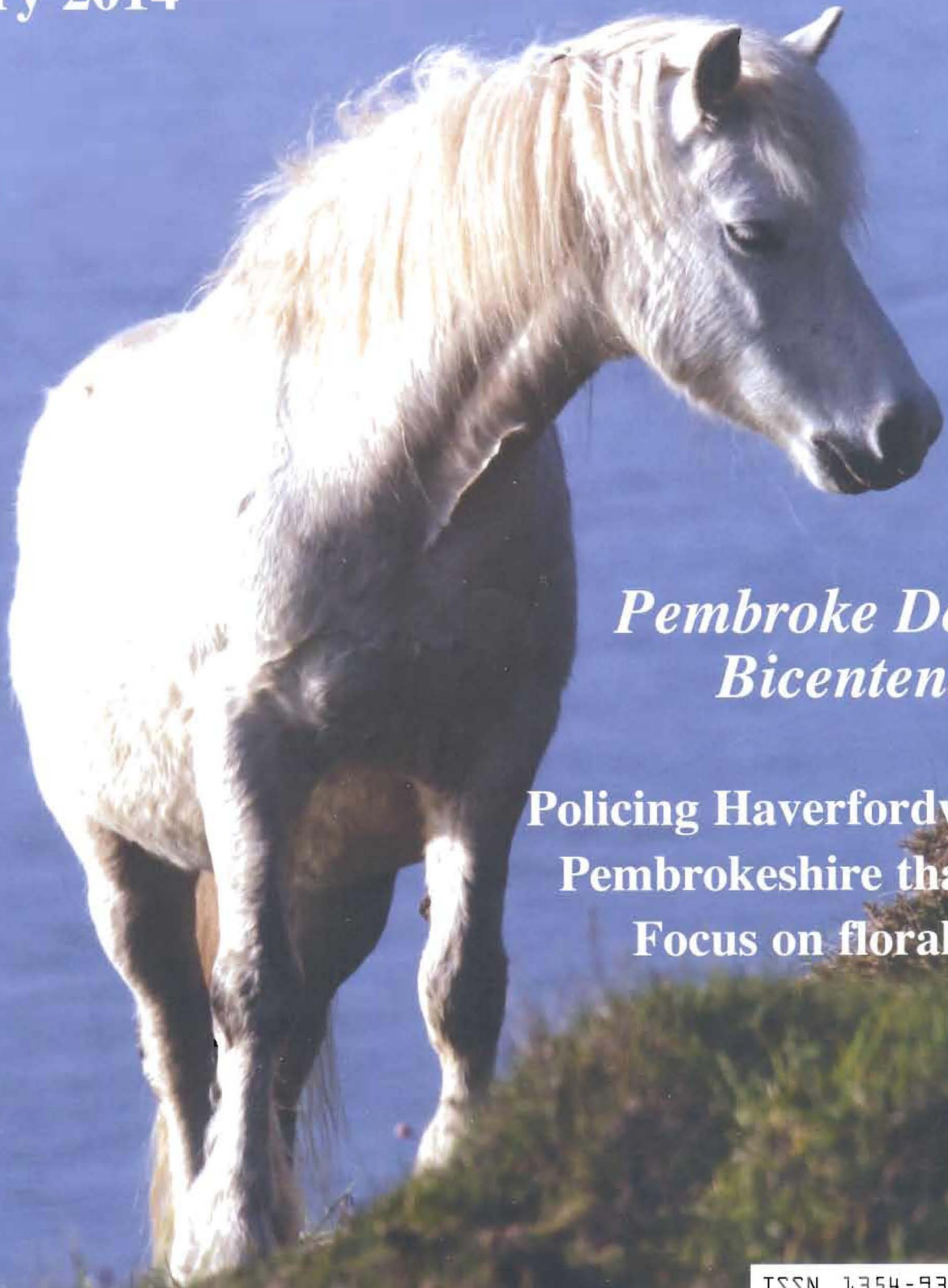


# Pembrokeshire Life

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*Pembroke Dock  
Bicentenary*

**Policing Haverfordwest  
Pembrokeshire thatch  
Focus on floral art**

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There was a time when thatched roofs were a common sight in west Wales. Mike Bennett uncovers their history

# The lost thatch of Pembrokeshire

*If the thatcher of Thatchwood went to thatchet a thatching,  
Where is the thatching the thatcher of  
Thatchwood did thatch in Pembrokeshire?*

WHEN I started to ask around if anybody knew where there were any thatched properties in the county – apart from the seaweed hut at Freshwater West and the reconstructed iron age dwellings at Castell Henllys – most people were unable to identify any at all.

