



Clues on the Trail of a Village's Real Name

W. Grenville Thomas

'Clues on the Trail of a Village's Real Name' was originally published
in The Western Telegraph on Wednesday, March 8th, 1989

Clues on the Trail of a Village's Real Name

W. Grenville Thomas

Throughout living memory, the name of the South Pembrokeshire village of Llangwm has posed acute problems for those who would embark upon the esoteric study of place-names. Whereas the etymology of the names of such neighbouring parishes at Burton, Freystrop and Steynton has been traced with reasonable confidence, that of Llangwm has severely tested even the well honed skills of professional historians.

However, during the long running debate, it has persistently been contended that the correct version is LANGUM, that it is derived from two Norse words, and that it was wrongly Welshified, probably during the rectorship (1901-1919) of the militantly Welsh-speaking the Rev. Henry Evans.

This Scandinavian thesis has proved sufficiently plausible to secure unchallenged entry into a number of reputable glossaries. It is only quite recently that the greater accessibility of records and the generosity of Pembrokeshire-born scholars have created the opportunity for it to be properly evaluated.

It is not difficult to detect the particular sources from which it was derived. In his *History of Little England Beyond Wales* (1888), Edward Laws offered a glossary of colloquialisms of allegedly Norse origin, several of which were in regular use in the village. His further assertion that such nearby locations as Freystrop, Barnlake and Dumbledale were also Norse seemed to invite the conclusion of a distant Scandinavian past for Langum.

Even more influential, because much more explicit, was Dr. Henry Owen's editorial comment (1897) in George Owen's *Description* (Vol. 2 p.546): "The Langum folk still retain peculiarities of dress language and custom. They are probably a Norse remnant left in the midst of the surrounding population. The name also may be Norse – Lang Heimr, the long village. Heimr in modern Norse is contracted into -om or



The spelling of the name on the roadside wall of the village school at The Gail.

-um. See Cleasby and Ugfusson's dictionary". Later, in a footnote (p.19) of his *Calendar of Public Records Relating to Pembs.* (1919), Dr. Owen somewhat impatiently insisted: "Langum: the name is Norse; it has been attempted of late to Welshify it".

Between these two works, in his very readable *History of Pembrokeshire* (1909), the Rev. James Phillips was resoundingly emphatic: "Langum is not the restoration of a Celtic name, but the corruption of a Scandinavian name" (p.131).

These historians wrote at a time when, especially among the intelligentsia, there was a fashionable preoccupation with remote ethnic origins. A close scrutiny of their works at Haverfordwest Reference Library has confirmed that they offered little or no real evidence in support of their claims.

Dr Owen's argument that 'Heimr' was contracted into -um in 'modern Norse' completely overlooked the fact that since the inhabitants of the parish were completely unaware of such a development, they could not have been influenced by it. Moreover, the grounds on which the Scandinavian theory were based have been largely discredited by Dr. B. G. Charles in his *Old Norse Relations with Wales* (1934). Protesting that there was no direct documentary evidence of permanent and extensive Norse settlement in the county, he contended that the several well established Norse place-names along the coast only suggested intensive maritime activity, and, at the most, pointed to small colonies of merchants and seafarers.

Dr. Charles also demonstrated that such frequently cited test words such as 'lake', 'grip' and 'Knapp' were just as likely to be of Old English derivation, and that some were found among the dialects of several English counties in which there had been very little Norse settlement. Very clearly, the Scandinavian thesis is little more than fascinating and romantic speculation.

For all his erudition, Dr. Owen was also quite mistaken in his impression that the name Llangwm was a recent innovation. It seems to first appear in the *Episcopal Register of St. Davids* (vol. 2 p.565) in a reference to the appointment of the rector William Leya (April 1489). That is most probably a piece of transliteration by the 1917 copyist, but it was definitely used by the Welsh-speaking Lewys Dwmm in his *Heraldic Visitation of Wales of 1613* (Vol.1 p.194).

Perhaps more convincingly, Llangwm was clearly written, presumably by the Rector, the Rev. James Higgon, on the inside cover of the parish church register (County Record Office) in 1768. Thereafter, the long-serving rector (1833-1882), the Rev. Thomas Williams, used the Welsh version of the name in a surviving letter of December 1868 (County Record Office). In view of the latter, it is rather odd that 'Langum' was engraved on the village school (1870), especially since the Rector's letter was concerned with the purchase of land for the school's erection.

If the Rev. Henry Evans was most insistent on the Welsh form of the name, it was surely because he was aware of the evidence in the records of his church. During the nineteenth century, particularly during the second half, the Welsh rendering was usually employed for legal and formal purposes. As was often the practice in anglicised areas of Wales, one 'l' was often dispensed with.

A careful search through a range of documents has enabled a topographical profile of the Parish name over a period of seven hundred years to be constructed. References in the *British Museum MSS. Relating to Wales; Archaeologica Cambrensis; Taxatio Ecclesiastica; The Calendar of Public Records Relating to Pembs.*, and *The West Wales Historical Records*, have firmly established the little known fact that during the late Middle Ages, when the parish was a manor, the name usually had three syllables –

LANDIGAN (1287), LANDEGOIN (1291), LANDEGAM (1303), LANDECOMBE and LANTIGORN (1376), LANDEGOM (1383), and LANDEGON (1441). There is one instance of LLANGOM (1069) and another of LANDEGUNNIE (1244).

During the Tudor period, when the parish contained 15 households, the middle syllable was dropped and the name was generally reduced to two – LANGOME in the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* (1535), LLANGOME in the *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII* (1539), and LANGOME, LANDGOME and LANGOOM in George Owen's *Description* (1603).

