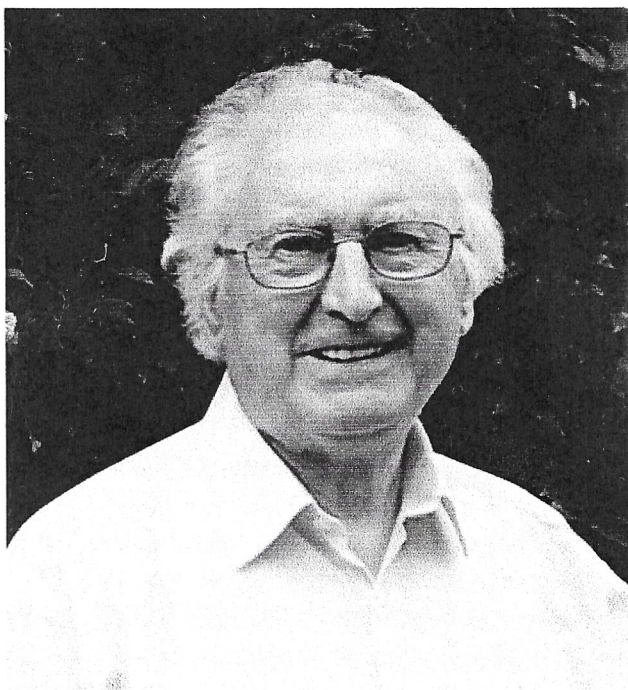


And I was 9

A talk given by Havard Gregory in November 2002
to Pentyrch & District Local History Society

I'm always fascinated to read the *Garth Domain*, and I must thank Don and his team of committed helpers. And, like you, I was excited to read about the Roman finds on the Garth. However old I may feel in my bones at times, I can't go back in my memories of Gwaelod-y-Garth to the days when some distant Romans lost their coins on the mountain!



Havard Gregory

But the more I think back to the day my family moved to the village in 1934, when I was 9, the more aware I am that so many details in our lives were nearly half way back to Roman times. After all, we had no water toilets in our house - nor did anyone else. But the Romans did!

Now, as I started marshalling my recollections for this evening, more and more details emerged from the past, with the result that I have time for only a fraction of what I could say to you tonight.

To help us all to place in a historical context the real time between November 2002 and November 1934 when we had just moved to Gwaelod-y-Garth, let's remember some of the things that happened in 1934.

In the world of literature, only a few days after we moved here, Dylan Thomas published his landmark first volume, "Eighteen Poems".

Little could I realise that, later in life, I would be Chairman of the first Dylan Thomas Society (in London) and then was instrumental in establishing a Welsh branch in Swansea, and I would have the experience of reading Dylan's work in a number of countries.

The country's economy was in a parlous state, and the Special Areas Act was passed to help 'distressed' areas, as they were called those days, such as the valleys of south Wales. My father had helped to awaken public concern by convening a public meeting in Cardiff, in the vestry of the old Ebeneser Welsh Congregational Chapel, which was later demolished in the re-development of that part of the city. It was an attempt to arouse public concern and to discuss ways and means to counter the appalling rise in unemployment in the valleys.

We are today in the age of spellbinding air machines and spacecraft technology. When I was 9, Cardiff Airport had been operating for just 3 years in a very humble, primitive location on Pengam Moors (I had my first daringly adventurous flight from there, to Jersey, in a little three-seater single-engined Tiger Moth in 1951). Two years earlier, 1932, Amy Johnson and Jim Mollison had made the first non-stop flight across the Atlantic to the USA, daring to take off from Pendine in their seaplane, and taking 34 hours.

The double-decker Mumbles railway, long ago disappeared, was just 5 years of age.

Jack Petersen won the Commonwealth heavyweight title. Who was Jack Peterson? some of you will ask. But some of us can just remember!

It was the peak year for the production of anthracite coal here in the south of Wales. Alas! It was also the year when 265 miners lost their lives in the Gresford disaster.

When I was 9, toys were scarce and very rudimentary. I saw so very few in our house that none has survived. But, when I was 9, the first Corgi models were produced in tinplate in Swansea and formed the basis of the company which became Mettoy Limited.

Where did I come from to Gwaelod-y-Garth? And what was the nature of that change in my life? I had previously lived 9 miles upstream, in Cymer, at the lower end of the Rhondda Valleys - or, to be precise, on high ground half a mile from the spot where the Rhondda Fach and the Rhondda Fawr become one, with a joint three mile journey down to Pontypridd, where they merge in the waters of the Taff. The river water was black with coal dust. The names that had become familiar to my early childhood ears were those of the collieries, whose inhabitants I sometimes saw, before the days of pit-head baths, walk from the pit up our hill, black from head to foot, with just a pair of beady eyes piercing the gloom. Ynyshir, Tonypandy, Tylerstown, Pontygwaith, Ferndale, Maerdy, Trealaw, Ystrad, Pentre, Cwmparc, Treorci, Treherbert, Blaenrhondda, Pontygwaith and Llwynypia were names that rang in my ears every day of every week with the echoing clatter of slammed cage grills before the stomach-crunching drop down into the earth. Although we were a generation away from the Tonypandy riots when Churchill sent in the troops, the people of Rhondda never forgot or forgave him or his party. It was a world of straggling long streets built on the cheap by the mine owners for the battery-hen world of miners' families.

Coal dust never left my mother's washing on the line in peace. The 'Persil white' (as it would one day be called) that always emerged from the hand-wash kitchen laundry soon gave way to the invading airborne enemy, which, silent and stealthy like a thief in the night, crept unseen upon every back garden.

Serious accidents below ground were a daily happening. A generation before I'd been born, 66 pits were working in the Rhondda. Before I was a pensioner, the last one had closed.

I treasure an exercise book my father kept in Cymer before we moved to Gwaelod-y-Garth, listing poor families where an injured breadwinner had been confined to his bed for years, a widow was desperately struggling to exist, a child had long been bedridden with TB. My father would visit them with words of comfort - and a little money, often just a few pennies, donated by a benevolent fund.

So I swapped all the names of those sombre coal-faced townships for a rural enclave surrounded by lots and lots of trees and winding paths, and places around me with clean-sounding names that rang in my ears with a resonance of a very different order, all redolent of the countryside: Y Garth; Craig yr Allt; Penygarn; Cware Glas; Brysta Fach; Getrys; Cefn Bychan; Penygarn; Pen-y-cwm; Ffynnon Ffigys; Maes-arail (where there lived that legendary creature, Mabon, staring at you with his frightening, blood-curdling glare, with whom I one day came face-to-face all of a sudden when walking in the woods, and froze, petrified as if I'd just met a cobra in the grass - Mabon, who lived among the trees with his equally fearsome-looking brother at the top of Coed-rhiw-ceiliog).



Then, Coed y Bedw, Nant Cwm-llwydrew. Yes, there were Llwynypia Cottages - but a world removed from the satanic rows-upon-rows of the Rhondda Llwynypia. Y Gwco, Ty'n y Ffald, Penmynydd, Danygraig, Garth Newydd, Ynysgau, and Maesgwyn (the claypit and brickworks).

One thing was common to these new names: they all smelt of green grass and lush trees and scented flowers, of hills and valleys, and lush green fields, and fresh, ever so fresh, clean air. Names that sounded like the morning song of birds beckoning to a fine day.

And the very white of clean clothes on the line was a new experience, because we could smell the clean of the clothes, on the line that stayed clean.