Even after several months of research, I have only been able to identify a total of eight properties in the county which currently have thatched roofs.

Two of these are modern 'chocolate box' fancies near Saundersfoot, which bear no resemblance to vernacular architecture whatsoever.

The remainder are traditional cottages; three near the coast between St. David's and Fishguard, one near Crosswell, and another at Marloes.

The majority of these were probably thatched originally, but have had other weatherproofing laid on the roof in the



*Thatched cottages at Llangwm.*

interim. In some cases there is evidence that the remains of the original thatch was left in situ, and simply covered with zinc coated corrugated iron sheets which have been removed recently and replaced with new thatch.

Only one property appears to have been continuously thatched since it was erected as a 'ty-un-nos' or 'one night cottage' before 1849, when it is known it was largely rebuilt.

It is situated near Maenclochog and is called 'Penrhos' which means, 'near the edge of the moor'; it is open to the public by appointment through Scolton Manor Museum.

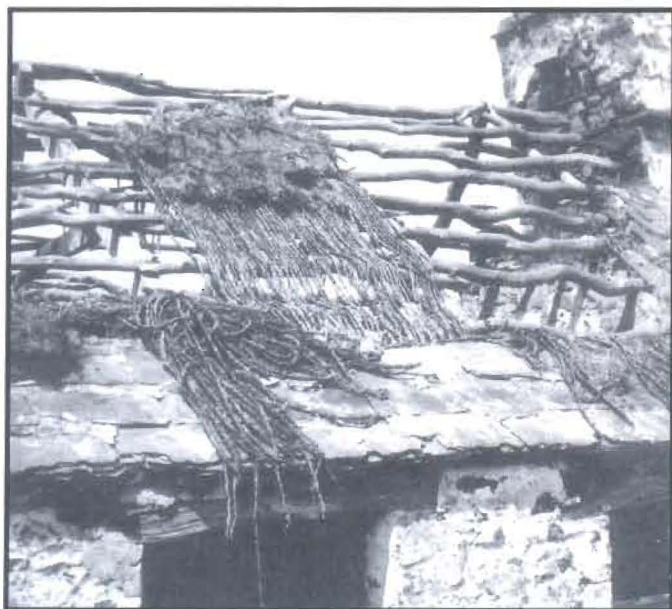
To avoid the tyranny of powerful landlords, it became a tradition that if peasants could erect a crude dwelling in one night on common land, and have smoke coming out of the chimney by morning they were allowed to own it.

However, the majority of the poor landless agricultural labourers in Wales during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, would have had no option but to rent hovels from their landlords without any rights of tenancy. They were often evicted without notice on the whim of their master, which was an effective form of social control but obviously generated great resentment.

THERE appear to have been regional variations, but labourers' cottages in this area would generally have been single storey, and divided into two parts.

One half was shelter for farm animals and the other for domestic accommodation, with occasional crog lofts installed in the roof at a later date.

The walls were usually made of mud, clom or wattle-and-daub, with one door and a few small windows.



*Straw rope underthatch with tree branch purlins and rafters on a cottage at Ceibwr, Moylgrove.*

Picture courtesy of The National Museum of Wales.



*These cottages at Marloes and Tretio, St David's have been recently re-thatched in very different styles.*  
Marloes picture courtesy of Margert Brace.

This humble dwelling would be covered with turf or thatch, which was held up by the boughs of a tree and wattle.

The cottage would have been lit by candles or tapers, and heated by an open fire and the body heat of the farm animals nearby.

Thatch is basically any vegetable matter used to cover a roof, and historically in this area was probably; turf, bracken, heather, broom, rushes, straw or reed.

There are a few houses currently covered with earth and turf in Pembrokeshire. Malator at Druidstone is famous, legal and award-winning, while the others in and around the Preseli Hills try to keep a low profile, perhaps waiting for planning approval.

A traveller through Wales in 1775 commented: "The cottages in Merioneth are in general unpaved and unglazed, but built of stone and covered often with slate, and superior to the miserable

mud hovels of Pembrokeshire and Carmarthenshire which I believe the worst mansions of human beings on this side of the Tweed."

