

'25th DECEMBER 1889: CHRISTMAS DAY LOST' FURNITURE MAKING IN MEIRIONYDD

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Village wheelwrights and general carpenters are well known by tradition as the suppliers of much country-made furniture. Two such craftsmen, John Thomas and William Parry of Llanbedr, Meirionydd, kept a detailed record of their activities from 1880 to 1900 in two day-books. With over 15,000 entries, these form an important source for understanding the opportunities and constraints to which such men adapted, and a way of evaluating their rôle as furniture makers in a community which brought producers and consumers into direct daily contact.

Llanbedr is a small village on the main coastal road and railway from Barmouth to Portmadoc, and the whole area enjoyed a certain prosperity in the late nineteenth century, with considerable building activity. Spreading back into the almost impenetrable mountains are two narrow valleys, with abundant supplies of oak and ash, and a large number of scattered farms. The meticulously kept day-books mentioned contain an entry for the work performed on each day, often divided into quarters and halves, by each of the men on separate pages. For much of the period they employed one John Griffiths, and occasionally other named carpenters, whose work is also entered daily. An entry for 25.6.1887 for example reads 'at Tyddynbach finish watter wheel $\frac{1}{2}$. with the glass cupboard $\frac{1}{2}$ '. At intervals there are calculations and copies of bills, and throughout the period they based their prices on a daily rate (plus materials), and it was to calculate these that they kept the books. Thus, on 8.7.1882 they charged '9 days work in repair the waggon for farm at 4s. 9d. . . . £2. 2. 9d'. Although they are known to have had apprentices, these are not mentioned, presumably because no charge was made for their efforts. Most of the entries are brief, and a picture has to be ascertained from the repetition of certain tasks and the time taken, and from the recurring names of their customers, most of whom are identified by the name of their farm or home.

John Thomas and William Parry were born around 1850 and described themselves respectively as 'master joiner' and 'joiner' in the 1881 census, when they each worked from their homes, Penrhiw and Glanafon. On the 9.12.1882 Thomas is 'at Penrhiw begin a donkey cart to W. Thomas Erwgochyn' and on the 14th 'at home chest of drawers for E. Thomas Portmadoc'. They were in partnership by this time and a bill dated 22.12.1881 is signed 'Thomas and Parry Joiners'. In late 1882 the day-books show them moving to a new workshop in the village quarry where, on the 24.1.1883 they are 'splitting spokes from log of oak from O. Owen Pantgoleu'. In the census of 1891, they each describe themselves as 'joiner and builder', and are not listed together in a trade directory until *Slaters Directory* for 1895, when they are referred to as 'carpenters and joiners'. They clearly prospered and built a pair of substantial houses in the centre of the village on the site of Parry's home, and their partnership is recorded there as 'Thomas and Parry, builders and contractors' in *Bennetts Business Directory* for 1913-14 and for

1922. In the edition of 1936 John Thomas' son, also called John (born 1871), is established at that address under the entry 'builder and contractor, Glanavon. Circular sawing done, Repairs to house property'. Despite these later references, there is no particular move towards specialising in building work within the period of the day-books. Among the very first entries in 1880 we find 'a contract of a new house for Revd John Davies Dyffryn', alongside a bill for £1. 9. 6d for 'a corn chest, three feeding troughs and a hayknife handle'; and among the last entries in 1900 we find that they made, fixed and varnished a cupboard, and made a table and repaired an old cupboard and chairs.

They were sufficiently organised and versatile to be in continuous employment as carpenters by performing a variety of tasks from making a 'washing tub for Gwin Calfore' in 1897 to taking a 'contract of new Villa Residence at Harlech' for £1417. 0. 0d in 1898. The entry for one day alone, the 15.3.1886, for Thomas reads 'mak hand barrow and box for R. Jones Caeclochydd till 3 pm. at Uwchglan repair horse power till 7 pm', while Parry was 'with Morris Owen table ¼. make box for Rees Evans ¼. roofing pigsty for Mrs Griffith Artro Terrace till 2.30 pm. at Dolwreiddiog for load of wood for himself till 7 pm. finish hand cars till 9 pm'. They worked six days a week, with only Christmas Day and Thanksgiving Day as regular holidays. On Christmas Eve 1882 they are 'at Llanbedr workshop make a pulley for W. Jones and R. Roberts thrashing mazine' and on Boxing Day at the top of the valley 'at Maesygarneidd fixing the watter poure'. They spend Christmas day itself in 1884 'estimating at Mrs Edwards house at Barmouth'; in 1888 they are 'at Taltreuddyn repair'; and in 1891 they record 'Xmas day at home. mak bills'. On the 29th December 1883 they 'work til night in respect of los this day week'. But on the 23.6.1885 Thomas is 'at home with children for Llandydnno excursion' and on the 16.6.1890 Parry and Griffiths are 'at Barmouth with Sunday School'. Thomas and Parry were evidently members of different denominations, which may have helped them in their apparent monopoly of fitting local chapels, and on the 25.5.1892 they both spend all day 'at preaching meeting Llanbedr'. Thomas's first real holiday is nine days in Liverpool in April 1899, followed by six days 'at home ill'. In 1889 he had attended his sister's wedding there, and in the early years of this century they apparently worked on Welsh Chapels in the city.