So here was I - and another new experience: I now lived in a parish, if you please, and a parish with history! - in a hillside village with the euphonious name of Gwaelod-y-Garth. Oh! There were steep climbs, and the rocky nose of the Garth teetered on the very edge, and you had to keep a sure pair of feet under you as you drank in the view across to the Graig and down to the railway viaduct, and Cardiff, the Vale and distant Somerset across the water. I was aeons away from Cymer and that other community of Sherpa Tensings whose nimble feet and stout hearts got them up that 'north face' to the rarified air of Trebanog, to their drunken rows of houses dramatically captured on canvas by a number of artists, and so famously written about by Gwyn Thomas, who was one of my fellow Cymer natives. Little wonder that Gwyn found such fertile material in our native valley. Mind you, there was here - and there still is - the Zig Zag, about which he would have coined a few masterly phrases. How I regret having never brought him face to face with that convoluted masterpiece of highway engineering!



The Zig-Zag

What I wasn't fully aware of in Cymer was the history behind those satanic holes far below the land, and the history of deceit with which mine owners had tricked the farmers into selling them, for a few paltry pence, the ground beneath their green fields. They said that was all they wanted. They didn't want the farmers' land - only what lay underneath it.

But from the world of the mine owners, I was now on land where those same people, the Dynevors and the Butes, not content with the rich seams of coal under the earth, had also grabbed the fields above and made yet another fortune from the rent received from the local tenant farmers.

Now, in Cymer, no one really seemed to mind much about our comings and goings. But in Gwaelod-y-Garth, things were, I soon discovered, conspicuously different. It slowly dawned on me, in my tender years, that this village might well win the top accolade for gossip! For it soon became apparent to me that there were quite a few around with an unquenchable thirst to specialize in other people's business.

After losing his well tended and fertile allotment behind our house in Cymer, where the kidney beans flourished unfailingly each season and were a welcome addition to my mother's homely and lovingly prepared fare, my father soon had no choice but to abandon the inert, barren wasteland above the gulley behind our new home.

The change of school wasn't too dramatic. From a valley school where I remember no other child able to speak Welsh, I came to a little country school where I seemed again to be the only regularly Welsh speaking boy, though many of the children came from homes where at least one parent was a native Welsh speaker. I remember the headmaster's younger son asking me one day in class what was the meaning of a word he had no idea how to pronounce. With the passing of the years, I realized that he meant "Myn yffarn i", a phrase which wouldn't have been in my vocabulary, in any case, at that time!



Garth Villas and Capel Bethlehem

This rural enclave had a mixed population of teachers and office workers; small (very small) shopkeepers, pensioners. Yes, I think there were a few colliers, who had the sense to live in the right sort of place.

From a manse whose top storey gave us a glimpse, over the houses opposite us, of the winding shaft of the nearby colliery below our street, to a front room view across a green field towards the Graig mountain.

After a sizeable rent-free Manse, a three story house where we had some sunshine all over the year, we were in a smaller two-floor rented house, where we only had sunshine in late spring, summer and early autumn. Through the long winter months we could only know that the sun was shining by seeing its distant presence 2 or 3 miles away on the Graig mountain, the other side of the Taff valley.

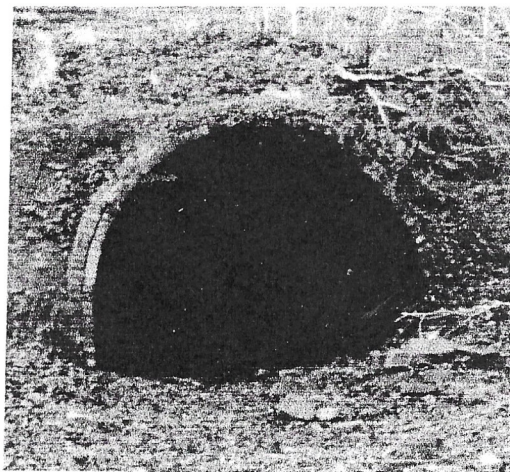
The only trees to which I had had free access in Cymer had been some sticky pine trees behind our back garden, where nobody else ever came. It was fun, even though the narrow pinewood was small. The trees were isolated from the road and had no public approach to them, as they were hemmed in by stout walls, one overlooking the allotments, and the other over the quiet road leading up to Bronwydd Park, a gift to the community of William Evans, the founder and owner of Thomas & Evans and the famous Corona drinks.

In my new environment, I had all the Garth woods to roam in. And I loved it.

No more need to run with an iron hoop-and-hook along the road, ousted out of the way by the occasional bus or lorry or taken unawares by the slow and deadly silent, solid-tyres of a Hovis electric bread van.

I could now run along safe untrammelled paths in the woods, and down along the winding switchbacks that had survived the old iron works which had long since closed, lower down by the river. When my parents bought me a Raleigh bike from Tom Chislett in Taffs Well, I was king of the woods, rally driving to my heart's content along those enchanting paths and twisting, figure-8 ups-and-downs.

But I discovered that there were deadly traps in the ground that I had to be very careful to avoid: wide holes in the woods, old mining holes concealed by the overgrowth, and deadly traps for unwary young feet down in the old iron works. And that spooky tunnel sloping down into the earth near the spot where you can re-shoe your car today at Garth Tyres. I never told my parents that I'd been there. Someone had the weird idea of creating an air-raid shelter during the second war in this godforsaken old mine-shaft. I often ventured inside the echoing gloom, to see if anything had changed, inching gingerly down some distance through the murky air and the thickening slime on the ground, down the slow incline, suddenly to find my shoes in water. If you had a torch, which was the only sane way of going in (if going in was sane at all!), you'd see at the other end the water up against the roof of the shaft about 22 yards away. I knew it was about 22 yards, because that was the length of a cricket pitch!

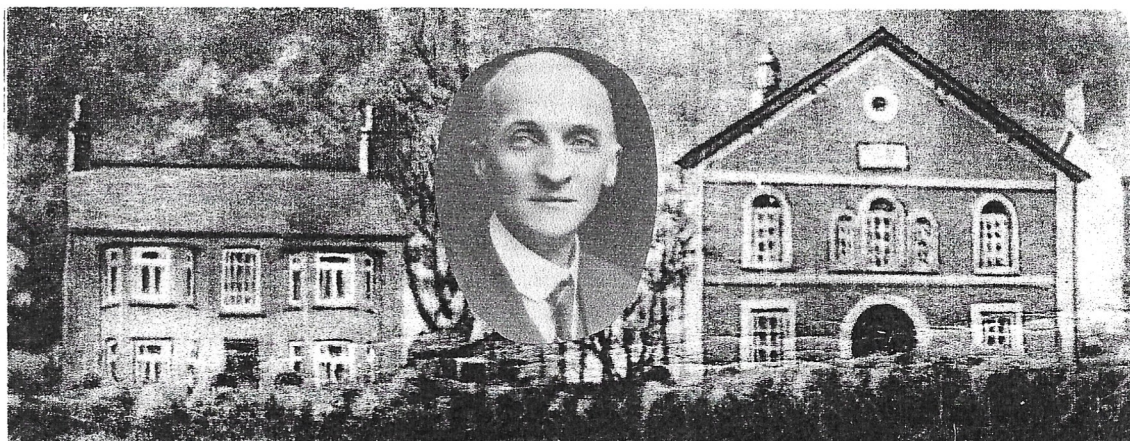


I soon came to realise that the foreigner could twist and demolish the name of my new home village and remove all its charm - by pronouncing it Gwaelod-y-gath, so debasing the resonant Welsh name. After all is said and done, Gwaelod-y-Gath quite simply means in Welsh 'The Cat's Bottom', whereas the shortened name Gwaelod, when turned in Welsh into the name of its inhabitants and into the plural, 'Gwaelodion', is the Welsh word for the grounds or sediment or dregs left in your cup when you've finished your tea!

