

**Pentyrch and District Local History Society
Cymdeithas Hanes Lleol Pentyrch a'r Cylch**

THE GARTH DOMAIN

(A SERIES DESCRIBING LOCAL PLACES AND PEOPLE AS THEY WERE)

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MISCELLANY (6)

**Compiled by
Don Llewellyn**



The Carpenter's Arms, Efail Isaf. Home of the Bryants – harpists of note.



C 1905 John Bryant (harper) and Richard Wilkins (road sweeper) prepare to make music in the garden of The Carpenter's Arms, Efail Isaf. John (1832 - 1926), was a harpist (harper) of the top flight; Richard Wilkins was a local character about whom several anecdotes survive.

THE HARPERS OF THE GARTH

I am grateful to Dr Colin Davies, a great grand nephew of Tom Bryant for providing the photographs and much of the information accompanying this article. (Ed)

People of my generation who were raised in the Garth Domain must be forgiven for thinking that Efail Isaf was the world centre of everything connected with harp-playing. The reason for this was the esteem in which Tom Bryant, landlord of the Carpenter's Arms was held by local people during our time. I have no doubt that Tom was a competent and popular publican, but it was for his virtuoso performances on the 'National Instrument of Wales' that he was so affectionately remembered. What an advantage it must have been for a tavern to have as 'mine host' the Royal Welsh Harpist of the day.

It was my good fortune to meet a number of the leading harpists of recent times and it was always pleasing to hear that they were very much aware of the Bryant contribution to the tradition of harp-playing in Welsh life. Although I set out on my research with only Tom Bryant in mind, I soon came to realise that the Bryant dynasty and its offshoots had produced a rich variety of musical talent over three or four generations. My enquiries quickly led me to understand that although Tom was prominent in his time, there were earlier, perhaps even more illustrious harpists of the Bryant line. Unfortunately, limits of time and space permit reference to only a few of the personalities involved.



The Carpenter's Arms c 1890

William Bryant (born 1834), archetypal Glamorgan pub landlord and his family. Jane, his wife, is the person fourth from left. Their daughter Mary (great grandmother of Dr Colin Davies) is third from right and the lad at the back is Tom who was to become a local legend. His uncle John (who was then in his prime), does not appear to be in the group.

John Bryant

One of the most illustrious harpists of the Bryant clan was John, born one hundred and seventy years ago. It appears he lived for most of his life with his brother William's family at the Carpenter's Arms, but, as these tributes in the local newspapers testify, he travelled extensively in Great Britain.



A newspaper article of 1920

'A Night with the Harp', has been the subject of a popular lecture known throughout the Principality for many years. The lecturer was the late Rev Watcyn Wyn, the penillion singer the late Eos Dar and Alawydd Glantaf was the harpist. These three eminent Welshmen entertained and instructed audiences in almost every town and village in Wales and many parts of England also. A few facts relating to the life-work of Mr John Bryant the harpist will awaken some pleasant memories of the past life of hundreds of Welsh people, for he has taught more to play the harp than any living harpist in Wales - if not the British Isles.

Mr Bryant was born in one of the most picturesque little valleys in Glamorgan, namely Cwm Castellau, near Llantrisant. His parents lived at a mill near the Lamb and Flag Inn - a mill which has long been in ruins. The harpist first saw the light of day as far back as February 1832 and in spite of his romantic surroundings, he never entered the married state. When John was between two and three years of age, his family left Castellau and came to Efail Isaf where soon they settled into the Carpenter's Arms - where Mr Bryant has lived to the present day. Eighty or ninety years have brought to this neighbourhood many changes. In those days the parish church Eglwys Illtud was the only building for worship in the place. Nonconformists met to worship at the inns and other places in the neighbourhood and the long room of the Carpenter's was one such venue used for religious services.