Other joiners worked in the locality and are mentioned in various sources, but not with any consistency, and appear to have offered little competition. One such was Robert Williams (born 1838) of Caermeddyg, a tiny hill farm, who is recorded in the 1881 census as 'farmer' and in the 1891 census as 'farmer and joiner'. He was a famous local character and is reputed to have made implements and possibly some furniture, but the day-books show that he turned to Thomas and Parry in 1887 'for sawing watter wheel arms' and again in 1888 to provide a cradle. He was however known to have produced sledges, carts without wheels, which were used on steep slopes and in the small rocky and boggy meadows. Thomas and Parry also made these, spending several days in September 1881 'at Byrlllysg sawmill sledges for Cwrt', and in December 1883 'at workshop make new sledge for John Prichard Hendy' for which they charged 10s. 0d. It may have been an ancient technology, but it was not dated, and on 27.5.1886 they 'mak sledge for Thomas Lloyd to carry manganese', the latest industry. A more specific type, for harvesting, had a ladder front and back and was known in North Wales as a *car llusg* and this is the only Welsh term used throughout the entire day-books, when one

1894 J. Thomas

1. 70 repairs for class room at school house
 2. 71 make new cupboard for class room
 3. 72 do
 4. 73 do at Mr Jones house
 5. 74 make shanty for Mr Jones house
 6. 75 do shanty
 7. 76 shanty at Mr Jones house
 8. 77 cut shanty for Mr Jones house
 9. 78 shanty at Mr Jones house
 10. 79 at Mr Jones house
 11. 80 at Mr Jones house
 12. 81 at Mr Jones house
 13. 82 at Mr Jones house
 14. 83 at Mr Jones house
 15. 84 at Mr Jones house
 16. 85 at Mr Jones house
 17. 86 at Mr Jones house
 18. 87 at Mr Jones house
 19. 88 at Mr Jones house
 20. 89 at Mr Jones house
 21. 90 at Mr Jones house
 22. 91 at Mr Jones house
 23. 92 at Mr Jones house
 24. 93 at Mr Jones house
 25. 94 at Mr Jones house
 26. 95 at Mr Jones house
 27. 96 at Mr Jones house
 28. 97 at Mr Jones house
 29. 98 at Mr Jones house
 30. 99 at Mr Jones house

1894 J. Thomas

1. 100 at Mr Jones house
 2. 101 at Mr Jones house
 3. 102 at Mr Jones house
 4. 103 at Mr Jones house
 5. 104 at Mr Jones house
 6. 105 at Mr Jones house
 7. 106 at Mr Jones house
 8. 107 at Mr Jones house
 9. 108 at Mr Jones house
 10. 109 at Mr Jones house
 11. 110 at Mr Jones house
 12. 111 at Mr Jones house
 13. 112 at Mr Jones house
 14. 113 at Mr Jones house
 15. 114 at Mr Jones house
 16. 115 at Mr Jones house
 17. 116 at Mr Jones house
 18. 117 at Mr Jones house
 19. 118 at Mr Jones house
 20. 119 at Mr Jones house
 21. 120 at Mr Jones house
 22. 121 at Mr Jones house
 23. 122 at Mr Jones house
 24. 123 at Mr Jones house
 25. 124 at Mr Jones house
 26. 125 at Mr Jones house
 27. 126 at Mr Jones house
 28. 127 at Mr Jones house
 29. 128 at Mr Jones house
 30. 129 at Mr Jones house

1. Day book of John Thomas and William Parry, 1894

was made on 15.8.1893 for 12s. od.

But they were in greater demand for the production and repair of carts which had wheels, and on 31.3.1882 they charged 18s. 6d. 'for the repair of cartwheel for Richard Ellis Coedlleci', including labour, twelve new spokes, and paint. On 31.3.1883 they made 'a new donkey cart. £6. 10s. od'. and on 2.8.1887 they finished a 'new cart for R. Evans Nantcol' at a cost of £11. 10s. od. The carts were painted and on 1.8.1882 they charged 3s. od. 'for printing two cart signs to J. H. Jones Penrallt'. Their skill was also utilised in maintaining the two main forms of power on the farms, waterwheels and wheels turned by horses. In June 1882 they spent six days in their workshop making a 'watter wheel for Maesygarneidd' and in November a day 'makin pullys for Maesygarneidd watter pouer'. The swift flowing streams and rivers of the area were used to turn wheels for a variety of purposes, and on the 17.11.1881 they were 'at Glanrhaidr fix a gorse mazine to the watter pour'.

On the 29.1.1894 they were 'at Dolbebin repair horse power' which operated a butter churn inside the dairy; and on the 19.1.1888 they 'mak fram horse power of Mr Jones Llwynhwyleyn'.