It was all delightfully exciting to me, of course - though, at the rather carefree, nonchalant age of 9, I was far from aware of the problems my parents had in moving here - material and emotional.

I remember the difficulty they had, with their very sparse material resources, to get the new home shipshape. My Father was out of a job - he had been a Congregational Minister and had left his church in Cymer for strong moral reasons of principle and conscience.

When my father had moved from Nantymoel to Cymer, in early 1925 - a few months before I was born - one of those who preached in his induction service was R. G. Berry, minister of Bethlehem, Gwaelod-y-Garth, whose services as a preacher outside the village were considered prime time in many chapels in all parts of Wales. His reputation as a preacher was the tops, and all the Phillips family, into which he had married, worshipped him. So, when I was 9, and my parents were looking for a suitable place to live, it seemed like manna from heaven that the very house next to the great R. G. Berry was available to rent. It didn't occur to me at the time that the probable reason why the house was readily available to rent was that, like the rest of the village, it had no flushing water toilets! Like everyone else, the denizens of the manse next door were similarly required to brave the cold, dark winter nights for the regular trek outside. Nature's call involved "nature tooth and claw" in all seasons.



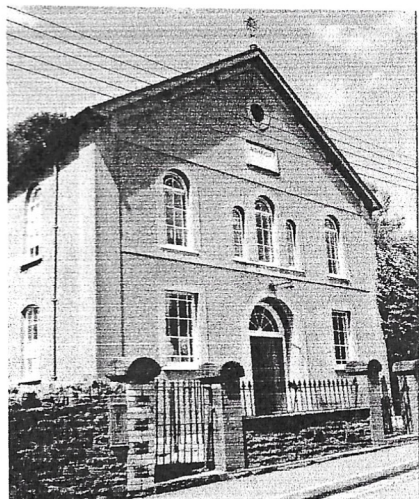
R. G. Berry's church, Bethlehem, was immediately the other side of the manse. He was revered as an intellectual preacher, and had become famous when a young man as the author of some very successful literary essays - and dramas, which were still performed in the chapel vestry. And it was he who received me into full membership of the church.

Now, I know that among us in this room are those we used to call “pobol ddwad” – people who’d come here and were not natives, an expression that often contained a grain of irony, and indeed sometimes more than a hint of virtual non-inclusion by the native elite. The old Welsh saying is currency all over Wales: “Rhwng gwŷr Pentyrch a’i gilydd”. You’ll remember Don’s comments about this in an issue of the Garth Domain. It’s a great pungent proverb that is wide open to use and interpretation: let them sort out their problems and don’t you get involved, that’s their affair, that’s their mess, that’s their lookout, keep out of their way, or just plain have nothing to do with them! We soon realized that we were just “Pobol ddwad”, newcomers, who were never really accepted into the close community. That’s how it more or less lasted for the whole time we were there - 16 years.

Gwaelod-y-Garth was a very close-knit community. Or should I say – most of those we dealt with were members of a very close community, centred, naturally, on the officials (major and minor) of the chapels, including offshoots of the close-packed, impenetrable Phillips genealogical tree.

And when you are dealing with a very tight, close-knit community, you learn very much sooner than later that blood is very thick – and water, well, just trickles away! And that’s another meaning you can add to “Rhwng Gwŷr Pentyrch a’i gilydd”.

Members of the mainstream family, both the thick branches and the thinner twigs of the Phillips tree, were in fact a class apart and all to a man and woman staunch members of Bethlehem Chapel. It was believed that some long-established members of the chapel paid no rent for their seats, while others had to pay annually. We were in the latter group. My mother, who was a very gentle person, stood up for us all after morning service one Sunday morning and harangued T. W. Thomas (he was Treasurer) in the chapel porch on this un-Christian inequity. She took the matter into her own hands and refused to pay the rent any more!



Bethlehem



T.W. Thomas

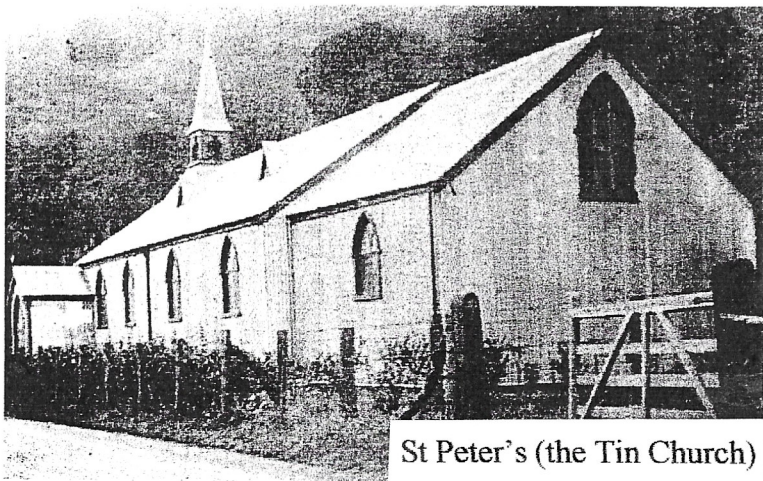
Mind you, in later years I became friendly with T.W. and thought very highly of him. He would now and again give me his very frank and straight opinion of others. Sometimes, if I’d say something or ask about someone, he would remain silent, and just screw up his eyelids in an irreverential gesture of dislike and tacit agreement. At other times, he would offer his frank opinion, and explain why. Indeed, we both agreed on the characteristics of some of the more irredeemable.

My father seemed to have become well accepted by the upper echelons. But I sometimes had my qualms. When I was about 14, and on Pontypridd railway platform waiting for the train back to Taffs Well and home, I saw John Hicks, one of the Bethlehem deacons, and a retired Taff Vale Railway inspector. It didn’t occur to me that he was travelling for nothing! He was busily chatting to a man next to him on a platform bench. So I quietly and slyly edged up to hear their conversation, taking care to keep out of John Hicks’ line of sight. At one moment, I heard him mention my father, after which I slowly walked past so that John could see me. He blushed, seeming very embarrassed, and managed to mutter: “What a good thing I said nothing about your father!” I wondered: what, indeed, might he have wished to say? I, on the other hand, might say a lot about John! He came from across Offa’s Dyke, but learnt to speak Welsh like a native.

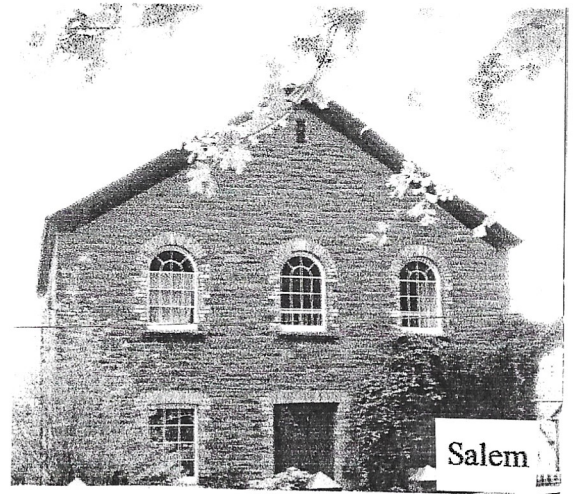


Willy Charles Thomas

There was another level, which fell quite some distance short of the upper citizens: those who were staunch members of Bethlehem - even deacons - but were odd ones out. Willy Charles Thomas was one, a very Leftist Socialist, a member of the Taff’s Well branch of the ILP, the Independent Labour Party, who had been a conscientious objector during World War One. He was a deacon in Bethlehem, but quite unlike the others. No use trying to discuss politics with him! But I liked and respected Willy Charles, an exceptional person both in the Sêr Fawr and outside.