Even the town of Haverfordwest was not much better. John Brown noted that in the 1700s: 'Almost all of the houses in Shut (Dew) Street are miserable thatched hovels'.



*Thatched hovel at Manorbier in 1830.*  
Picture courtesy of Tom Lloyd.

**T**HERE are no comprehensive records of which properties were thatched in Pembrokeshire, since they were the norm.

However, other sources like local history reference books and old paintings, prints and photographs can give us a clue.

I have found numerous copies of prints and photographs of thatched properties all over Pembrokeshire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, that confirm that they were ubiquitous in the county.

W R Morgan in his history of Begelly, 'A Pembrokeshire Countryman Looks Back' records:

"Today there are no thatched houses or cottages at Begelly. In the early years of this (20th)

century several thatched cottages were to be seen, some of them being at The Green, The Parsonage Green, The Bank, The Corner, Folly Cottage, Fold Park, Broom Cottage, Begelly Moor, Cottage On The Green at Thomas Chapel and Cowsland Stone."

In her study of Penally and surrounding hamlets entitled 'A Murder Of Crows' Margaret Davies includes images of some of the cottages that were thatched in that area, including Drusselton, Frankleston, Church Hill Cottage and Juniper Cottage.

In the 1830s Charles Norris sketched numerous buildings around Pembrokeshire, notably in Tenby, some of which were thatched.

There were two water mills with thatched roofs that were drawn before photography was invented in the 1830s, one at Nolton Haven in 1795 by J M W Turner no less, and the other at St Florence sketched by Fanny Price Gwynne.

*Continued*



*The removal of a zinc roof exposes the long-forgotten thatch underneath at a cottage in Hook.*

Picture courtesy of Mr and Mrs Lawrence.

# The lost thatch of Pembrokeshire

Two early photographs of buildings at Gumfreston mill near Tenby, and Caer Bwdy mill near St.David's, clearly show they were thatched long before they became redundant and were demolished.

In their 1979 research results, B and J Howells found that: "All 28 farmhouses belonging to the Prince of Wales in the parishes of, Steynton, St.Ishmaels, Roch and Camrose in 1623 were thatched: no buildings in this area are so thatched today."

A trawl through written records also gives us an insight into the public buildings and business premises in the county that were thatched through the ages.

Evidence exists that two public houses were originally thatched; the 'Sinnel Hotel' on Newgale Sands before it was lost to the sea, and the 'Corner Piece', on the Haverfordwest to Fishguard road.

An education report in January 1847 tells us that the thatched roof of Roch school-room was letting in rain and disrupting the work of the pupils.

**I**T IS more difficult to find evidence of who was thatching all these properties, which would have needed repair and replacement on a regular basis.

There are only a few records of dedicated thatchers in the county, but the noted local historian E.T Lewis says that a David Evan of Penfeidr and his apprentices were busy thatching cottages in the Preseli hills in the eighteenth century.

I can find no list of the number of thatchers in the official occupational analysis of the nineteenth century census returns for Pembrokeshire, but by chance I found in the 1851 census a James Greynish living at Keep Hill, Keeston who gave his occupation as that of a thatcher.



*Above: The Green, Begelly, in 1918. Picture courtesy of William Morgan.*



*Left: Gatehouse on the Ridgeway estate near Canaston Bridge. Picture courtesy of Mary Houseman.*

However the authority on Welsh historic agricultural workers' housing, Eurwyn William, suggests in his book, 'The Welsh Cottage' that thatching techniques would have been passed down through the generations, and neighbours would have helped each other when thatching was required. This, plus the fact that thatchers

may have had other main occupations, could account for their absence from the archives.

Thatching styles varied in different parts of the country, and on the west coast of Cardiganshire and Pembrokeshire in particular, straw rope was used as both an underthatch support and overthatch binding,

Slate was also used occasionally along the edges of the roof, as an extra defence against stormy weather.

The materials that were utilised for thatching roofs were



*Pembrokeshire's only continuously thatched cottage is at Penrhos, Llanycefn. The picture on the left shows Mary Williams in the doorway in 1894. Old picture courtesy of Scolton Manor Museum.*



*Postcard views of cottages at Penycwm and Clarbeston Road, with the obligatory lady of the house by the doorway.*  
Pictures courtesy of Roy Lewis

usually freely available locally, and if properly constructed and maintained were weatherproof and provided good insulation.

