

Toilsome times of the 'fisher girl' who was one of a legendary breed: Mary Palmer, part 1



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To an extent which we, the pampered beneficiaries of a more affluent age, are incapable of fully appreciating, the overwhelming majority of our 19th century forbears were perpetually engaged in a struggle against the gravitational pull of poverty.

The distinguished sociologist Seebohm Rowntree (1899) had no difficulty in demonstrating that the hapless members of the Victorian working classes were vulnerable to acute hardship at three stages in their lives:

- In childhood, as members of large families.
- In early married life, as the number of children multiplied.
- In declining old age, for which there was virtually no provision.

It was the destiny of the incorrigible Mary, one of the legendary breed of Llangwm fisherwomen, to have first-hand experience of those successive trials and tribulations which turned life into a daunting obstacle course.

SEVERE

Born in 1833, in the Cleddau-side village, Mary Jenkins – or 'Jinkins' as the villagers invariably pronounced the surname – was one of the seven children of fisherman John and his wife Jane.

There were three older children and three younger, and at a time when more than two children made severe demands on limited and inelastic resources, the two parents were fully extended in rearing their clamouring brood.

The opening of the Haverfordwest workhouse on St Thomas Green', Haverfordwest, in April 1839, served as a grim reminder to all in the district of the likely fate of those who plunged towards destitution.

By 20th century standards, Mary scarcely had a childhood. The National village school on the Gail Hill did not open its doors until 1871, and if Mary was ever taught to read, it was as one of the 60 children who attended Galilee Sunday School – now the site of a roadside car park – on the Burton side of Guildford Bridge.

She probably never mastered the art of writing, for in her late teens she was incapable of satisfying the minimum criterion of literacy by signing her name on the marriage register.

Even though child labour was strictly regulated by the law of the land, Mary often assisted her



Elm Cottage, Main Street, Llangwm: The house Mary helped to build and which has been a well-maintained second home for over 20 years.

mother and father in their tasks until at 11½ years of age, she joined the ranks of the village's 'fisher girls'.

PROPOSAL

According to liable tradition, 19th century Llangwm courtships were not protracted exercises in romantic dalliance, with regular clandestine assignations and frequent furtive walks along Knapp Lane and across Ashdale Bottoms – away from inquisitive eyes and wagging tongues!

When a nubile woman 'clapped eyes' on a personable member of the opposite sex, she was not considered immodest if she unblushingly approached him with the clear proposal that he should become 'her man'.

From what is known of Mary's character, it is not unlikely that she took the initiative. When she married 20-year-old John – son of waterman Thomas Palmer, of Guildford – on October 30th, 1852, she assumed a surname which, during the next 20 or so years, was to be born by around 70 of the villagers. (Many of the inhabitants of South Pembrokeshire were to be convinced that Llangwm was entirely occupied by Palmers!).

Like the majority of 19th century working class women of childbearing age, Mary lived in constant dread of unplanned pregnancies which could unleash domestic crisis by wrecking precarious budgets and by devouring scarce living space.

However, passion has never taken much account of economic realities and in spite of the threat of chronic impoverishment, Mary dutifully – or carelessly – bore nine children, four during the first eight years of her marriage and five during the next 11.

The strain placed on her small frame did not crush Mary's spirit or diminish her natural vigour. With admiral resilience, she discharged the often competing roles of mother and working wife with a stoic's acceptance of her toilsome lot.

Equipped by lifetime's practice with skills in boat management which rivalled those of most men, she regularly accompanied her husband on his dredging and fishing expeditions.

After the fish had been caught, in all kinds of weather, she tramped the roads or tracks of South Pembrokeshire selling her wares. More than occasionally, she rode from Llangwm Ferry to 'the other side', to Coedcanlas, and walked to the markets of Tenby and Pembroke, where Llangwm fisherwomen were familiar figures.

Remarkably, Mary would sometimes walk the 38 miles to Carmarthen with one hundredweight of oysters on her back. Arriving there on the evening of a particular day, she would dispose of them at fourpence a 100 and, after staying the night, trudge back home the next day.

A practising feminist without realising it, this particular fisherwoman was her husband's more than equal partner. Scorning the conventional doctrine that sustained physical labour was the proper province of menfolk, she played an active part in the construction of the marital home – Elm Cottage, Main Street, almost opposite John James' smithy, now Llangwm Post Office.



The grave of John and Mary Palmer is sited in the top left hand corner of the cemetery at Pill Park Way (previously Coronation Avenue), Llangwm.

She was involved in the digging of the foundations, the mixing of the mortar, the carrying of the stones to the cramped site, and after the actual building had been completed by hired local masons, she whitewashed the ceilings and walls.

At a time when most of their contemporaries could only afford to rent their humble cottages from the Lawrenny estate, it was little short of amazing that this couple managed to build their own home and to raise a family, which had increased from four to nine children, between 1861 and 1872.

In a notoriously pious community addicted to church-going, Mary was a committed and combative Baptist.

With her son John and her daughter Mary, she was immersed in the stream, known as 'the lake', at Guildford Bridge during the dynamic ministry (1877-1880) of the Rev David Hussey. He was a native of Cwmavon and had been trained for the ministry at Haverfordwest Baptist College – on the site of the present College Court Flats in Upper Hill Street.

On the death of her 57-year-old husband on April 3rd, 1888, Mary seems to have clashed with the Rev J. Palmour, the Rector of the Parish Church, whose policy it was not to allow Nonconformist clergy to conduct interments in the Cemetery Road (now Pill Park Way) graveyard. She made her point, but the rector retaliated by refusing to record the burial in the register!

In Mary's day, Nonconformist public worship – especially in the rural districts – was not the sedate, formal and largely passive affair it has latterly become.

The services were often conducted with evangelical fervour, and sermons of the 'hwyl' type frequently provoked spontaneous ejaculations of 'Amen' from the occupants of the pews.

This fisherwoman was most forthcoming with her unscripted responses than most. The Minister (1911-1925) of the new Galilee Chapel, the Rev D. M. Pryse, was a most accomplished pulpiteer with a county-wide reputation for eloquence and wit. Often when he chastised the members of the congregation for their sinful shortcomings, much to the embarrassment of her many relatives, Mary – rocking in her seat near the front of the chapel – would very audibly concur with 'Give it to 'um'!

W, Grenville Thomas, 1994