

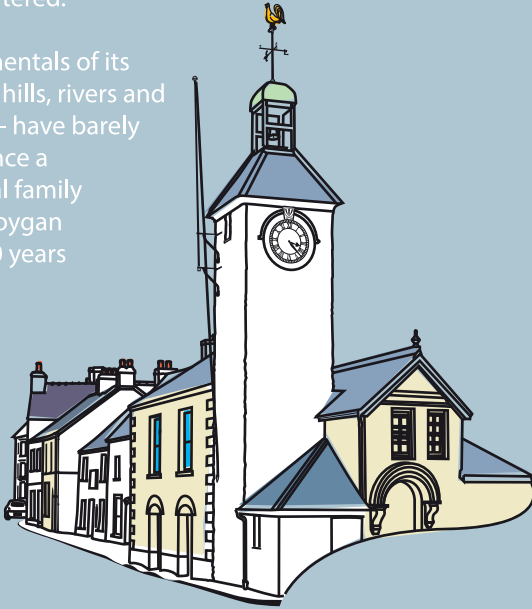
# "To begin at the beginning...."

When visitors arrive in Laugharne with **UNDER MILK WOOD** and **THE COLLECTED POEMS OF DYLAN THOMAS** tucked away in their luggage, their instinct is to start walking, to find for themselves whatever it was that Dylan found here nearly eighty years ago.

Their first discovery is that nothing much has altered.

The fundamentals of its landscape - hills, rivers and visiting sea - have barely changed since a Neanderthal family settled in Coygan Cave 20,000 years ago.

Peoples come and go.



So far so good....

But where did Dylan come from?

What brought him here?

How did he live?

To answer those questions you have to travel further into

## Carmarthenshire

The Beaker People established a cemetery here 6,000 years ago. The Romans settled, briefly. So did the Flemings, the Irish and possibly the Vikings.

There was an Anglo Saxon church before the Normans built St Martin's. Laugharne was largely Catholic until the Reformation, although, at one time, the town also had six chapels and thirty-three pubs and ale houses.

Until comparatively recently, much of the town's business was conducted in Latin. When Laugharne Corporation transcribed its minutes for the last three hundred years, not a word of Welsh was found - and yet the town is proudly Welsh in all its customs and sense of being.

## Dylan Thomas loved these contradictions

Antiquity and continuity rolled into one. A language unique (for Laugharne has words found nowhere else). An "old, lost Laugharne where some people start to retire before they start to work" that always was a "legendary lazy little black magical bedlam by the sea" long before Dylan arrived.

Many different strands of his life came together in Carmarthen, especially on Market Day. Dylan had known the town since childhood. Before the War, and when he returned to Laugharne in 1949 after his years in London and Oxford, Wednesday was his day for meeting friends.

He loved the routine. With Caitlin, or alone, he would catch the morning bus, dressed in his Wednesday best, rattling, twisting and curving through the country lanes beyond St. Clears, that can still be seen, meandering beside the motorway.

As the bus nears Carmarthen, note The Friends Arms in the Old St. Clears Road on the left **1**,



which we will mention again, and Johnstown Green to the right **2**

His father, known to the family as Jack, was born at what is now The Poplars pub **3**, overlooking this Green where Jack first met Dylan's mother, Florence Williams, at the annual Johnstown Fair.

The Thomas and Williams families were both Welsh speaking, steeped in Chapel life. Jack's father Evan, a Guard on the Great Western Railway, was a Deacon at the Heol Awst Welsh Independent Chapel in Lamma Street **4**

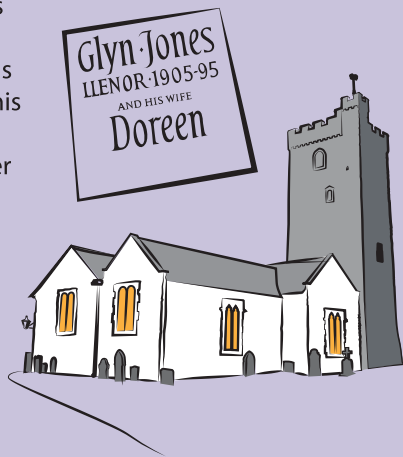


Evan's brother, the Rev William Thomas (1834-79), who wrote under the bardic name 'Gwilym Marles', was a Unitarian and a prominent Liberal, who was turned out of the old chapel at Llwynrhydowen because of his radical beliefs. His grave can be found by the new chapel at Llwynrhydowen. Two members of Florence's family were also Ministers.