However, when more durable roofing materials such as slate, tiles and zinc corrugated sheets became available because of the Industrial Revolution – which also produced cheaper transport costs and more disposable income – the use of thatch gradually declined after 1850.

If you fancy a thatched roof and can afford the cost of the labour and materials plus higher insurance premiums, you will first need to get planning consent. I am told that it helps if you can prove that the building has been thatched at some point in the past, although this is no guarantee of approval.

There is no longer a need to bring in a thatcher from outside the area, as we now have our very own master thatcher

at Newport. However, finding suitable affordable thatching material locally will be more of a problem, especially if you want to use the most durable reeds.

In sustainability and economic terms, thatch is a renewable resource that could be grown on redundant farm land and help create new jobs for thatchers. However, the need for regular replacement and repair, coupled with unfavourable comparative costs for current roofing options, may make this an unpopular choice.

A lot of people may also have fears about pest infestation and fire hazards, although these can be addressed effectively these days.

I will be pleased to communicate with anyone interested in this subject, and I can be contacted through email [mike21702170@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:mike21702170@yahoo.co.uk) or telephone 01437 710994.

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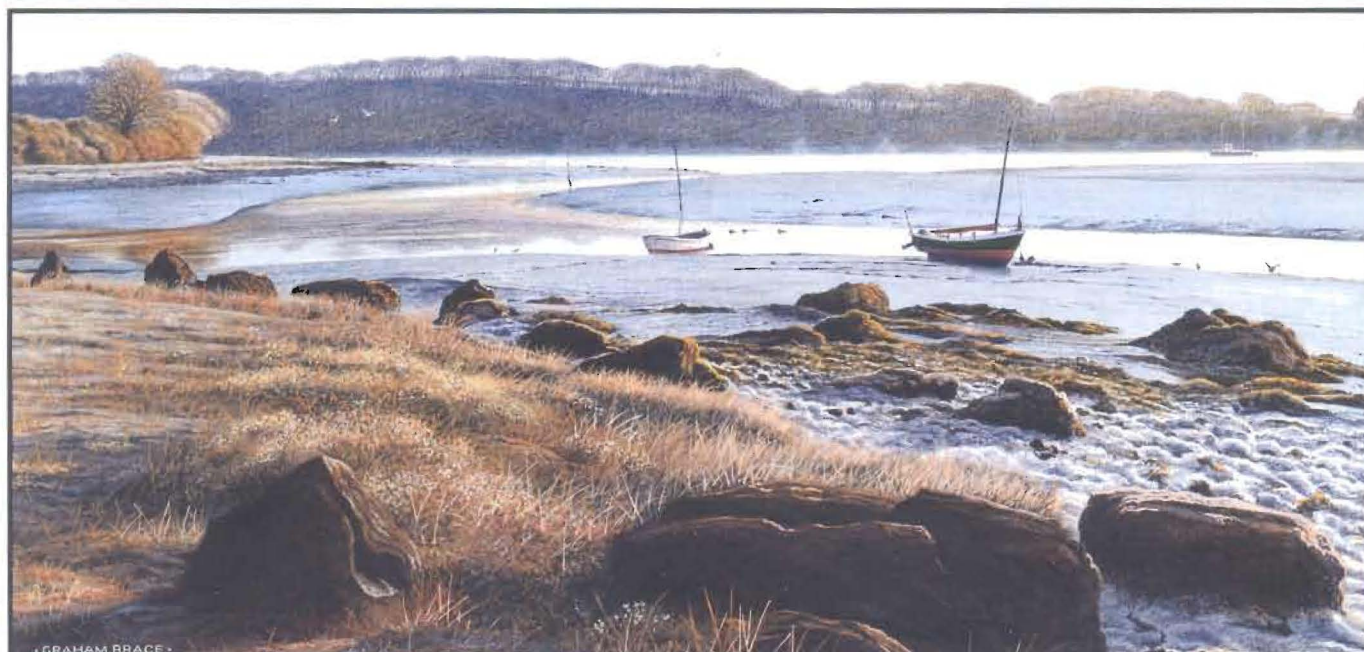
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June Howell suggests a winter walk shadowing the Cleddau from Burton to Black Tar. Artworks by Graham Brace

# To the woods and the water

## Burton to Llangwm



*Burton Churchyard – the last resting place of several of the 1797 French invaders.*

A perfect walk to shake off the Christmas excesses. Approximately five miles. Linear, with 308 bus (Haverfordwest – Burton circular) for return journey. Starting point: Burton Church.

