

THE SAD TALE OF SAM & MARY

Sam and Mary John - 28th July 1930



W. G. Thomas

THE LLANGWM TRAGEDY.

INQUEST ON AGED COUPLE.

Overwhelmed by Tide.

BODY FOUND UPRIGHT IN MUD.

The Coroner for South Pembrokeshire (Mr. H. J. E. Price), sitting without a jury, held an enquiry on Wednesday evening of last week into the circumstances surrounding the deaths of Mr. and Mrs. Samuel John, of Mill Street, Llangwm, who, as reported in the "Guardian" last week, lost their lives in Carew reach on the previous Monday evening. The court was held in the humble home of the unfortunate couple. P.C. Bevan acted as Coroner's officer, and there was nobody present beyond the officials, the witnesses and three newspaper reporters.

William John, a Dockyard and Naval pensioner, residing at Cemetery Row, Llangwm, gave evidence of identification. He said Samuel John was his brother and Mary John his sister-in-law, their respective ages being 73 and 65. His brother was an old age pensioner and a fisherman. Witness last saw him alive on Sunday evening in the Wesleyan Chapel. He suffered from rheumatism very badly, and had lost the sight of one eye. Being born and bred a fisherman, he was used to handling a boat. Mrs. John was equally experienced in the handling of boats. Deceased had been to Carew reach many times; it was not strange ground to him.

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By W. G. Thomas

Around 10 o'clock on July 28th, 1930, the Cleddau morning tide, seemingly reluctant to obey the compulsions of its pre-ordained nature, was quietly ebbing from Guildford Pill in the riverside village of Llangwm. On this 'Washday' Monday, as on any other, the women folk were too busily engaged in their major weekly chore to linger for long out of doors. The low murmur of subdued conversation occasionally emanated from Johnny Bryant's cobbler's shop at Jubilee Cottage, in which a few of the unemployed and retired men were wont to gather. The only slight threat to the persuasive tranquillity of the scene was unwittingly raised by a homespun pair of pensioners, 73 year-old Sam John and his 66 year-old wife, Mary, of Mill Street, who were nonchalantly 'dapping' their way out of the inlet in their tarred car-built fishing boat. They were casually noticed by at least one villager from his vantage point in Cemetery Road, but there was no reason for surprise, still less for alarm. Though noticeably lame and partially sighted, Sam was a veteran fisherman who had spent an informing working life-time on the Cleddau River. His wife appeared more than capable, especially under his supervision, of coping with any situation likely to arise. Moreover, it was not the couple's intention to embark upon some hazardous venture, but as they had often done before, to row down to Carew Lake, collect shellfish, and then to return on the making tide between four and five o'clock in the late afternoon.

For the majority of the inhabitants of the village, the next seven to eight hours passed in that serene uneventfulness which, at least in retrospect, often seems to precede hideous calamity. When, by early evening, Sam and Mary had failed to return, uneasiness spread among relatives, neighbours and friends. As if summoned by a communal telegraph, a sizeable crowd of anxious villagers gathered in conversing clusters on Guildford shore and along the sea-wall opposite. Just after 8 pm, as the prospect of further waiting became unbearable, 35 year-old John Warlow, the Guildford shipwright, and his 60 year-old father, Joseph, set out for the Carew Reach of the river. Accomplished oarsmen, they reached it at 9.30 pm on the high tide, and they quickly located Sam's boat, which was floating, with the anchor overboard, near the middle of the river. Inside the boat, they discovered Mary's mud-splattered clog and boot, and her jacket and hat. There was no sign of the missing couple, and enquiries at the very few houses in the vicinity were fruitless. The nonplussed pair arrived back at Llangwm at midnight, with the ominous news of the empty boat and the missing occupants. There was no alternative but to inform the authorities of the apparent disappearance of the hapless Sam and Mary.

Early on Tuesday morning, six quickly organised search parties, under the general direction of P.C. Bevan of Houghton, purposefully set off down river. For several hours, they unavailingly dragged the river and carefully scoured the banks and foreshores. At 12.30, another boat, manned by 47 year-old Cemetery Road shipwright John Jones, and 45 year-old James John J.P. of Chapel Row, left Black Tar for Carew. By this time, the tide had been in and out twice since