St Peter's (the Tin Church)



Salem

There were three churches when we moved to Gwaelod-y-Garth. One we called the Tin Church, because its roof was made of corrugated iron. It was down on the road towards Taff's Well, on the right hand side just before the Gwaelod road joined the road from Pentyrch. It was St Peter's Mission Church. The original church, built there in the early 19th century to serve the needs of those who worked in the Iron Works, was followed by a mission room holding 150 people in 1870, and this in turn was replaced by the tin church. When I went to Pontypridd County, I would pass it every morning on the way to Taff's Well to catch the train, and always thought it rather a weird building. It closed in 1938, and I thought it looked even more forlorn on its new plot on the Trefforest Trading Estate.

If our timing was right, I would meet, just below the tin church, Miss Megan Thomas who was a teacher in Pentyrch and would walk up every morning from Taff's Well station, and then down in the evening. A few words of greeting in Welsh before we both went on our way. I knew her many years later when we were members of the same Cardiff church.

Then there was Salem Baptist Chapel, built in 1863 and extended in 1871, with a membership of 95 in 1905. When we came to the village, the congregation numbered fewer than 50. Salem closed in 1972 and converted into a private house.

So we had moved into the end-terrace house, 6 Garth Villas, a really posh sounding name. My parents could not afford to buy a house of their own, but were fortunate in finding that No 6 was a rented house whose owners lived some miles away. And for the 16 years we lived there, my parents went on paying rent, till they managed, ever so slowly, to build up enough capital to buy in 1950 a terraced house off Whitchurch Road, Cardiff, and gave Phil Phillips, who acted as their solicitor, quite a surprise when he asked my Father, "Mr. Gregory, how much mortgage do you require?", to receive the resounding answer "I'm paying cash". £1,900. And who had been born in that very house, 6 Garth Villas, 100 years ago last September, but Phil Phillips himself.

The front room became a sitting room + study; then a small middle room, the kitchen and a simple back-kitchen. Upstairs, three bedrooms and a very sparse bathroom without toilet.

Furniture vans were a very rare sight in the village, for few people moved in or out. And although we were moving into a house outside the core of the village, the active bush telegraph very soon brought news to some village nippers that there was a new family in No 6 Garth Villas. They clambered up the gully wall on our first night to see what was going on in the kitchen, as my mother hadn't got round to fixing the curtains. We shoed them away - and they stayed away!

I come now to some of the people - indeed, the characters - that I soon got to know well when I was 9.

On our first morning, when I had my first chance to go out and explore a little of my new world, I sat perched on the railings at the front of the house - the railings which later disappeared for the metal-collection war effort. Two old gentlemen (to my eyes, they were very old) sauntered down the road in front of the house. One said to the other "Pobol newydd yn symud mewn. Saeson, siwr o fod." "New people moving in. English people, sure to be."

I couldn't take this, so I immediately retorted "Nage, wir, Cymry y'n ni" "No indeed. We're Welsh." After which, we became great friends.

They were Teddy Chapman and Tommy Roblin. We often met on our walks, the three of us, in the woods behind our house. They were always together, and walked very slowly, and I would find them occasionally squatting on the ground in the woods, harvesting their search for dail troed yr ebol - coltsfoot - that supplied them with their homespun tobacco, which they smoked joyfully, with that easy, relaxed and meditative air which was so typical of many rustic pipe smokers, especially the clay-pipe types like Teddy and Tommy.

I said they appeared to me to be very old. Iorwerth Peate, the first Curator of Saint Fagans Folk Museum has a line in one of his sonnets that fits them perfectly: "Gan hen lafurwyr ar eu gliniau'n grwm" (Sonnet no 48) Old labourers on their bended knees.

I soon realized that we were surrounded by a few (to quote one of Dylan Thomas's stories) "very interesting people", with whom I developed the habit of chatting at some considerable length.

Two of our neighbours in the Villas soon became known to me. No 3 and No 4.

In No 3 lived Harry Stratford, a bachelor - again, he also seemed old to me, but was probably in his early 40s, and worked in a place whose name I just could not identify. It was many years before I discovered he worked in Tir-y-Berth, near Ystradmynach. His rendering of the name Tir-y-Berth was so distorted by his West Country English tongue, that he could have been referring to a place on the moon! He did not mix with the local community; but some of the children would know him well enough to say 'Hello'. As a close neighbour, I went a stage further, as he was quite pleased to welcome me into his house, on an occasional late afternoon. Nowadays, parents might fear all kinds of risk; but Harry was a kind, if unusual, neighbour. Unusual and foreign because he just didn't fit into such a 'native' village environment. He was very hard of hearing, due no doubt to the noisy work he did in Tir-y-berth. He'd come to work in the area from perhaps The Forest of Dean or Somerset. Wherever it was, his was to me a very foreign sound; and his accent was the first I had ever heard from a distant land.

Understanding his English was my first lesson in coming to terms with strange sounds from across the border. As his hearing was poor, this became a sort of 'learning-curve' that taught me to articulate my words with sufficient clarity that we could communicate! So, my problem was two-fold: he had difficulty in hearing me, and I had a serious problem in understanding his strange, foreign accent. My prolonged perplexity regarding his pronunciation of Tir-y-Berth lasted many years before I managed to unravel the mystery by straining my memory and finding a detailed atlas!

Although we soon became good friends, and though he had a motor-cycle and sidecar, he never offered to take me for a ride. This up-there-and-back-home sidecar seemed to be the only accompaniment to his life, and we'd sometimes hear his early-morning kick-start, followed by a rev-up as he left early for his work. Had he, long ago and in some other place, had conjugal company in the cabin of his sidecar?

We always chatted in his kitchen - not his cooking-kitchen, but his living-kitchen (*cegin fyw bob dydd*) - his very bare living-room, where he seemed to exist when not at work. I never saw the other rooms, but suspected that they were bare and uninhabitable. His table, too, was always bare, except for the evening *Echo*, which served the dual purpose of daily reading matter and sole table cloth, on which he would serve himself what appeared to my eyes and nostrils as very gungy, pungent tea, on whose surface I wouldn't have been surprised to see the spoon floating merrily, in that grubby oversize enamel mug, which exuded a strong and redolent whiff that suggested that it was never washed. It bore all over its inside the hallmark brown tarnish of an inveterate bachelor strong tea drinker.

