

# Pembrokeshire Life

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*Haverfordwest's first firemen*  
*An American tourist in 1782*  
*Llangwm's famous fisherwoman*  
*Choosing local produce for Christmas*

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When New Zealander Jane Smallfield began researching her family tree, the trail led her to one of Llangwm's best remembered - and most photographed - characters

# Descended from Dolly the Bridge

**M**Y LATE father, Allan Palmer, was not interested in family history. He had emigrated to New Zealand in 1953 and never returned to his Welsh birthplace of Skewen, West Glamorgan.

He knew nothing of his paternal family background and could not provide me with the names of his grandparents or any cousins, believing that his father, William Aubrey Palmer, had moved away from the family home at the age of 14 when William's mother had died in 1914.

My aunt, however, knew that the Palmer family had a connection with the village of Llangwm in Pembrokeshire. In 1991 I wrote to all the Palmers listed in the Welsh phonebook residing in Llangwm – seven of them.

I provided them with details of my father and his parents and the response was overwhelming.

One of the letters I sent arrived at the home of a deceased person, but even then a response from his son-in-law was forthcoming – and what a goldmine it was. Grenville Thomas was not only married to one of my relatives but was also a genealogist and Llangwm historian.

His lengthy response indicated that I was indeed correct in assuming that the Palmer family had a strong connection with Llangwm. He indicated that they were a very prolific family and that 'they were so numerous during the late 19th century and early 20th century that many residents of south Pembrokeshire were convinced that the village was entirely inhabited by them'.

He was able to tell me that the Llangwm Palmers could be traced back to the marriage on December 23, 1765 at Burton Parish of John Palmer (d 1810) of St Mary's, Pembroke, and Anne Jones (d 1814) of Burton.

He provided detailed sourced information (which I have since confirmed) on the descendants of this couple.

Grenville wrote extensively of my great-great-grandmother Dorothy 'Dolly' Palmer.

*She died at 90 yrs of age on 28 February 1932 and is still [in 1991] remembered by a handful of surviving octogenarians in the village. Affectionately known as 'Dolly the Bridge', because she lived in a two storied*

*[sic] cottage a few yards on the Burton Guilford side of the stone bridge linking the two parishes, she was quite a village beauty in her younger years.*

*But she was best known in many parts of South Pembrokeshire as the quintessential Llangwm fisherwoman.*

He explained that the fisherwomen of Llangwm, dressed in their quaint costumes, were the subject of such interest that articles on them appeared in the American *Baltimore News* and the English *Daily Mirror*.

Not only did these fisherwomen row and navigate the fishing boats, but with their panniers on their back they would walk to Haverfordwest, Pembroke, Tenby and even Carmarthen to sell their fish and oysters door to door, in the markets and at hotels. They were excellent 'boatmen', handling the tides, winds, currents and sandbanks as competently as any man.

**R**ESearch indicates that the dress of the Llangwm fisherwomen was distinctive.

They wore a flat black felt hat which had a fairly large brim. In the 19th and early 20th centuries they sometimes wore a white scarf under their chin.

Their skirts were heavy and dark, but not so long as to impede walking. Often the skirt was tucked up to reveal a red Welsh flannel petticoat.



*Still tramping the roads – Dolly Palmer in the 1920s.*



Other prominent items of their serviceable clothing were a warm jacket, a striped flannel apron, a three-corner shawl around their shoulders, thick woollen socks and strong boots.

These fisherwomen were a unique breed of hard-working, durable women whose fame endures.

The village of Llangwm was regarded by many as a matriarchy in which the dominant role was played by the adult female. It was a society in which many would chose their own husbands and where young women would not leave the Llangwm district to go into service but would become fisherwomen, joining their parents and siblings.

Women would work side by side with their husbands and would continue working in the trade even after they had been widowed.

The women of the village were also good housekeepers and took pride in their tiny cottages.

Llangwm fisherwomen were also superstitious and they would go out of their way to avoid meeting a parson, which they thought would bring them bad luck.

Llangwm villagers were also known for disliking strangers – so much so that they would throw stones at them. This dislike of intruders has been traced back to the 1854 cholera epidemic that swept through the area.

It killed 62 inhabitants of the village and a black flag was hoisted to keep strangers away. Villagers at this time would throw stones at strangers to deter them from entering the village.

ONCE all my Llangwm letters had been collated and further research carried out, the stories of Dolly Palmer began to arrive from all directions. My father's cousins (previously undiscovered by me) could recall various stories about Dolly – including one that she never wore knickers, believing this to be unhygienic.

Many referred to the fact that she was the village beauty and that she was sought out by local photographers who produced postcards of her.

And when my great-uncle George Palmer was in the army during World War I, he and some of his friends went into a café and Dolly's portrait was reproduced on the tea-cups. None of his friends believed it was his grandmother.