View of Carew Reach from the site of Lawrenny Castle

Sam and Mary had left Guildford Pill and the prospects of finding them alive had greatly diminished. Around 2.30 pm, the attention of the two was arrested by 'something unusual' on a mud-bank some 300/400 yards from where the empty boat had been found. Upon closer inspection, they identified Sam's body, which was half submerged in the treacherous mud, with the top half protruding. His two arms, with fingertips, touching, were lifted to the level of the chin of his drooping head, and the tails of his saturated coat were hoisted almost to the back of his neck. At one stage, the two men approached near enough to grab Sam's belt, but it snapped when they forcefully tugged on it. At great personal risk, the nimble and adventurous Mr Jones daringly squirmed across the mud in an attempt to attach a rope to the body. When the cloying mud threatened to engulf him, he had to scramble back to safety. Eventually, after the two were joined by Mr John Warlow, they succeeded in pulling and dragging the body into their boat. At 3 pm, the news of the recovery of Sam's body was telephoned to the waiting village of Llangwm. A solemn convoy, formed by the boats which had conveyed the search parties, made for Edward's Pill, which was entered at 5 pm. Dr G. J. Bowen, summoned from Haverfordwest, promptly examined the corpse, before it was dolefully transported on a horse-drawn trap to the empty cottage in Mill Street. At 7.30 that same Tuesday evening, 24 year-old Leonard Rogers of the Post Office, Milton, was walking with his uncle, Mr Thomas George Picton, in the vicinity of the Carew River. After glimpsing a prostrate form in the distance, he discovered Mary's body on the mud at Ratford Pill, about 1½ miles from the accident spot. Very aware of the search in the area, he immediately informed P. C. Griffiths of Carew, who arranged for Mary's corpse to be taken to Llangwm by motor boat. The coroner, Mr H.J.E. Price, assisted by P. C. Bevan, conducted the inquest which was held in the dining room of the two-roomed Mill Street cottage after 6.15 on the Wednesday evening. Evidence of identification was given by Sam's 76 year-old brother, William John of Cemetery Road, a retired naval dockyard rigger, who had last seen Sam at the services at the Wesley Chapel on the previous Sunday. He confirmed that his brother had suffered from arthritis and had lost the sight of one eye, and that he had been a seasoned fisherman with an intimate knowledge of the river. The precise evidence of Mr John Jones and Mr John Warlow enabled the coroner carefully

to reconstruct a credible outline of the relevant events of the fateful Monday. Dr Bowen explained that without a full-scale, meticulous post-mortem, it was not possible to stipulate the exact cause of Sam's death with total certainty. It was very likely to have been by drowning, but his known physical condition and the horrendous circumstances of his last hours could have induced death by shock or heart failure. There was no shred of doubt that Mary had drowned. The coroner was not obliged by his terms of reference either to pronounce upon which of the two had died first, or to determine just how Mary had come to be in the water. The only appropriate verdict was that of 'Accidental Death'.

The double funeral on the Saturday was one of the largest and most impressive even the village of Llangwm, which almost specialised in hugely attended obsequies, had ever witnessed. Sam and Mary had been affectionately regarded, and their gruesome fate had deeply affected many in the symbiotic community. With his limping gait and inevitable flat black cap, Sam had long been a familiar figure as he strolled the village Green and lanes, and gathered firewood in the nearby Ashdale fields. A most congenial and original



Sam's and Mary's Grave - Pill Parks Cemetery

‘character’, he had possessed a droll sense of humour, and the fisherman’s proverbial talent for the telling of a diverting tale. Though not formally members, he and Mary had been regularly in attendance at the services of the thriving Wesley Chapel. Sam, in particular, had been a shrewd critic of preachers, a discerning connoisseur of sermons, and an avid reader of ‘The Methodist Times’. His devotion to the latter had been such that to prevent its precious pages from being lost or misplaced, he had instructed Mary to stitch them together! The funeral services were conducted by the very literate Rev. Robert A. Ellis, who was assisted by Ald. Richard Sinnett of Haverfordwest. At the house, ‘Rock of Ages’ was imploringly sung, and in the spacious and thronged chapel, the two coffins, strewn with wreaths, were laid on trestles, one each side of the pulpit. Miss L. Rogers (later Mrs W. Roach) presided at the organ for the poignant singing of two hymns, ‘Thee we adore, Eternal Name’ and ‘Jesu, lover of my soul’, and for the spine-chilling ‘Dead March’. At the Cemetery Road graveyard, Sam and Mary were interred – Sam first – in a grave whose weathered headstone still bears their decipherable names.