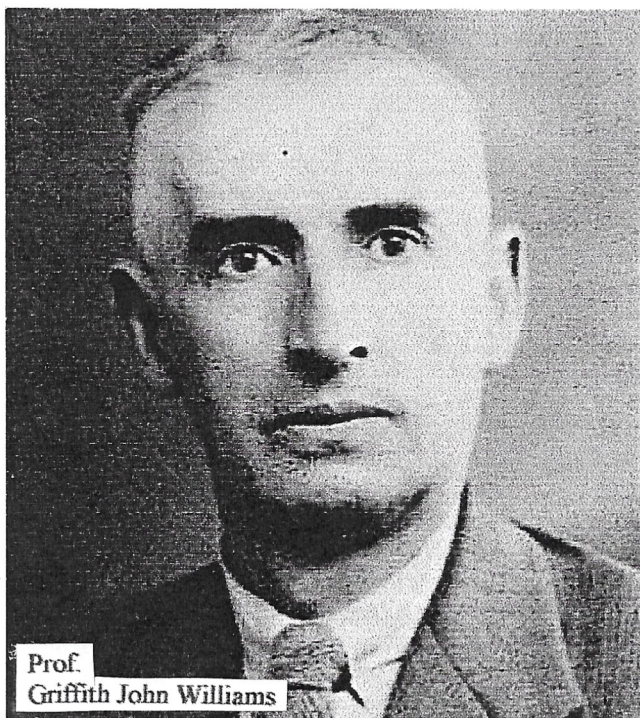
I recollect three subjects of dialogue: the place he worked at, his faithful bike, and what he gleaned from the afternoon *Echo*. I can remember no exchange of ideas or rumours about local affairs - affairs of a trivial or perhaps of a tabloid nature. He was unaware, I'm sure, of any village hanky-panky; nor was there an occasional dialogue on world events; no *causerie* on world affairs or an exchange of ideas on what had happened to me in school.

I sometimes wonder what could we ever have had cause to chat about! But, then! I just loved talking with people, and I thought nobody else around him seemed to take the trouble to speak to him.

How I would love to have a recording of those distant conversations. They might have been worthy of a Harold Pinter play! How I regret never having kept a diary of those far-off halcyon days, with a few recorded details of what we all said to each other. After all, our present would be so enriched if we still had some trace of what was spoken in that remote past. But who could expect 9 and 10 year olds to think as far ahead as old age?

The other neighbour was Nancy Millward, who lived in No 4, a house that had long belonged to members of the Phillips family. She never married. And I never knew whether somebody out there was ever to blame. She was quite nice to me throughout our 16 years in Gwaelod. I can't remember in what school she was a teacher - somewhere between Gwaelod and Cardiff; but there's no doubt that she had made a lasting impression on the children who had benefited from her tutelage, if the name with which they baptised her was in any way a true reflection of that most lasting of impressions, because it conjured up in my imagination acts of terrifying cruelty inflicted by a female Frankenstein who lived only two doors away from me! Although I would look at her hands gingerly and imagine the terror they might have aroused in those poor little kids, nobody could persuade me that Nancy had lived throughout her career deserving such a calumnious accolade - "Buggernails". This information, by the way, was bequeathed to me by one of the village boys, based on his reception of the sub-teenage bush telegraph.

But really, had she lived all those years not knowing that those innocent little cherubs had done her such an undeserved wrong? After all, how ready schoolchildren - even the more innocent of the species - had always been to find the unkind and thoroughly undeserved label that stuck to even the kindest of mentors. They had even elevated me, I should add, once I had gone to Pontypridd County School, with the honorific title 'Professor' Gregory, which at first I profoundly resented, but later accepted as a unique compliment. You never knew - it might one day fit! What perceptive little kids they might be!



Prof.
Griffith John Williams

Down the other side of the field in front of the house, there lived someone of a very different calibre. Griffith John Williams, who was at that time lecturer in Welsh at the University College, Cardiff (The University of Wales in those days was a federal university, with a number of constituent colleges, not like Oxford and Cambridge - because its constituent colleges were scattered in Aberystwyth, Bangor, Cardiff and Swansea, and later joined by Lampeter). Mr. Williams was admired by his academic peers as the greatest Welsh scholar that Wales had ever seen, and was famous for having recognized the true genius of one of the outstanding figures of the 18th century, Iolo Morgannwg.

He was also, to quote one of his successors as head of the Welsh Department in Cardiff University College, one of the ablest interpreters of the Welsh literary tradition and our long centuries of learning and poetry, dating back to the 6th century through the so-called Dark Ages, and on to the remarkable poetic tradition of the Middle Ages, to the Renaissance, and to the present day. A real giant, whom I was privileged to know.

His father had been a blacksmith in Cellan, near Lampeter, a village whose enlightened literate working population had a long history of readership - yes, and bookbinding, a visible proof of their love and respect for books.

The year we moved to Cardiff, 1950, Griffith John Williams founded the scholarly magazine *Llên Cymru*, and he was the first President of the Welsh Academy - yr Academi Gymreig. A towering academic.

In that very year, when I was 9, the distinguished Welsh scholar and author, Saunders Lewis, wrote these words about Griffith John Williams, who was then 42 years of age. I translate.

"The works that Mr. Williams has published so far are a classic example of the unplanned but indispensable consistency which characterises pure scholarship . . . And it's not all over yet," went on Saunders Lewis in 1934, when I was 9, "A slow pace is an essential element in the sure maturity of the scholar."

He had a little Austin Seven, which took him every day to his lectures in Cardiff. I doubt that his driving would survive the infernal traffic we suffer today; but it was he who so kindly and safely took me to Caerffili Workmen's Hospital in the Austin Seven when I was 13 (1938) to have my tonsils out, and drove back to bring me home the following day. I couldn't have known at the time - but my wife Rhiannon had been born only a few weeks earlier!

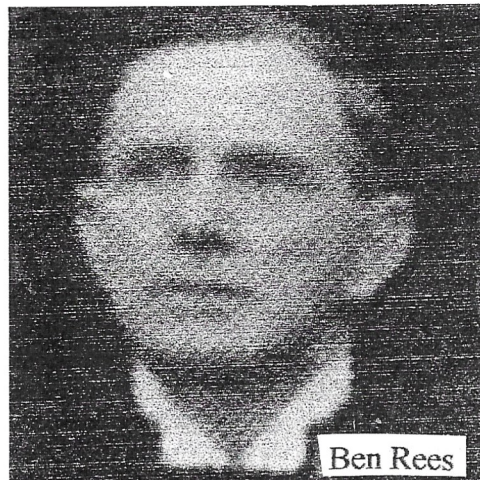
I have always prided myself on having had Griffith John Williams as our neighbour. His extraordinary library is now housed in its own special room in the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth. He was one of a considerable number of prominent Welshmen in those days who had a pipe perpetually stuck in their mouths. W. J. Gruffydd was another, and Iorwerth Peate, Alun Oldfield Davies, and Alun Llywelyn Williams. I've always thought it rather bizarre that such prominent men needed this large dummy in their mouths long after they had left their mother's knees!

When I went away to university, I would call to see Griffith John Williams during the summer holidays and report on the activities of Cymdeithas Dafydd ap Gwilym, the Oxford Welsh Society, which had had among its members many eminent Welshmen. While he was a member of Bethlehem Chapel, his wife remained loyal to her Baptist principles as a member of Salem Baptist chapel at the other end of the village.

Between us and the greatest man around was the field, whose mangled remains are still here today. We'd hardly moved in before a couple of American evangelists pitched a tent on that field. Of course, I was most interested in seeing what went on there; and so, after attending a number of evangelizing meetings 'for young people' - I think I was the only one who remained till the end of their missionary visit - I was presented with a copy of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and a little badge to commemorate my scripture adhesion and to record my pledge.

Now, there were very interesting people who lived further down the road, in what some of us proudly called the Gwaelod Suburbs. The interest I showed in our neighbours varied according to circumstances. In one house below the school lived three sisters, the youngest and most nubile of whom, Lorna, appeared to my eyes, each time I saw her, to be blossoming into a more and more delectable creature. Once - what could I be, 11 or 12 or 13? - I didn't record the date of hormonal change! - I tried as stealthily as possible to follow her and one of the Foxhall boys as they went on a cuddly saunter through the woods behind the house, to pry on what an aroused libido might observe as something quite exciting, even though only second-hand! But they conducted themselves (to my prying eyes) so uninterestingly that I soon abandoned the pursuit from the shelter of one tree to the next.

