

Llangwm in 1870

A dispute between Llangwm fishermen and the Herne Bay Company over a contract for supplying oysters was reported in the local newspapers of February/March 1870. The information printed in the newspapers provides an interesting insight on the local fishing industry.

The fishermen in dispute were named as John Palmer, William Llewelin, John Davies, William Davies, John Palmer, Richard Cale, John Bryant, William Davies, George Jones, James Jones, Robert Lewis, William Edwards, William Morgan and Richard Palmer. The surnames are recognisably local but the limited number of forenames in use at the time led to more than one person in the village having the same forename, surname and occupation. It is known that James Jones and George Jones were amongst those living at Black Tar. Richard Cale was an unmarried 50-year-old living with his widowed sister Elizabeth Herbert in Mill Street. Amongst their neighbours were blacksmith Henry Brock, grocer Emma Trindall and Joseph Towle, an engine fettle.

The fishermen were receiving £1 12s 6d per thousand oysters (an increase from the previous year's payment of £1 7s 6d) plus an allowance of 3s 6d for their boats. At that time, 38 boats were contracted to the Herne Bay Company.

On the 1871 census, the parish of Llangwm (which included Hook) had a population of 875 and a total of 189 occupied houses. A rough count of fishermen (and fisherwomen) just in the village of Llangwm suggests that there were approximately 75 persons employed directly in the fishing industry and a further 15 living down at Black Tar.

The newspaper articles revealed that 26 of the 38 men were "marksmen", meaning that they were unable to write their own names and had signed their contract with an "X". It was reported that "the signature of William Llewelin was written by Mr James Thomas, farmer, in Mrs Shrubsole's house, in a private room".

The fishermen were accused of breaching their contract by not supplying the whole of the oysters caught to the Herne Bay Company. Their defence was that "the [oyster] beds are exhausted; they are getting exhausted all over the world". Previously, Llangwm used to supply 33,000 oysters per week but, in 1871, it was only 3,000 per week.



On 23rd September 1870, the 'Pembrokeshire Herald' newspaper reported that William Palmer of Llangwm had been fined 5 shillings for neglecting to have his child vaccinated against smallpox.

Smallpox was an airborne disease that had a death rate of up to 35% and survivors often had extensive scarring of their skin. A serious epidemic was circulating in the UK during 1870-1872. Under the 1853 Vaccination Act, it was compulsory for infants to be vaccinated in the first 3 months of their life. Vaccination was provided by a doctor employed by the local Poor Law Guardians and a certificate was issued to the parents. The smallpox vaccine was the first vaccine to be developed against a contagious disease.

William Palmer had married Mary John at Llangwm church in 1852 and, by 1870, were the parents at least 8 children. The youngest was Anne, baptised at Llangwm church in 1870 and, sadly, buried there in April 1871. This was, presumably, the child he neglected to have vaccinated.

Without access to Anne's death certificate, it is not possible to know the cause of death but infant mortality was high in the 19th century. Was Anne's poor health the reason for non-vaccination? On the 1861 census, William was employed as an Able Seaman on board HMS Asp, a paddle steamer described as a 'surveying vessel', moored off Pembroke Dockyard. At other times, he earned a living as a fisherman. Perhaps William was away from home at the relevant time.

In 1870, 5 shillings was the amount that a working man might expect to earn in 1 day and nonpayment of a fine could lead to imprisonment. In 2020, 5 shillings would be approximately equivalent to £15.

Researched by Nikki Bosworth. Information available online at newspapers.library.wales, findmypast.co.uk, ancestry.co.uk and other websites.