The presence of three reporters at the inquest virtually guaranteed that the village tragedy would receive exceptional treatment in the local press. The July 31st edition of ‘The Pembrokeshire Telegraph’ mounted a four-decker headline in a ‘Telegraph Special’ –

PERISHED IN A MUD-BANK

DOUBLE LLANGWM TRAGEDY

OLD FISHERMAN AND WIFE THE VICTIMS

A VILLAGE IN MOURNING

The next edition (August 7th) was similarly explicit -

THE LLANGWM TRAGEDY

GRAPHIC INQUEST IN A COTTAGE

ENGULFED IN A MUD-BANK

ACCIDENTALLY DROWNED VERDICT

‘The Pembrokeshire and West Wales Guardian’ (August 1st) reported in similar vein –

MYSTERIOUS LLANGWM FATALITY

AGED FISHERFOLK DROWNED

WHEN ON MUSSEL EXPEDITION

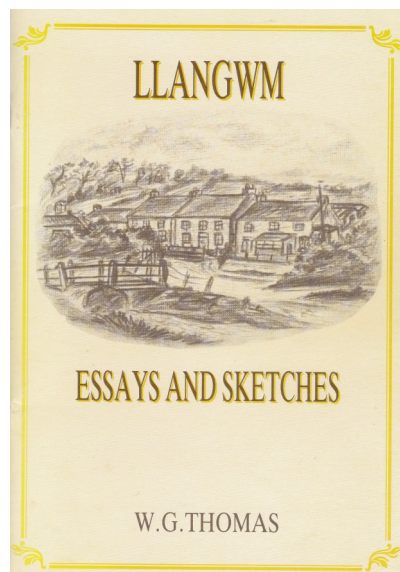
BOAT FOUND ON MUD-BANK

Natives of the village have seldom been tentative in the expression of their opinions, and well-versed as many of them were in the peculiarities of the river and the eccentricities of the tide, they were quite certain they knew exactly what had happened to Sam and Mary. After making leisurely progress down the Cleddau, they had arrived at Carew Lake an hour or two before low water. They had dropped anchor, but before they had realised it, the retreating tide had grounded their boat on a mud-bank. Probably impulsively, Sam had stepped over the side with the intention of pushing the boat into a deeper channel. He had succeeded in doing that, but thereafter he had failed to extricate himself from the glutinous mud. Alarmed by his predicament, his frantic wife, having hurriedly changed some of her footwear and removed her jacket and hat, committed herself to the rescue. For three or four hours, Mary had either struggled desperately to reach him, or having reached him, to wrench him free – until the rising tide had covered them both, and had caused the boat to carry its anchor away from the mud-bank.

Since the couple had been almost half a mile from the nearest house at Upton, their cries for assistance would not have been heard. There was an unconfirmed report that some cockle pickers had heard strident shouts, but that they had assumed that they were made by men and women calling to each other while collecting shellfish. Given the topography of the heavily sedimented river, the mounting of a successful rescue operation would have been difficult, even impossible. There was one feature of the grisly business which puzzled Dr Bowen at the inquest. Because of Sam's increasing infirmity, it had long been the practice for the much more active Mary to ground the boat on dry land before Sam disembarked. On this occasion, they seemed to have departed from this routine with disastrous consequences.

The distressing end of this estimable couple was such a uniquely traumatic experience for their fellow villagers that the latter never forgot it for the rest of their lives. The episode was not just a sad and regrettable occurrence – it immediately became known as 'The Llangwm Tragedy'. For the next 25/30 years, whenever the carefree and euphoric young ventured out on the river, their elders seldom failed gravely to admonish them – 'Remember Sam and Mary'. A decade or so ago, four Llangwm natives were pleasant cruising along the Carew River on a Saturday evening tide. When they reached a certain spot, the much older of the two men quietly remarked 'This is where it happened to Sam and Mary'. No-one else spoke. Comment was unnecessary.

The text in this article first appeared in 'Llangwm Essays and Sketches' by W. G. Thomas, published 1992.



W. Grenville Thomas was born in 1933 in Williamston Terrace, in the hamlet of Guildford, Llangwm. He was educated at Llangwm School (1938-45), Haverfordwest Boys' Grammar School (1945-52), and the University of Wales, Cardiff (1952-56). For almost his entire career he taught at Milford Haven Grammar School, where he was Head of History for 27 years (1961-88). He was, perhaps, best known as a Nonconformist preacher and, since 1969, he was Pastor of Thornton Baptist Chapel. He was married to Gloria for 45 years, and they had one daughter, Amanda, a Modern Foreign Languages graduate.

Grenville was the author of *The People of the Covenant* (1988), *Llangwm Through the Ages* (1991), *Llangwm Essays and Sketches* (1992), *Some Remarkable People of Llangwm and Hook* (published posthumously, 2018) and numerous articles published in the *Western Telegraph* on aspects of the history of Llangwm, Haverfordwest, and Milford Haven where he lived for 45 years.

Sadly, he passed away suddenly on May 30th, 2002. He is buried at the Deerland Road Cemetery, Llangwm.