It was after her death in February 1933 that Dylan wrote one of his most famous poems, IN MEMORY OF ANN JONES. Her grave is beside the chapel at Llanybri **9**

ER COF ANNWYL AM  
Annie Jones  
MOUNT PLEASANT LLANGAIN  
HUNODD CHWEF 7, 1933, YN 70 OED  
HEFYD EI PHRIOD  
James Jones  
HUNODD MEDI 3, 1942, YN 78 OED  
HENFYCH DDYDD CAWN ETO GWRDD.

Dylan had many reasons for knowing this ferry. His friend Glyn Jones was born in Llansteffan, set his first novels there and returned repeatedly after becoming a teacher in Cardiff. Dylan would meet Glyn and other friends at The Sticks **10**. Jones is now buried beside Llansteffan Church **11**.



The Williamses lived on what is often called The Llansteffan Peninsula, on the other side of the River Taf from Laugharne. They owned several adjoining farms, totalling roughly 1000 acres, and this was another area known to Dylan throughout his life.

On the basis of a letter written to impress his first girlfriend, Pamela Hansford Johnson, some say Dylan first visited Laugharne in 1934; but it may have been earlier than that, for aunts, uncles and cousins were scattered across the peninsula - and the ferry could be summoned by the ring of a bell to take the curious across the river to Ferry House **5**, next door to The Boat House **6**



When he lived in Laugharne, Dylan frequently travelled the other way, from Laugharne to Llanybri, so who knows when the journeys began.

From the age of four and throughout his teens, Dylan regularly stayed at the two cottages at Blaencwm **7** owned by the Williams family; he often wrote there and probably visited Pentowin, which his Aunt Ann and her husband Jim farmed before moving to Fern Hill **8**.



Another friend, Keidrych Rhys, who edited the magazine WALES with more than a little help from Dylan, settled near the church at Llanybri with his wife, the poet Lynette Roberts, not far from The Farmer's Arms **12**.

They married in Llanybri in October 1939, with Dylan as Best Man. Now she is buried beside the Church which she came to as a bride **13**.



# Return now to Carmarthen

where Dylan stepped off the bus every Wednesday morning, crossing the road to buy his Woodbines at Heddons, an old-fashioned tobacconists who rolled tobacco and made snuff to order.

He would then walk through to the old covered market where stallholders from all over Carmarthenshire brought in eggs, cheese, bacon, hams, bread, cakes, jams, fruit and vegetables, and sold anything from tomato plants and seedlings to clothes or bric-a-brac. This was where Caitlin found her flowery summer dresses, plates and cutlery and the Staffordshire ornaments that decorated The Boat House.

Nearby, cloth-capped county farmers stood in groups, also dressed in their Wednesday best, weighing up the sheep and cattle as the auctioneer's babble lured their bids.

The cattle market has moved out of town. The covered market is now modern, but retains the character Dylan would have recognised . . . but this was how it was in October 1953 when Dylan walked through these streets for the last time on his last journey to New York.

Each week, if Caitlin was with him, they would usually catch the latest films showing at The Lyric or the Capitol (Carmarthen had two cinemas in those days), before travelling back on the last bus to Laugharne, for the Thomases rarely missed a chance to see a movie . . .



And if she wasn't, he would make his way, a little erratically, up Lammas Street, past the houses that are all still there, past the Picton Monument, down into Johnstown, for one last drink, or two, at The Friends Arms **1**.

There, another routine would follow. When the drinking was done, the landlord would take Dylan outside, and slip his braces over the back of the iron railings so that the driver of the Laugharne bus could pick him up and take him home.

This was where he came every Wednesday, sharing the hustle and bustle, calling in at The Plume of Feathers or The Hole in the Wall, and always ending up in the bar at The Boar's Head **14** where the market traders drank side by side with the farmers and auctioneers.



This happened again and again, and is still remembered, for Dylan Thomas was never much of a drinker; he was a gentle man with a weak liver, suffering from untreated diabetes, who loved companionship, sang songs, played piano and told stories and music hall jokes, until he ran out of steam....

....and he often  
ran out of steam.

That was  
the sadness of it.

George Tremlett  
9th January 2013

