

## THE MAID OF CEFN YDFA

“The Cupid” was undoubtedly the most popular book written by Thomas Morgan (better known by his bardic name “Llyfnwy”) who lived a large part of his life in the town of Maesteg. First published in 1869 it was a collection of Welsh Romances and romantic poetry in which, for the first time, the Welsh public at large were introduced to what were to become two of the nation’s best loved romances. The stories of *The Maid of Sker* and *The Maid of Cefn Ydfa* are both set in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the latter concerning a girl named Anne Thomas who lived at Cefn Ydfa Farm a bare mile or so down the valley from Llangynwyd Village.



In 1703 the farm was the property of one William Thomas who, in the spring of that year, married a woman named Catherine Price. In due course their first child (a daughter) was born and as recorded in the parish registers was christened with the name “Anne” in a ceremony at Llangynwyd church on 8<sup>th</sup> May, 1704. Her life was to prove a comparatively short one, and (if legend is to be believed) none too happy a one at that, but her name was destined to become known throughout the length and breadth of Wales.

Perhaps amidst the village urchins that goggled at the well-dressed Thomases and their guests leaving St Cynwyd’s church after the ceremony was a lad named William Hopkin who would have been about four years old at the time. Young Wil’s family occupied a fairly lowly station in local life so during their early years he and Anne moved in two very different levels of local society and there would have been little or no personal contact between them. Probably Wil occasionally saw the young Anne when she attended church with her parents. Possibly too he was amongst the onlookers who watched as during the course of a few short days over Christmas 1707 she and her mother followed the coffins of first her father and then her baby brother to their graves.

These deaths left Anne the sole heiress to the prosperous farm at Cefn Ydfa and she was consequently carefully groomed to be a suitable match for some young husband of good breeding. Amongst other accomplishments she was taught to read and write – something not necessarily considered an essential element in the education of a young lady of this period. Wil Hopkin on the other



hand had to pick up such education as he could at the local village school and, at the same time learn a trade by which to earn his daily bread.



In 1722 he, his widowed mother and his elder brother Jenkin took out a lease upon a smithy, a croft, and eight acres of meadow at Llangynwyd. Presumably Jenkin was the one principally involved with the smithy though Wil presumably assisted him and learnt the rudiments of the trade. Tradition asserts however that he became a tiler and plasterer and it was in this capacity that he and Anne came into contact when her mother engaged him to carry out some work at the farm.

Wil had also achieved something of a reputation as a bard, having a way with words and a mischievous, often wicked sense of humour that enabled him to employ them with telling effect. He and Anne were immediately attracted to one another and soon hopelessly in love. Only too aware that this was not the kind of match Mrs Thomas had planned for her daughter they carried on the liaison in secret and, for a time, all went well.

Eventually, of course, Mrs Thomas did find out and immediately confined Anne to the house in an effort to break what she considered to be a most undesirable match. One can understand her point of view. Anne was a well-bred young heiress; Wil (whatever he bardic ability) no more than a rough and ready labourer. Mrs Thomas would have been less than human had she not suspected that he was more interested in her daughter's inheritance than her future happiness! In her eyes she was saving Anne from making a dreadful mistake she would live to regret.

For a time the young lovers managed to keep in touch by means of letters smuggled in and out of the house by one of the maids. When she however revealed to Mrs Thomas what was going on Anne's confinement became even stricter, she spent her days locked in her room and quill, ink, and paper were confiscated. Unaware of the maid's duplicity Wil continued to write, but his letters all ended on the kitchen fire. Furthermore Mrs Thomas actively promoted the suit of a certain Anthony Maddocks, a lawyer living at Cwmrisca Farm just across the mountain from Cefn Ydfa.

The legend claims that Anne, in a desperate attempt to contact her lover wrote him a letter in her own blood on a sycamore leaf, but the treacherous maid ensured that it never left the house. Eventually, convinced that Wil's feelings towards her had changed she agreed to marry Maddocks and Wil, believing in turn that she was spurning him, left Llangynwyd and went to work in England. He did, however, pour out his heart in a poem which, sung to an old Welsh folk-tune, is one of the most haunting love-songs in the language. Called "*Y Gwenith Gwyn*" ("The White Wheat") it declared his undying love for someone who had abandoned him for another whose beauty, that he had watched ripening like a field of corn, would be harvested by his rival.



The union of Anne and Anthony Maddocks proved a loveless one for he had only been interested in adding Cefn Ydfa's acres to those of Cwmrisca. When in a final and fatal illness she began crying out for her true love he abandoned her altogether. Somehow (some claim it was a message from Mrs Thomas) news of Anne's illness reached Wil and he returned to Wales reaching Cefn Ydfa only just in time for her to die in his arms.



So, everyone asks, was it all true, or just some tale conjured up by some storyteller of the past?

We historians have great problems with legends, for it is only natural that the grow with every telling, bits being added that had not place in the original tale upon which it is based. Some will focus on the obvious flaws and dismiss the whole thing as false whilst others seem to feel honour bound to defend such stories in their entirety – “warts and all”. So it has been with the story of Anne and Wil ever since it first appeared in a letter from the Revd Pendrill Llewellyn and his wife of Llangynwyd published by the *Cambrian* newspaper in 1845. The story, they claimed, was one that survived as a popular folktale amongst the people of the parish and pointed out that all the characters mentioned in it had actually existed. Others were not so sure, and the eminent scholar Prof Glanmore Williams went so far as to declare (on very dubious evidence) that it had actually been the Llewellyn’s own invention! In turn the late Graham Hill (“*Cefn Ydfa – A Who’s Who and What’s What*” published 1990) has shown that many of the arguments advanced by the professor to discredit the legend are themselves seriously flawed. The discussion rumbles on! As for this particular Time Tekker, well he’s an old Maesteg boy. Where the story of Anne and Wil is concerned we don’t have to think or reason – we know!