Ben Rees was a very colourful neighbour down the road, opposite the headmaster's house. He was a stalwart deacon of Salem Baptist Chapel, and one of the very few villagers - even in the suburbs - who had a car. He was quite a blustery character, whose voice could be heard from the top of the Garth! One day I saw him and his wife Mari outside their house. There was nobody else around. The car bonnet was open, and Mari just innocently looking at the engine - maybe for the first time ever! Ben came out of the house, with a swagger and the memorable comment "Get out of my way, Mari. I know more about motor-cars than you do" - an appropriately modified version of which often falls from our lips at home - especially in the kitchen!



A few doors up from Ben and Mari lived another ageing couple, who emerged victorious from an evening's pensioners' competition in Bethlehem vestry and won the prize - a whole side of bacon. For evermore they were known as Mr. and Mrs. Lewis the Flitch.

Then there was the very tall, indeed lanky, unmarried Olwen Lewis, living in the detached house Tŷ Gwyn, a few houses down the road from us, with an attractive front garden. She certainly loved a gossip and stood well over 6 foot tall. Her resounding soprano voice, coupled with her strategically positioning herself in the front row of the gallery at every Good Friday Cymanfa Ganu gave her a fearfully commanding prominence, and a menacing, overpowering dominance over the visiting conductor, aided by the fact that, after all, the pulpit was a good bit lower than the gallery. Come to think of it, that's where the strongest soprano voices seemed to dominate over every Cymanfa Ganu I've conducted. And in a small chapel like Bethlehem she stood fearlessly like a squawking scarecrow. Ah! Indeed! I had nicknames for a number of her breed, and Olwen presented a ready target. No visiting conductor ever dared to try to control her. And as I grew into my teens, having my ears to the ground brought me colourful intimations of very, very 'interesting' and warm friendships rampant among quite a few esteemed members of the community.

A daily visitor to many houses was Anne Edwards, from the Getrys farm. I might - euphemistically - call her the village milkmaid. She was unmarried, like her brother Tom, who sometimes helped my father to cut the grass on our tiny front lawn. The contents of her little milk hand cart were a lethal potion on hot summer mornings, as the nourishing produce of the Getrys cattle was invariably sour before it entered the house. Boiling it was no use - it only made the smell greater. I really can't remember how my Mother solved the problem. Of course, no one had a fridge; but no equipment would ever have restored such an acidified cocktail. I think she must have one day intimated the problem to Anne, whose public image: 'Anne Edwards, Getrys, our purveyor of fresh dairy produce', faded away.

I mentioned the school mistress, Nancy Milward, a short time ago. I can't remember any nicknames for the staff of Gwaelod-y-Garth school. The many nicknames I coined for certain individuals around me were kept to the confines of my home. My mother enjoyed them, and they even made my father laugh.

When I went to Pontypridd County after the 11 Plus, however, I discovered that nearly all the staff there had nicknames. Our Head, E. R. Thomas, was 'Piggy', partly due to the evocative contours of his face, but also aided by his foul disciplinarian habit of crouching in the shadows and emerging like lightning with a flick of his pencil on your head which would all but knock you out. He was feared, though he certainly had some splendid qualities, such as helping some boys whose fathers were chronic unemployed and could not afford to buy their sons a pair of shoes.

My first history master was 'Jelly' I never discovered whether that was because he was plump or because his initials were J.L. - or an amalgam of both. Our 1st year arithmetic master, David Weale, was just 'Dai Weale'; but the sound was acidified and rendered with a mixture of disdain and horror because he used to aim at any boy misbehaving in first-year arithmetic by seizing the long window-opening pole and charging, quite beyond himself with rage and a vicious, lightening charge. Imagine how long his interment penance would be today! The main Welsh master was William Lewis, nicknamed 'Willy Woodbine', which hardly suited him because he didn't smoke. Sometimes there seems no logic in nicknames. Shades of poor Nancy Millward, I hope!

Our teachers in the Gwaelod-y-Garth school nearby spoke Welsh. One or two of the children also spoke some Welsh. I can only remember a staff of three, though I'm assured that there were four. The Head, Billy Leopold, who lived in the nearby Headmaster's house, had learnt Welsh and seemed to me to speak it with great fluency. His wife was quite un-Welsh, so much so that she could have been from any distant land. Then there was Mr. Samuel, the deputy head, who used to teach us the rudiments of science. During my first week there, the boys told me that Friday afternoon would end with science. I asked my mother what that was and enjoyed the lesson. The third I remember was Gwen Howell.

We were a very Welsh family. My elder sister was studying in Cardiff University College (as it was then) for a Degree in Welsh, and among her teachers was Griffith John Williams, to whom I have already referred. She later became one of the most successful and influential Grammar School Teachers of Welsh in Wales.

Contrary to the experience of countless other children, I had no trouble in school as far as speaking Welsh was concerned. My wife, Rhiannon, went through her schooling in Bangor not knowing that any of her teachers spoke Welsh, until she would suddenly find herself being addressed by them in Welsh because it was Saturday, or Sunday in chapel or somewhere else! Such was the damnable tradition that only English should be spoken in every school lesson. Whenever any of the teachers in Gwaelod spoke to me personally - and even during class time - they never did so in English. They invariably turned to me in Welsh. The Head, Billy Leopold, who had learnt Welsh but not passed it on to his children, would often call me out to the front onto the dais on which he had his desk, and give the rest of the class some reading or writing to busy themselves with. Then he would give me a Welsh lesson! How I wish I'd gone to see him in later years to reminisce and ask him what had prompted him to do this! The chances lost over the years . . .

I found that he had a strong aroma around him, which I identified - wrongly - with ginger biscuits! I was so taken with the fragrance that I mentioned my diagnosis to my bemused Mother, who obligingly, for a few weeks, bought me several packets - until, one day, I realised my mistake and turned my back on ginger biscuits forever! His fingers were brown because he was a heavy smoker, and it was the smell of the weed on his hands - a perfume that was unfamiliar to me! - that I mistakenly but innocently associated with more healthy living! Everyone at home thought it a big joke!

Although Gwen Howell, like so many others, seemed quite old to me, today, thanks to a book about the Phillips family, I know that she had been born in 1893, so was in fact 41 years of age, had been trained at Swansea Normal College and spent the whole of her teaching career in Gwaelod-y-Garth Council School. Of course, what did 41 years of age mean to me, a boy of 9 and 10? The kids were afraid of her, but she seemed, in my memory, to have averted the accolade of a nick-name.

Gwen had lost 4 siblings: Gwilym had died aged 23 - Morgan aged 6 weeks - Selwyn aged 14 - Aneurin aged 11. When I was around, she and a sister and 3 brothers had survived, Gwen being the eldest of the children. Becca was 34, 7 years younger - Evan was 34 - John William was 31 - Ben was 23 (14 years older than myself), had a degree in history and taught at Pontypridd County when I was there.



Ben Howell

He left Pontypridd to be Headmaster of Carmarthen Boys Grammar School, where quite a strange thing happened. The boys' and the girls' Grammar Schools in Carmarthen were bang next to each other. The natural result: boys and girls nudged up to one another across the flimsy boundary, until, one day, both Heads issued a joint edict forbidding such philanderings on school premises and planted a hedge to keep them apart. Then, what happened? Headmaster and Headmistress got married! And what a lovely person Ben's wife was.

