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For all their personal integrity and worthy endeavour, countless millions of ordinary people have perished from the earth, leaving no individual mark on recorded history.

But Mary Palmer, the Llangwm fisherwoman who shared their humble station, was different in that she possessed a natural talent for controversy which attracted an unusual degree of attention.

To an extent which was disputed but not denied, she played a part in those Llangwm Riots – only recently uncovered – which did so much to influence the general perception of the village for the next 50 years.

When John Morris Philpin, the Dockyard worker who was the tenant of Llangwm House – now 35 Main Street – successfully applied for an eviction order against his sub-tenant and sister, Mrs Jane Palmer, he unwittingly triggered a unique crisis in the endogamous community.

On the historic day of Friday, November 23rd, 1900, a crowd – which quickly swelled to 250 to 300 – gathered outside the house and virtually blocked Main Street from 10am to 11pm.

The peace was disturbed by much shouting, spasmodic singing and outbursts of jeering, and nine of the ten panes of the house's front windows were smashed in the roadside tumult.

The local arm-of-the-law, PC Jenkins, summoned reinforcements from Neyland and Johnston, but both he and they were jostled and struck as they struggled to enter the house to endorse the order.

Apparently, Mary contributed to the mayhem by dancing her way up and down the road, singing and accompanying herself on a concertina. Much more culpably, it was alleged that she was one of the stone-throwers responsible for the breaking of the windows.

Anyway, she was one of the nine women and three men who were formally charged with 'routous' (not riotous) behaviour on Saturday, December 5th, at the Roose Petty Sessions at Haverfordwest.

In the course of the hearing, the magistrate requested that Mary should demonstrate the dancing steps she had performed in Main Street, Llangwm, on the day in question.

She did so with such defiant verve that Superintendent Francis threatened to clear the court of applauding spectators.



A postcard (circa 1906) showing the Post Office and Village Stores of Alfred J. Anstee on the left. Second on the right is Llangwm House, outside which the riots took place.

The Bench reluctantly decided that a prima facie case did exist, and Mary and the other culprits were committed for trial at the Pembrokeshire Quarter Sessions of Tuesday, January 8th, 1901, at the Shire Hall.

Very quickly, Judge Owens expressed grave reservations about the nature of the charge brought by the police. When he discharged the nine accused women, there were scenes of wild excitement – the like of which had never been seen in a Pembrokeshire law court.

Many of those present, who included most of the able-bodied population of the village, stood on their seats, loudly clapping their hands and noisily calling down blessings on 'Your Honour'!

POLITICAL

During the High Noon (1885-1922) of Liberal supremacy in Wales, Mary was an ardent supporter of the party. She was the first in the village, in January 1909, to receive the Lloyd George old age pension of five shillings a week for those over 70.

She was convinced that she deserved more, but she only had to walk the short distance to Rock House – where Alfred J. Anstee kept his Post Office and General Stores – to claim her weekly dues.

Eager to display her political allegiance, Mary sent word to Mr Isaiah Reynolds, the Haverfordwest Liberal Councillor, requesting that a quantity of blue ribbons be sent out to her and the other Llangwm women of a similar persuasion.

Her bonnet was ostentatiously decorated with the party colours when, on the evening of Saturday, January 8th, 1910, she attended a crowded meeting at Llangwm School, which was addressed by Mr Walter Roch – the very personable Liberal by-election candidate.

On the appointed election day, she walked to the polling station at Johnston, just to reassure herself that the voting was proceeding properly.

The appearance there of a female septuagenarian proudly sporting the Liberal ribbons was so loudly cheered that the incident was reported in the *Haverfordwest and Milford Haven Telegraph*.

The granting of the franchise in 1919 to all women over 30 years of age, a gift from the Baptist Liberal Prime Minister David Lloyd George, only served to confirm Mary's political convictions.

IRRITATION

Dubbed 'Mary Hush' by her mischievous neighbours, this fisherwoman again attracted publicity over her refusal, on principle, to pay an increased water rate imposed by the Parish Council.

Appearing before the magistrate at the Roose Sessions in Haverfordwest in April 1912, she unashamedly wore the garb of a Llangwm fisherwoman as if it were a uniform.

At first, she did seem a little perplexed by her situation, but her irritation overflowed into indignation when the chairman informed her that her case was adjourned.



This picture of Mary Palmer appeared in 'The Daily Mirror' in January 1913. A copy of this edition is on deposit at the National Newspaper Library in London.

Waving her stick, she cried out to Mr Joe Davies, of Hook, the assistant parish overseer: “You will have to get me a carriage to drive me home. I cannot stand, much less walk.”

Turning her attention to the Bench, she declared: “How am I going to get home, gentlemen? I have been on the road since the dawning of day because I could not rest. You to bring me here, an old woman of 82 years of age, and been a widow for 24 years, and nursed a heavy family, gentlemen.”

Suddenly recognising Mr Summers, the Chief Constable, Mary broke off, rose from her seat, hobbled over to shake hands with him, and ingratiatingly expressed her pleasure that he was looking so well!

Before she left the premises, she invited Mr Walter Roch, the County MP who was on duty as a solicitor, to take tea with her at her humble cottage in Llangwm.

The fame of this formidable matriarch was not limited to several extended references in the local press.

Soon after her second court appearance, much to her amusement, she was visited by a reporter and photographer of the national *Daily Mirror*, which even then had a circulation of two million.

On Page 5 of it's edition of January 30th, 1913, Mary was featured in an article on the village, in which the special correspondent described her as ‘one of the most remarkable women I have ever met’. On Pages 8 and 9, there were six photographs – two of Mary and four of the Llangwm fisherwomen at their work.

The feisty octogenarian eventually expired on November 30th, 1921, at Elm Cottage, the house which was a monument to her particular brand of Victorian self-help.

This time there was no dispute over burial. The Parish Church had long changed its policy and a different and more Liberal incumbent, the Rev Wilfred Griffiths, raised no objection when the interment was conducted by the Baptist Minister, the Rev D. P. Pryse. It was almost an anti-climax.

W, Grenville Thomas, 1994