Roadside parking at church, or 308 bus to Stable Inn, and walk up Church Road to start.

**B**OTH the bus stop and the starting point have their points of interest. Seemingly not worth a second glance is the stone 'shed' next to the bus stop, but on closer inspection you will find it displays a small plaque announcing that it once was the site of a toll gate.

So, next time you complain about the price of crossing the Cleddau Bridge, be grateful you aren't being charged for every boot-load of goods you wish to take down the road to..... well, today, probably Llangwm.

Next point of interest is the baptismal well outside Burton Church; total immersion, no less. The church is open daily from Easter to harvest time and contains, among other things, the fine 16th century tomb of one Richard Wogan of Milton.

In the graveyard lie the unmarked graves of a number of French prisoners who died in the nearby naval hospital after the 'last invasion', but more visible is the preaching cross on the south side of the porch.

After your look around, return to the baptismal well and follow the signs to the footpath between the farm and the graveyard. This leads across a field, then through gates into a second field heading directly for the electricity pylon, with a gate out to the lane just beyond.

Turn right onto the lane and walk on past Beggar's Reach Hotel, formerly Burton Rectory. Half a mile beyond the hotel, turn left through Cudlic Farm. Shortly, the road reverts to stony track; follow the signs on past the next farm and enjoy a glimpse of the river to your right.

Now the lane is tarmac again and leads for a quarter of a mile downhill until converging on the lane to Roose Ferry. (No ferry alas, but, hey, we've got the toll bridge now!).

But we aren't going down to the ferry, even if it were there; we are going to cross over the stream and follow the footpath sign up the hill.

Fifty yards up here, turn right (waymarked), and wind your way for the next mile through the leafy domain of Benton Woods.

Don't be surprised if Rupert Bear and his pals come out to greet you as you go past Benton Castle. It's more of a tower really, and in true Rupert fashion, it's painted white and is surrounded by what might as well be 'Nut Wood'.

Built in the Middle Ages, the castle was restored in the 1930s, and remains in private hands.

**L**EAVING the castle behind, the path reverts to stony track for another five minutes before two stiles lead you out of the woods and into a field.

Soon you have a view of the river with the Preseli Hills providing a distant backdrop. Cross over a cattle grid into the next field and follow the waymarkers, right, at a second cattle grid, over the stile and into a fairy dell of a gully bestrewn with fallen trees and moss-covered stones.

In ten minutes, another stile leads into yet more woods, but Llangwm is within sight now, as a glance over the hedge will prove. Once the deciduous trees change to larch, your woodland walk is nearing its end.

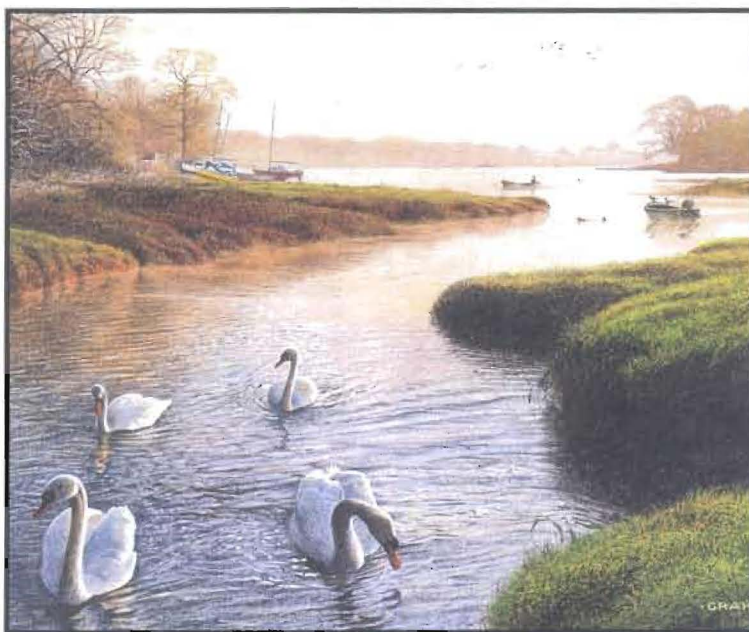
A short flight of steps leads you out of the woods and across a forestry track, to more steps down to Port Lion's foreshore.

Go left along the foreshore and follow the markers up the steep path, and through the kissing gate at the top into the field.