Ben lacked what might be called a prepossessing temperament. He was, to say the least, dour, cold, unsmiling. In Pontypridd, he was, shall we say, thoroughly unloved, though his teaching of history was cast in a better mould than that of his colleague J. L., who was kind and benign.

We thought the world of J. L., certainly not for his teaching prowess, but because he had a tender heart - so tender that he took everything on the chin. When one boy started moving his desk around in all directions, J. L. simply retorted with the indulgent comment "What are you doing boy - playing dodgems?" When another, for some very un-academic reason, just sat on his history book - a thick tome full of tedious royal dates and the dullest narrative - J. L.'s benign comment was "What are you doing boy - do you expect it will go up through you?" No such luck with Ben. Scorched earth would have followed in his wake.

Ben's brother Evan had a little Austin Seven - though a more sporty looking model than that of Griffith John Williams - in which he and the other brother John William would go past our house every morning on their way to work. Their fleeting appearance outside our home was rather like the train years ago - when they rolled past, you knew what time it was.

The village proper - upstream, as it were - abounded with colourful characters, straight out of Dylan Thomas, except that most of them were Welsh-speaking, the linguistic wealth of which would have meant nothing, alas! to Dylan's anglicized ears.

John Howell, Ben's father, died aged 66 in 1936, two years after we arrived in Gwaelod. He kept a sweet-shop in the front room of a house up on the bank between the village pub and the Zig-Zag, and I inevitably used to go there to buy sweets. Inevitably also, we would talk! He was virtually a Welsh-speaking monoglot, and what we would chat about I can't remember - except the Welsh language. I was no more than 10, and he died when I was 11. He would wax eloquent in his lovely Gwenhwyseg Welsh dialect about the value and

importance of Welsh. Not with dictatorial undertones, but as one who loved and valued the language and all it represented. He had remained faithful to his roots and had brought up all his children to be Welsh speakers. As I remember him in those mid-'30s, he remains for me a gentle, historic figure, one of the small group of engaging indigenous beings that still enriched this strange, improbable Welsh-speaking enclave on the outskirts of an early 20th century city.

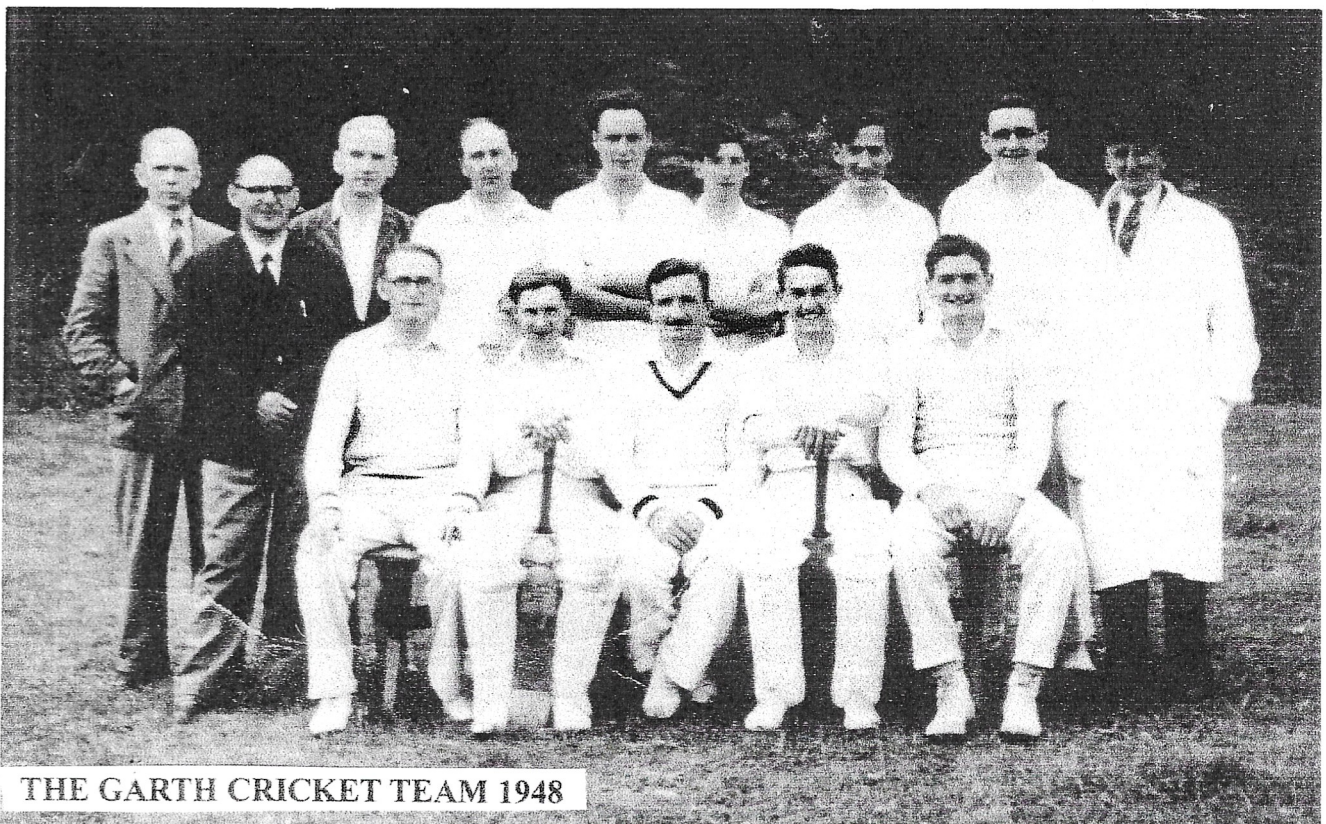
He was most uncomfortable in English, but fluent in Welsh. And he loved the language. And I think he really meant it when he said that Welsh was the language of Heaven. Many of us are still grounded in the same belief! If only the Benjamin of the brood had possessed some of his father's innate enthusiasm for an affectionate sense of history, he would have had us eating out of his hand. Isn't that what teaching history is all about - and also the teaching of everything else?

And now that I've reached an age 11 years beyond John Howell's span of life, I feel sure that Welsh is the only language he wants to speak in heaven. And oh! I once more regret that we didn't spend more time chatting together, and that I didn't ask Ben many questions about his father and the rest of his family, and that I didn't feed my memory so that it would hold more and be so much richer.

In 1993, Rhiannon and I were privileged to go on behalf of our church for a fortnight in Madagascar (which is another story) and on our return I was invited to talk to members of Bethlehem Chapel about our experiences. About a dozen came to listen in the vestry, a much changed room since my childhood days - the stage had gone, as also the heavy wooden and glass floor-to-ceiling sliding partition that used to be an enclave for weeknight prayer meetings. I recognized one or two of my listeners. Then one of them rose to thank me. Yes! The voice was familiar. It was Ben. He was 82. I was close to 70. We hadn't met for over 50 years. This was the nicest Benny Howell I'd ever seen and heard, and we remained on warm, friendly terms until he died. He even came to Bethlehem on the occasions when I took the morning service there and preached. Dear old Ben.

And so many connected and disconnected thoughts come rushing back. When I was in my teens, I had modelled my cricket bowling style exactly on Ben's. It took me into the college cricket team when I was in Oxford and helped me to get quite a few wickets. I was glad to be able to tell him so in his old age and make Ben smile.

