough weather-beaten men who invariably had other jobs in the area – shipwrights, fitters, carpenters. The main fish catch was herring, netted in the northern section of Castle Reach known locally as ‘Gullidraft’. I’m also proud to say that some of the best schoolteacher men and women who (ran?) the Pembs Ed system came from my village.

At this time the world system was becoming volatile. Hitler was established as the German leader. China and Japan were at each other’s throats. Mussolini had his eyes on creating his African empire, and the seeds of the Spanish Civil War were being sown. Llangwm suffered, as many other like places did, from severe economic restraints initiated by the Baldwin Tory Government. A large number of families, including my own, survived on ‘Means Test’ pittance. ‘TB’, diphtheria, were diseases out of control. As a ten-year old I must have had gallons of cod liver oil poured down my throat. However, we survived thanks to the efforts of our father. Fresh vegetables from the garden, fish from the River Cleddau, and that lovely watercress from the close-at-hand streams, a good wholesome meat from the local butchers. Yes, I often think of those days in that village which will always be close to my heart and where my parents, along with many others of those days are resting in peace for evermore in hallowed ground adjacent to the Pill Parks Rugby Ground – another hallowed place – where boys were formed into men long before they were old enough to shave.

I am at an age now when I ponder over words spoken to me many years ago by my Uncle Herbert, my mother’s brother – a public speaker of Churchillian standards. “Think well upon this day, Raymond, for yesterday was but a dream and tomorrow a mere vision. And, what’s more, tomorrow, if it should come, will be the first day of the rest of your life. So, enjoy it, boy because it could be your last.” Cheers, Mr Editor! I’m looking forward to tomorrow come. Llangwm 20 pts Neyland nil!



Raymond Palmer



Tenby RFC 1948-49
Raymond Palmer is middle row, centre