After leaving school young Bryant went to Caerphilly to commence learning to play the harp and also to improve his general education at the hands of Mr Llewelyn Williams whose father Mr Sephania Williams kept the Boar's Head in those days. Mr Williams senior was an associate of John Frost and Dr Price of Llantrisant in the days of the Chartists. Many are the stories and incidents that Mr Bryant can recall from those stormy times.

The first harp that John ever possessed was given to him by Dr Harrison who was the first colliery doctor in this neighbourhood. Mr Bryant never worked at a colliery but has been tutor to many miners from time to time. Mr Tom Bryant of Cardiff is a nephew of the old gentleman whose pupil he was and he often substituted his uncle with the late Eos Dar and the Rev Watcyn Wyn on their lecturing tours. The veteran, at the age of eighty nine in his quiet way still continues to teach his great nephews and great nieces, some of whom are not yet in their teens. It is inspiring and touching to listen and watch him explaining the art of teaching them in his own inimitable way. For anyone who has a taste for music and a love for the old Welsh airs, to hear him giving a few selections is indeed soul-stirring and if one is inclined to melancholy, I don't think there is a better tonic to be found than a few selections from his varied repertoire.

We, of the younger generation perhaps do not at all times appreciate what has been done by men of the type of Mr Bryant in days gone by; the time spent, sacrifices made and services rendered by him in the cause of education being immense. Many years before such a thing as a Board School was known in the country, he was a staunch supporter of education in Llantwit Fardre. A British School was built by private subscription and by deductions from the miners' earnings. In this way it was supported for very many years. To help in this cause, Mr John Bryant organised concerts and eisteddfodau. It was whilst presiding at one of these functions in the schoolrooms that the late Judge Gwilym Williams of Miskin Manor remarked after hearing Mr Bryant playing: 'It is not in Llantwit that his talents should be used but in the chief city of the world amongst the greatest musicians of this time in this country.'

Perhaps it is not generally known that Mr Bryant was harpist to the late squire Henry Lewis of Greenmeadow and also to the late squire Wyndham Lewis of The Heath, Cardiff. He travelled much to various festivals to play the national instrument when the old-time feasts and dinners were more in vogue than they are today. His services were very much required and he was invited to dances and parties not only in public places but to the castles and seats of the aristocracy throughout the Principality. His services were also greatly in demand as an adjudicator at eisteddfodau and had he been partial to that branch of the profession, more would have been heard and seen of him in that direction. The satisfaction he gave was such that he was often pressed against his wish to oblige eisteddfod committees from time to time. I well remember it said of him that after much persuasion he consented to adjudicate on instrumental music at an eisteddfod in Pontypridd many years ago. When giving his decision on the drum and the band competition, the only thing he said was 'number "so and so" band gave the best performance, therefore I award them the prize' - and then sat down. The satisfaction of the different bands and the audience was complete and a lengthy explanation of his views would not have convinced anyone more than they already were of his true impartiality and unerring judgement. It may be that it is his temperament that accounted for this. Those who know Mr Bryant best would agree that it is not his nature to speak an unkind or disparaging word of anyone and it is entirely disagreeable to him to dwell upon anyone's weakness in any direction, be it musical or of any other kind. But as to knowing which is the good, better or best in music, he has few superiors.

A newspaper article of 1922 (by which time John Bryant was 91 years old):