Family members had also heard stories of paintings of Dolly as far afield as Japan. When I told my aunt about Dolly Palmer it reminded her that my late grandfather once told her that he had a famous ancestor whose picture appeared on chocolate boxes. Could this be Dolly Palmer?

I have since discovered that there are numerous postcards and paintings of the Llangwm fisherwomen (including many of Dolly) which capture the strength of character of these women in their shawls and hats, thick flannel skirts, heavy

boots and baskets strapped to their backs in which they would carry a hundredweight of oysters.

The postcards were sold locally but also as far afield as London, and collecting them has become something of an obsession with me. I have become intrigued by Dolly Palmer and her position in this matriarchal society of Llangwm.

So who was Dolly Palmer, what was her background and what did she look like?



*Llangwm fisherwomen pose for a portrait on Tenby sands.*

**D**OROTHY 'Dolly' Palmer was born in about 1842, the daughter of George and Dorothy (nee Davies) Llewellyn.

Her mother, Dorothy Davies, was born in Llangwm in about 1805, the daughter of John Davies, a fisherman, and she married Thomas Harbett in May 1829 in her home village.

Thomas died in 1831 and two years later Dorothy married a sailor and fisherman called Peter Adulph of Haverfordwest.

The couple had two children, William (b 1834) and Caroline (b 1835) before Peter died at the early age of 26 in October 1835.

In July 1839, Dorothy gave birth to an illegitimate son called George Price, and in the 1841 census she is listed as living at Guilford, Llangwm, as a 35-year-old widow with three young children.

On January 7, 1842, Dorothy wed her third husband, George Llewellyn, at Pembroke Register Office. He was a fisherman, 11 years her junior, and Dorothy signed the marriage certificate with her mark 'X'.

The couple went on to have four children, the first of whom was Dolly, so that by the time of the 1851 census the cottage at Guilford must have been a little crowded, with the following being listed as residing there:

*George Llewellyn [sic], head, married, 29, fisherman.*

*Dorothy Llewellyn, wife, married, 45, fisherman's wife.*

*William Adulph, wife's son, unmarried, 17, fisherman.*

*Caroline Adulph, wife's daughter, unmarried, 17, at home.*

*George Price, wife's son, unmarried, 12, at home.*

*Dorothy Llewellyn, daughter, unmarried, 8, at home.*

*Ann Llewellyn, daughter, unmarried, 6, at home.*

*Ellin Llewellyn, daughter, unmarried, 6 months, at home.*

By 1861, George and Dorothy were described as living at 23 Guilford Cottages, with George being listed as a stoker aboard HMS *Blenheim*, a guardship which was anchored off Pembroke Dockyard at the time.

*Continued*





## Descended from Dolly the Bridge

Dorothy was widowed for the third time in 1867 and she eventually died in 1882.

But what of her daughter Dolly? In 1863 she married William Palmer (b c1841 in Llangwm), the son of Richard and Sarah Palmer, and by 1871 they were living in the cottage at Guilford Bridge – in Llangwm village, but in Burton parish – with their first three children.

By this stage Dolly is listed as a fisherwoman and her husband as a fisherman. William and Dolly had at least eight children, all born in the parish of Burton between 1863 and 1888. They were:

- Sarah Palmer, b 1863, died after April 3, 1881.
- Dorothy Palmer, b 1867, died September 26, 1893, Llangwm.
- Richard Palmer, b 1870, married Jane Childs c 1892. Richard died in 1947.
- William Palmer, b 1873, married Mary Ann James, January 20 1901; married Florence Everett February 19, 1921. William died January 19, 1947 at Neath.
- Ellen Palmer, b 1878, died in 1890.
- Annie Palmer, b 1880, married John Henry Adams in 1906.
- Caroline Palmer, b April 19, 1883, married Evan Rees Davies on December 21, 1907.
- Beatrice Laura Palmer, b 1888, married John Henry Davies in Haverfordwest district in 1910.

### Roaring drunk

ON a Sunday in November 1865, PC George James was called away from evensong at Llangwm church to sort out a disturbance at a nearby alehouse called the Ship and Castle.

Here he found oyster fishermen William Palmer and Thomas Harbit both roaring drunk and singing 'Slap, bang, Here we are again' at the top of their voices.

With difficulty the PC ejected the two choristers from the pub; both were fined at the local Petty Sessions later that week.

Was this Dolly's William Palmer? And if so, what would his reception have been like at home?

By 1901 William was a dockyard labourer and the couple still had three daughters living at home with them. Annie, 20, and Caroline, 18, were both recorded as fisherwomen who worked on their own account from home, while their youngest sister Beatrice Laura was a 13-year-old scholar.

Just as Dolly had followed her mother into the trade of a fisherwoman, so too did Dolly's daughters follow her.

In 1911, William – a fisherman again – and Dolly, a fisherwoman, were still living in their four-roomed cottage at Guilford Bridge. Living with them was their 23-year-old married daughter Laura and her young son Winston. (Laura's husband John may have been at sea serving with the Royal Navy).