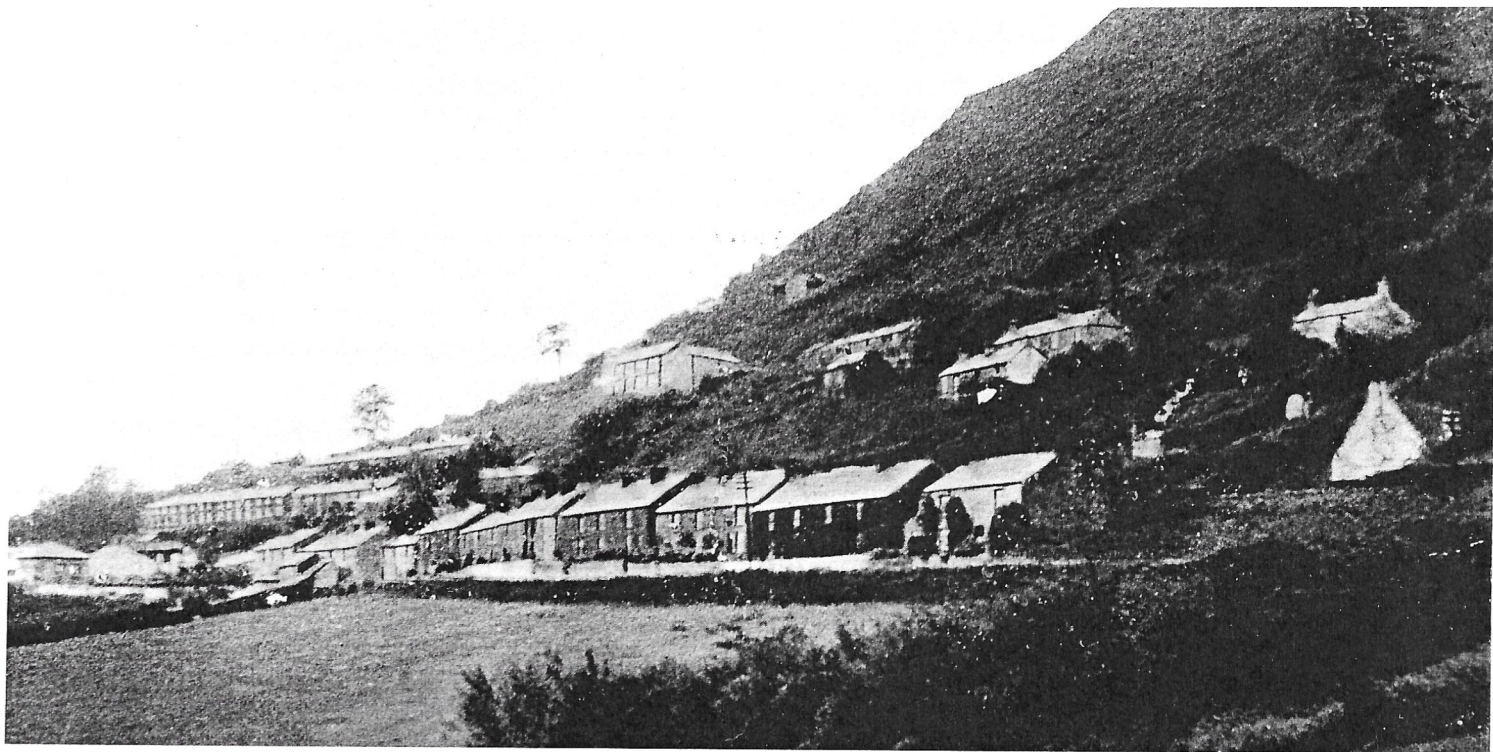
He was the star bowler in the Gwaelod Cricket Team - medium pace. He had an easy flowing right arm movement. None of that rush at fiercely hurling a spinning ball at the 22-yards-away enemy! The Saturday cricket on the field down by the Taff was a regular end-of-the-week afternoon fixture every summer and was extremely well supported. You only needed a 'four' for the ball to slither over the grass into the river; and 'sixes' were rare! The puffing and the billowing smoke from the leisurely trains crossing the bridge over the Taff added to the pastoral delights of the afternoon. I would sometimes enjoy chatting to the groundsman while he mowed and rolled the pitch in the morning ready for the afternoon's gladiatorial exchange.



Ben Howell is at back (standing) third from left

There's a lot more I could say. I haven't mentioned Christmas and the dramas in Bethlehem vestry; I haven't expanded on R. G. Berry's drawing power as a preacher; nor the annual Cymanfa Ganu, and how volunteering to read two hymns on one of those Good Fridays was instrumental in my getting a foot into the BBC when I was 12; that generous, great country character Dr. Dan Thomas, a native of Cilycwm in the heart of rural Carmarthenshire, and his very disabled cousin who drove him in her lower gears around the district after he thought he was too disabled to cycle everywhere, and his Taffs Well surgery with his apothecary Mr. Perrett, who lived by the river below the Zig Zag. Dr. Dan's profound faith in the curative properties of poultice, and the advice of a passer-by when the doctor's cousin's car wouldn't start - "Give it a poultice, Doctor!" And more about T. W. Thomas, the doyen of them all, who outlived every one of them till he was within a few months of a century, a man of great principle who twice turned down a knighthood.

More about Willy Charles Thomas; crab apples and school races; the Eleven Plus; air raids, and how we were very nearly killed by a German bomb in the field opposite and for a day became such good neighbours . . . Piano lessons, and how a right royal death got me off the hook when I was due to give my first public piano performance. How I was not gored by the local bull that I once shepherded back to Ynysgau farm but never told my mother. My first and only experience of trying to run with the hounds, and my first and last view of a lofty member of the Bute family on her posh horse looking down from her eminence at us 'peasant' boys who had been crazy enough to run exhausted up and down the hill and woods, and which nurtured in me thoughts that made me very sympathetic to the views of Willy Charles. Safely riding on Saturday afternoons in a local lorry driver's cab. Regular gifts outside the Gwaelod pub of a penny donated to each of the village children by the wealthy Mr. Joe Frazer from Pentyrch who came in his Rollis Royce and whose chauffeur kept an eagle eye to prevent any one of us from going around twice in the queue. The Coronation Jubilee bonfire on the Garth Pimple. The weekly squelchy, malodorous but highly necessary and thoroughly 'thank-heavens and welcome' visit round the back gully by Jack Gummer and his little horse-and-cart. Our Sunday School charabanc outings to Barry Island. Time is running out.



But a word before I finish.

One summer's afternoon, when home on holiday from the University, I took my stalwart Raleigh bike and cycled up past the sweet shop of Ann the Getrys, the pub and the square and the Boobier boys' house, past Salem and the house where Gwen and Benny Howells and the others had been brought up, down and up between the hedges of Ynysgau, past the Glebeland cottages and the Willowford, before crossing the bridge over the Taff, and Pontypridd, and up to Cymer, to have a nostalgic look at my old school, which I'd never been back to. A very safe trip for a teenager on his bike those days. My old school is still there today; but it's dwarfed by the Welsh language Comprehensive above it. Great and happy changes have occurred since those days.

As it was the summer holidays, my old school was empty. Of course, as you might expect, it looked a lot smaller to me by now. And there was nobody around - till I suddenly heard the branches of one of the trees behind the back wall crunch, as a little 9 year old boy tried to scamper down out of sight and into safety. And he shouted, scared, to his little 9 year old friend? "Mind out! There's a MAN!"

And I was no longer 9. . . !

Havard Gregory