Veteran Harpist

Inseparably bound up with the history of the Welsh harp is the name of Mr John Bryant, Efail Isaf, near Pontypridd, who today celebrates his ninety first birthday. When seen by a South Wales News representative yesterday, Mr Bryant was full of vim and vivacity. To speak of the harp was to touch upon something almost sacred to the aged musician whose eyes glistened with happy recollection of days long past when he entertained royalty, gentry, and huge eisteddfodic gatherings with his manipulation of the strings of the national instrument of Wales. Mr Bryant was born at Castellau, a scattered hamlet nestling beneath the historic town of Llantrisant. When three years of age he removed with his parents to Efail Isaf where he has since resided and now enjoys the peaceful repose of advancing years. In his boyhood days the harp had an irresistible fascination for him and Dr Harrison, a popular figure in the Vale of Glamorgan in those days presented him with a harp before he was eleven years of age. He received lessons under the late Mr Llewelyn Williams, Caerphilly (who was instrumental in bringing out the 'Pencerdd Gwalia') and also a few lessons from the late Professor Chatterton. He competed at many eisteddfodau and won the triple harp contest at the Abergavenny National. For many years he was the harpist for the National Eisteddfod committee and among those he entertained were the late king Edward and the Duke and Duchess of Argyle. There were few gatherings at the mansions and great houses of Glamorgan to which he was not invited to play. He was harpist to the late Sir Watcyn Wyn, the Lewises of Greenmeadow and played on numerous occasions at Miskin Manor for the late Judge Gwilym Williams, also at Lady Llanover's residence at Cardiff Castle and at Dunraven Castle. He was for years the appointed harpist at the anniversary of Balaclava held by the late Lord Tredegar and the Inkerman celebrations organised by Colonel Morgan. On one occasion he played before 900 guests at a gathering arranged by Sir Watcyn Wyn at Wynstay Hall. He accompanied Caradog on numerous occasions when that celebrated conductor played the violin. Others with whom he played were the late Eos Morlais.. Gwyn Alaw, Tom Stephens, and the king of penillion singers, Eos Dar. He has adjudicated at a large number of eisteddfodau. A nephew of Mr Bryant is Mr Tom Bryant, Cardiff, the present Royal Welsh harpist and one of the leading exponents of the art in Wales.



The editor's grandfather Richard Llewellyn (Dic Soar) was known to sing tenor to Tom Bryant's accompaniment. It is, however, with John Bryant that he is preparing here an al fresco rendition from his reputedly vast repertoire of Welsh songs. The writer would like to point out that Dic was not an eisteddfod performer - his performances were restricted to the hostelrys of the district!

Family background

Print-outs of family trees show graphically how the number of persons claiming the same blood line grows enormously with each generation. The Bryant Line is no different and I have seen a lay-out which shows hundreds of names which owe their origin to John Bryant (born 1781) who was the publican of the Carpenter's Arms in 1841. My colleague Barry Davies has looked for details of earlier Bryants and suggests that they seem to descend in some way, directly or co-laterally, from Thomas Bryant of Croed Ged, a yeoman farmer, but has to remain wary of a dubious reference to an earlier Bryant at Llantwit Fardre. Having consulted the censuses and Llantwit Fardre parish registers he has passed to me some random notes which throw light on the changing spelling of the family name, and the older names for the property which became 'The Carpenter's Arms'. Barry also refers to the register of Freemen of Llantrisant and that rich source of information on 18th century life in East Glamorgan. William Thomas's Diary.

Barry's notes

... You will see that the famous John, born in 1831 (for which I find no PR record) was living with his father Daniel and grandfather John at *Gweunydd Hirion* (The Carpenter's Arms) in 1841 aged 10. By 1851, aged 20 he is described interestingly as a 'harpar'.

John's brother William became a freeman of Llantrisant through marrying Jane Williams, daughter of a freeman. Their son Tom became a freeman later.

There is another Bryant family in Llantrisant descended from a William Bryant, glazier who married Mary Robert a freeman's daughter on 22nd May 1784. They had a son Thomas baptised in Llantrisant June 12 1785. I can find no evidence that the two families are related.

Llantwit Fardre 1841 Efail Isha Village

John Bryant	60	Farmer	born in Glam.
Daniel Bryant	40	Publican	born in Glam.
Mary Bryant	35		born in Glam.
John Bryant	10		born in Glam.
William Bryant	7		born in Glam.
Daniel Bryant	3		born in Glam.
Margaret Jones	20	Female Servant	born in Glam.