The census of 1911 indicates that seven of William and Dolly's nine (or ten) children were still alive at this time.

William Palmer died in 1925, aged 82. He and Dolly had been married for 62 years.

FOR 70 years, Dolly made the journey to Pembroke, Pembroke Dock and Tenby two or three times a week, by ferry-boat and on foot, with a heavy pannier of oysters on her back.

It was a combination of her distinctive costume and fine features that captured the imagination of artists and photographers.

In 1880 William Powell Frith RA painted a Llangwm fisherwoman selling fish to his wife and two daughters, and the fisherwoman is reputedly Dolly Palmer, then in her late 30s.



*Studio portrait of Dolly Palmer.*



*In Dolly's day, fetching water was a regular chore in Llangwm.*



That would make it the earliest image we have of Dolly. The original now hangs in Scolton Manor.

A postcard sent from Pembrokeshire in 1915 clearly identifies Dolly as the subject on the front of the card. The writer states: "Here is a photo of Dolly Palmer who takes fish to our house every week. How would you like to work in such boots and clothes?"

Earlier copies of this sepia tone card indicate it was in circulation by 1903, with coloured copies available by 1906.

About 1919, W Leach, a well-known Tenby photographer of the time, gave a photograph of Dolly to the Tenby Museum, and on the reverse he wrote:

*Would you like this for Museum? Dolly Palmer, a Langham [sic] fisherwoman I took years ago, but she would not sit – was in studio for a few minutes.*

*She thought I was making money out of her, doing p-cards. I gave her two shillings and out she went I do not know how I did it in so short a time.*

Tenby Museum also holds H Mortimer Allen's picture of Dolly Palmer as an older woman which has also been reproduced on postcards.

In 2008 I had my most exciting discovery – a Foley China plate which I believe depicts Dolly Palmer, although the illustration is simply titled 'A Llangwm Fisherwoman'. The plate bears the Wileman and Company stamp and its number indicates it was produced between 1902 and 1905.

At this time Dolly would have been approximately 60 years of age. The image depicted on the plate is very similar to a postcard of Dolly in circulation in 1903.

Dolly died on February 28, 1933 at her home in Llangwm, aged 90, and was buried in Llangwm cemetery. Her obituary notice in the *West Wales Guardian* was headed *Death of Famous Llangwm Fisherwoman*.

*By the passing of Mrs Dorothy (Dolly) Palmer at her home in Guilford, Llangwm, on Tuesday, Pembrokeshire has lost one of its most notable figures.*

*Mrs Palmer was the last in a long line of Llangwm fisherwomen and her portrait in Welsh National costume, with her pannier slung over her shoulder, is to be seen in many homes throughout the Empire.*

*Also many old Welsh mugs, which were at one time in great demand, bore her replica, so her fame was world-wide. Her death severs a link with the past.*

*In her youth Mrs Palmer was a very beautiful woman and many artists visited Llangwm to paint her profile.*

*Her dialect was distinctive and she was extremely popular with the notable visitors to Tenby years ago.*

*Not so long ago a Pembrokeshire native 'exiled' in Canada was pleasantly surprised to see, when visiting a Toronto cinema, a film depicting the beautiful scenes of his native county.*

*Of course, Mrs Palmer, as a rare piece of the old county, was featured*



*A Llangwm fishing family, with the mother evidently the dominant figure.*

*in this. A portrait of 'Dolly' is also to be seen in one of the London art galleries.*

*Before she put her pannier away, Mrs Palmer walked to Pembroke, Pembroke Dock and Tenby – a distance of about 20 miles – two or three times a week with a load of oysters on her back. Even after she had retired last year – her ninetieth – she never failed to cultivate her garden in which she took the greatest pride.*

*She was a faithful member of Galilee Baptist Church and attended regularly up until a few months ago when she had to keep to her bed following the fracture of a leg.*

*She was always spotlessly clean and took the greatest pleasure in showing visitors round her little cottage where she had spent the whole of her 91 years. A few years ago she sold her Welsh costume to a lady who was a visitor to Tenby.*

*Mrs Palmer was predeceased by her husband eight years ago. She had nine children, five of whom survive, 26 grandchildren and 13 great-grandchildren,*



*This coloured postcard portrait of Dolly was very popular.*

**M**Y FATHER had no real interest in his family history until I discovered his great-grandmother Dolly Palmer, and he was very proud of a coloured print of her that hung in his living room.

In 2002 my father developed Alzheimer's and eventually he was unable to determine what relationship Dolly was to him. So proud was he of her, however, that we would never correct him when he told us that Dolly was his mother!

Dolly Palmer, village beauty and legendary fisherwoman, lives on in the village of Llangwm, where her images are on the village website and where she features in displays and talks organised by the local historical society.

Her cottage still stands near Guilford Bridge, while interested descendants whom she never knew are helping keep her story alive.

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