These are the earliest versions of the parish name, and in form and sound, they seem to be more Old or Middle English than Norse. In later centuries, the spelling varied from LLANGUM (1670) to LANGHAM (1770), to LANGUM (1861). It is well known that *The Western Telegraph* persisted with the latter until the mid 1950s.

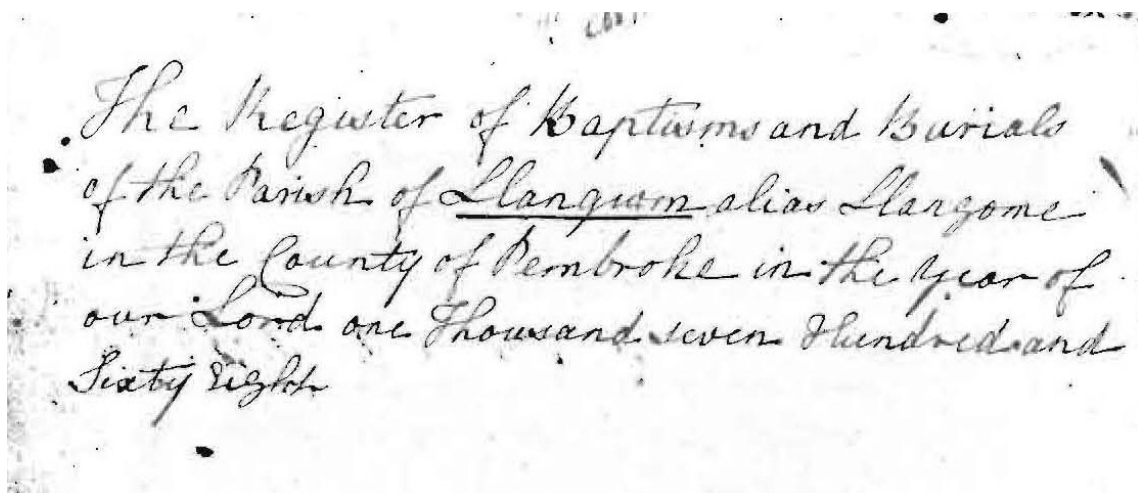
The most credible explanation is the simplest – that the parish name is derived from the two Welsh words, 'llan' (church) and 'cwm' (vale or valley). According to the late Prof. E. G. Bowen's *The Settlements of the Celtic Saints in Wales* (1954), the first word originally meant 'an enclosure', and has the basic meaning of 'a clearing' or 'open space'.

In the vast majority of place-names in which it occurs, it is found in a religious context, and is often linked with the name of a saint. On the original sacred enclosure, the cells of Celtic monks were built, but with the passage of time, these were replaced by a church, and 'llan' came to signify the latter.

In a further development, it was often used to refer not particularly to the church, but to the community which had grown up around it. Apparently, in the case of this parish, unlike that of nearby Llanstadwell, the practice of linking the prefix with a saint's name was not followed. The parish church is dedicated to Saint Jerome, sometimes rendered Hierom, but there is no early version of the name which resembles LLANHIEROM.

Incidentally, no-one has yet been able satisfactorily to explain why the three Llangwms in Wales have churches dedicated to Saint Jerome.

It seems that the other practice, mentioned by Professor Bowen, of linking the prefix with a locational feature, was adopted since the heart of the parish was a church in a vale, the name 'Llangwm'



The Welsh version of the name in the Register of the Parish Church at the Haverfordwest Record Office.

was transparently appropriate.

In recent correspondence, Dr. B. G. Charles of Aberystwyth, the leading authority on place-names, has carefully stated the argument for the Welsh derivation:

“The difficulty of arriving at the original form of the name from the early spellings is that most of them are Anglicised, or seem to be so. If there was a pre-Norman Conquest Welsh settlement and church here called Llangwm, the early English-speaking conquerors and settlers seem to have adopted it, but faced with the difficulty of pronouncing this strange and meaningless name, they may well have substituted their own Middle English sounds most akin to the Welsh ones. The Welsh ‘llan’ has always been a difficult word for an Englishman to say properly – ‘lan’ is the best that he can do. It seems to me that in the case of Llangwm, the English settlers, unable to make anything of ‘llan’, changed it to ‘Land’, the Middle English ‘Lande’, a word which made sense of sorts. ‘Cwm’ or ‘gwm’ was less of a problem. No doubt the scribes of the early period were English and ignorant of Welsh, and it is their efforts to spell the name in their written records that have come down to us in the above quoted forms. It was they who established the misleading but conventional written form LANDEGOM for Llangwm, which lasted over a long period, until it was ultimately restored to its present disyllabic form”.

Dr. Charles’ statement, positing a Welsh name which was obscured for several centuries before it was eventually reinstated, is admittedly a theory, and it does not require the existence of a Welsh settlement at Llangwm before or during the protracted Anglo-Norman conquest to clinch it.

But it is a much more convincing thesis than its rival, and it has the capital advantage of accommodating the available evidence.

Its crux has indirectly received considerable reinforcement from no less an expert than the Herald Extraordinary, Major Francis Jones:

“Even in South Pembrokeshire where Anglo-Norman occupation was most pronounced, the natural population was not so much displaced as absorbed, as shown by the names of Welshmen in early deeds and documents, and by Welsh names like Tenby, Pembroke, Pwllcrochan, LLANGWM (Major Jones might also have included Llanstadwell, Lamphey and Rhoscrowther) which would not have survived had the occupation been as ruthless and thorough as it is sometimes alleged to have been” – (Pembrokeshire Coastal National Park booklet – 1973, p.64).

Many other historians have little doubt that the Landsker was not nearly so exclusive as George Owen asserted it had been for the previous 500 years.

Shakespeare posed the reverberating question ‘What’s in a name?’. There is a great deal in a name – when the name is Llangwm.