Llantwit Fardre 1851

Daniel Bryan	Head	49	Victualler & Farmer of 26 acres	Llantwit Fardre
Mary Bryan	wife	48		Llantrisant
Thomas Bryan	son	22	coal miner	Llantrisant
John Bryan	son	20	harpar	Llantrisant
William Bryan	son	16	coal miner	Pentyrch
Daniel Bryan	son	13	scholar	Llantwit Fardre
Ann Bryan	dau.	9	scholar	Llantwit Fardre
Hannah Bryan	dau.	4		Llantwit Fardre
Mary Howell	servt.	20	General Servant	Llantwit Fardre

Memorial Inscriptions in Llantwit Fardre St. Illtud:

Thomas Bryant of Croscade in this parish d. 19 May 1816 aged 44
 Hannah d. of Daniel & Mary Bryant of Evilisaf d. 18 Sept 1843 aged 2
 John Bryant of Evilisaf d. 18 December 1846 aged 68
 Ann Bryant d. May 11 1862 aged 20

Tudor s. of Daniel & Emma Elizabeth Bryant of this parish d. Oct 8 1884 aged 2 yrs 3 months
 Emma Elizabeth Bryant d. July 1 1919 aged 78
 Daniel Bryant d. Sept. 20 1922 aged 84

Eleanor Adeline Bryant wife of Thomas Bryant, Allt house, Church Village, d. 31 March 1945 aged 70
Thomas Bryant d. Feb 26 1966 aged 93
Daniel John Bryant d. 15 November 1981 aged 81
his wife Matilda d. 25 April 1989 aged 88

Llantwit Fadre Parish Registers

William Bryant burial or baptism? April 1729
Robert & John ss of Thomas & Mary Bryan bapt. Dec 25 1776
Robert Bryan buried March 9 1777
Hannah Bryan buried 22 February 1783

Thomas Bryan, Croesged buried Jan 26 1794 aged 86
Mary Bryan, Crosscade buried 20 January 1810 aged 74
Thomas Bryan, Crosscade, buried 26 May 1816 aged 44
Bridget Bryan, Newbridge buried 8 October 1854 aged 2
Catherine Bryant, Newbridge, buried 3 June 1857 aged 3
Thomas Bryant, Efail Isaf, buried 7 Jan 1851 aged 22

Llantrisant Freeman

723 May 1864 William Bryant, farmer, Efail Isaf married a daughter of Richard Williams
1178 May 1900 John Bryant, carpenter, Carpenters Arms, Efail Isaf son of late W. Bryant, 723 1221
May 1902 Thomas Bryant, Efail Isaf son of W. Bryant 723
1849 May 1939 Denis William Bryant, Carpenters Arms, son of T Bryant 1221
1923 Feb. 1945 Thomas Bryant, Carpenters Arms, Efail Isaf, son of D W Bryant, 1849

William Thomas's diary

2 February 1773 was buried in Bedwas from Llantwit Fardre, James Bryan, Miller 23
1763/ 1769 References to Mr Thomas Bryan, chief agent to William Morgan Esq of Tredegar, English
by birth.

From about 1782 until the 1830s the owner of the copyhold tenement of Croesged alias Tir Treharne, in
Llantwit Fardre was Thomas Bryant. By the 1840s it belonged to Mr William Perkins, descendant of
Perkins of St y Nill, who built himself a gentry house there. He was Stipendiary Magistrate for Merthyr
Tudful.

From about 1811 Mr Thomas Bryant was also freeholder of Gwaun Hirion.

Gwaun Hirion was part of the Ffrwd in Efail Isaf. In 1671 it appears as 'Tair Gwayne hir alias
Gweynydd hirion and the forge.' It is, therefore, probably the original Efail Isaf.

The Tithe Map has it as Gwynydd Aaron belonging to Jolm Bryan and in hand. The Carpenters Arms
then was just a cottage and garden.