Keeping to the left edge, head straight up towards the house in the distance (don't fork left half way!) and exit via a stile on to the Llangwm Ferry lane.



*Fishing boats beached for the winter at Port Lion.*



*Swans explore one of the pills at Llangwm.*

No Llangwm Ferry today, or any other day, so we turn left and walk 100 yards to the next turning on the right, which leads between houses to Guildford Pill.

Pick your way, left, between boats to cross over the stepping stones. (N.B. If high tide has covered the stones, go back to the road and head inland until you reach Rectory Road on your right.

Turn down here to re-join the route on the far side of the stepping stones.

Having crossed the inlet, wet-footed or dry, carry on along Rectory Road for five minutes to Edwards

Pill, which boasts a bridge, but no stepping stones. Once over it, walk down to the tree-lined foreshore and round to Black Tar Pill (ten minutes).

*Continued*

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## To the woods and the water

We are going to return to Llangwm village via the bridle way, signed, just after Black Tar Cottage, (five minutes along the foreshore), but before doing so, it's worth a few extra steps to view the information board 100 yards further on.

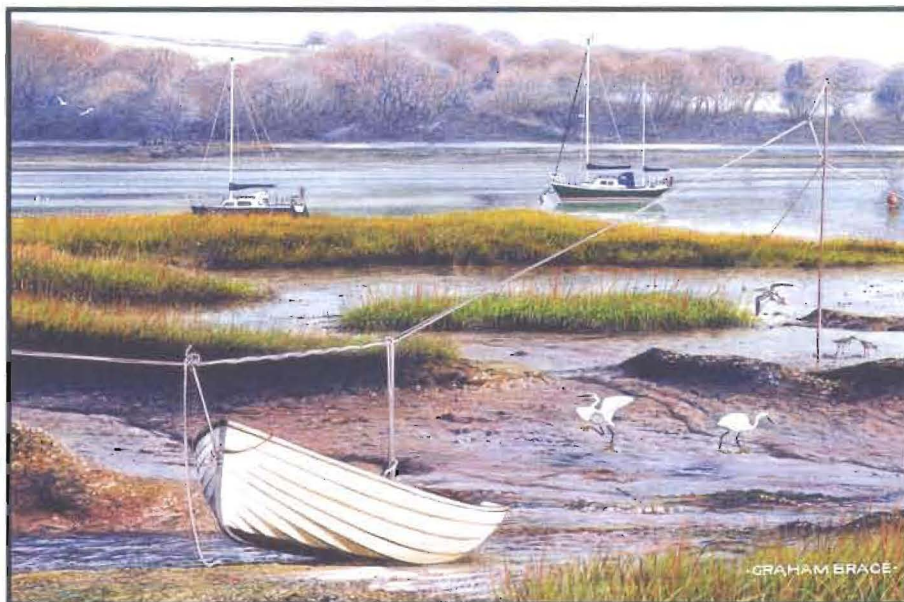
Take a minute to read it, then enjoy a break on the bench conveniently placed alongside. You may wish to conjecture on how the scene would have differed in former times when the words 'pleasure' and 'boats' did not necessarily float merrily along together as they do today.

Black Tar pill, like most pills around here, was a place of work, not one of recreation.

When you are ready, go back to the bridleway; it begins as a leafy tunnel, before leading on to the periphery of Llangwm.

Soon you will be retracing your steps along Rectory Road, but instead of crossing over the stepping stones, turn right, and go right again up the hill into the village centre, which is 'quaint, essentially English' in lay-out. That is to say, essentially, of Norman origin.

In fact it was Flemish over-lords who settled Llangwm back in the 12th century, and St Jeromes's Church on the village green dates back to that period. Look inside if you have time.



*Egrets and oyster-catchers at Black Tar.*

For centuries Llangwm and fishing were synonymous, and the village women (hardy types by all accounts) were renowned for walking miles around the county carrying their baskets of oysters to sell. They were also renowned for 'wearing the trousers' in the household, and – not being shy violets – chose their own husbands.

Was there ever a village as liberated as Llangwm?

Rhetorical question requiring no answer – suffice it to say, the village still retains its olde worlde charm, and boasts a shop, a pub and a bus stop for your return journey.

What more could you ask at the end of a pleasant day's ramble?



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*If you happen to be doing this walk in the last week of July you may well encounter various characters like this. Llangwm's Scarecrow Festival is now a fixture in the calendar featuring music, parades – and lots of scary figures lurking round every corner.*