The resting place of the Bryants
at Tabernacl

It has been said that if you were to stick a pin anywhere on the Bryant family tree you are likely to find a musician of one kind or another and I am told that this family characteristic is still in evidence today. Over the last few generations, there have certainly been pianists, organists, and violinists, also horn players in silver bands who have left their mark, but it is the harp which remains synonymous with the name Bryant.

I learned from Dr Colin Davies that he was always aware during his childhood of the importance of the harp in the family tradition. In the homes of his relatives there was more often than not such an instrument under a dust sheet in the corner of the living room.

There is no doubt that old John Bryant was an inspiration to several of his relatives. One of these was Tudor Powell, son of Morgan Powell and Emma (Bryant), daughter of John's brother William. A major harpist in his own right, Tudor was another who always acknowledged his debt to his great-uncle John, not only for his masterly teaching but also for his enthusiastic encouragement. The winner of numerous prizes for his virtuosity, Tudor was in great demand on the concert stages of South Wales in the years between the two world wars.



TUDOR POWELL



Tabernacl, the Welsh Congregationalist chapel in Efail Isaf

Tom Bryant (1882-1946)

I don't think I ever actually met Tom Bryant but I always felt I knew him well for he was talked about so much. There is no doubt that he was respected throughout the Garth Domain both as a talented musician and as a gentleman. My brother and myself were always delighted to hear stories about escapades involving Tom and our father's father. In retrospect, with more facts at our disposal, we are inclined to think that some of the tales must have involved John Bryant rather than Tom. Unfortunately we shall never know for certain.

I have to admit that as a child I was under the impression that this Tom was the one and only Bryant who played the harp; only recently have I discovered the truth. Since beginning this short treatise, I have come to the conclusion that the story is far bigger than that which can be told properly here and I trust that one day full justice will be done to this family's remarkable contribution to the musical heritage of Wales.

There are many aspects of the Bryants beyond their pure musicianship which are worth considering. For instance their family life was firmly embedded in the atmosphere of the tavern rather than the strict chapel world we have come to associate with most aspects of the Welsh cultural dimension since Victorian times. Yet, we know too that the Bryants have been faithful supporters of the Congregationalist cause in Efail Isaf both John and Tom, the biggest names, are buried at Tabernacl. We also know that they were amongst the keenest of competitors and later as judges at countless eisteddfodau including the National. Could it be possible that the Bryants represented a vein of talent which managed to defy the restrictive measures that some say were imposed by a joyless nonconformism which had gripped Wales? Is it just possible that they were a 'throw-back' to the time when Welsh society was known for its gaiety? Again, we shall never know. What we can be sure of is that their place in Welsh cultural history is assured.



Tom Bryant. The versatile musician is photographed for once without his harp

According to the major Welsh biographical dictionary, Tom Bryant was born on 22nd July 1882 at the Carpenter's Arms, Efail Isaf. It was Tom's good fortune that John the living legend resided there too. Consequently, it would have been from a very early age that Tom started his musical education at his uncle's knee. It is recorded that he won many prizes at eisteddfodau whilst still in tender years. From the age of nine till he was fourteen he won the first prize at the National Eisteddfod every year! It was clear that he would eventually adopt the mantle that his uncle John had worn for so long. Upon reaching adulthood, Tom followed in John's footsteps by travelling around the country with two other performers. In his case they were Watkin Hezekiah Williams and Robert Rees, the former lecturing on folk songs and the latter singing to Tom's accompaniment on the harp. Tom became an A.R.C.M. in 1906 at the age of twenty four and in the same year within a few months of having played at a Command Performance when Cardiff became a city, he once more received King Edward VII's command, this time to play the harp at the opening of a new dock in Cardiff. With the 'Golden Quartette' he held concerts at the principal towns of Britain. He wrote music for the harp, and composed variations on the tunes 'Merch y Felin' and 'Merch Megan'. Another claim to fame was that he was one of the very first harpists to broadcast on the wireless. Tom Bryant was not to enjoy the longevity of his famous uncle who had lived until he was 94; he passed away on 13th January 1946 aged 63.