The exercise of their traditional craft required the use of native hardwoods, and these were obtained directly from the source. On the 21.2.1882 they were 'at Dolbebin wood cut trees for shaft for Cefncymerau Farm' and on 11.7.1883 they 'cut tree for G. William Llwinionfychan cart frame'. Certain woods were favoured for the strength required in cart wheels, and these needed seasoning for several years. The hubs (naves) were turned in elm, the spokes were made of cleft oak, and the rim sections (felloes) of ash. The logs had to be transported down the valley, and they are frequently 'at Aberartro sawmills sawing timber for ourselves'. Sometimes they transported them as far as their workshop, and on one occasion at least, on the 9.8.1889 they 'take timber from Dolbebin wood down the river'. In preparation for several days converting the timber on 31.3.1883 they are 'at Byrllysg sawmill fetch pit saw'. On 28.11.1890 Griffiths has to 'mak handle in his ax and square timber for sawing', and on the following day he continues to 'square timber and turne the lathe to sink the teeth of pitted saw'. There follows twelve days of 'sawing ashwood'. On the 15.12.1883 they are 'at Hugh Evans yard split spokes' and on 19.1.1888 they 'make frame sawe to cut fellowes'.

Building work was possibly their main activity, ranging from 'repair cowhouse £1. 7. 11d'. on 23.10.1882, to drawing up the plans and building and fitting houses, schools, chapels, and shops. They only carried out the carpentry, sub-contracting to masons whose days are listed, and gained contracts in the adjoining villages. On the 27.4.1889 they are 'at Portmadoc about plans of Dyffryn Capel' and on the 30th 'estimating on Dyffryn Capel £1054. 4. od'. For some of the building on the farms they used local timber, preferably felled close to where it would be used: on the 20.6.1892 they 'cut trees for Ystumgwen hay shed' which was then repaired on the 1 July. But for most of this work they used deal, which was easily transported by rail from the timber merchants in Portmadoc. Much of their time was spent transporting this from the station, sometimes to their workshop, but when possible direct to the site. On the 1.12.1888 they are 'at Portmadoc order wood and slates for Penisarcwm repair', on the 14th 'unloading timber at station' and on the 31st two of them start a fortnight's work at the farm. They also made extensive use of pitch pine, which is shown as twenty-five per cent



2. Early nineteenth century engraving by I. W. Harding showing a horse-drawn sledge of the type made by Thomas and Parry

more expensive than deal, for turned and panelled work in chapels, schools and houses. Surprisingly, on the 28 June 1884 they even used it to make a water wheel for Jarrett Dinas, and charged £7.15s. od, after spending six days in the workshop and five days on site.

Relatively few days were spent on furniture making, although an enormous variety was produced, including several types of table, chests of drawers, settles, glazed cupboards, cradles, children's chairs, dressers and desks. Restoration was also undertaken, and in May 1892 Thomas spent one and a half days repairing 'the beureau of W. Williams Gornant' and a half day on 'soffa for J. E. & Son'.

There is no discernible pattern to this work, which was carried out by both the partners and Griffiths. They normally worked on pieces separately, seeing them through from start to finish and utilising a number of skills, although larger items occasionally involved two men. In October 1888 Thomas starts a 'glass cupboard for John Williams Tanybryn' and he and Griffiths work on it together and separately, sometimes spending whole days, sometimes only a part. The work is accomplished in two phases, about a fortnight apart, involving Thomas for nine whole days, and Griffiths for six. Unlike

some of the tasks connected with tree-felling and wheel-making, there is no seasonal variation: in 1890 no furniture is worked on between the end of May and November apart from the 7 July when Thomas is 'at Hugh Evans house repair chairs'; in 1891 something is produced every month until October; and in 1892 only in May, August, and September, when Griffiths spends two days on a 'chest of drawers for E. Davies Hafodycoed' and Thomas half a day 'paintin chest'. Some of the furniture may have been put on one side until the weather prevented outdoor work, which could occur at any time of the year. In August 1894 they worked on Cwmnantcol school and report 'very cold and stormy on the roof'; and in July and August 1889 Griffiths makes a table, Parry a sofa leg, picture frame and cupboard, and Thomas makes shelves and a table with turned legs. Pieces are rarely worked on for whole days, but fitted around other tasks. For the 13.7.1887 Thomas enters 'begin glass cupboard' on the same day as he does sawing and collecting bills. The job spreads over two weeks, involving nine days, mixed with time spent in the next village and on farms, roofing and repairing churns. Parry was in the workshop on the same days, making stairs, windows, and a table. On the 14.7.1891 Parry starts a cupboard for 'Mrs Jones Terrace' and spends four and a half days on it over a period of a month, until the 21 August when the entry reads, 'fix cupbord in Mrs Jones House'.

Many of the pieces are made for customers whose names occur regularly in connection with other work. In November 1886 a bill for 'William Evans Gilfach' includes a settle and coffin, and repairs to the horse power, water wheel and hay cart; and in February 1887 they spend ten days at Dinas felling and sawing ash, and in the middle of the month make a 'cupbord for Jarret Dinas'. He is a regular customer for building and cart repairs, and in June 1888 all three carpenters 'make coffin for R. J. Jarrett Dinas. work all night. take it to Dinas 4am. Sunday morning'. Throughout the day-books we find work of all types stops for the making of coffins, often for children, and the subsequent attendance at the funerals. On the 24.7.1886 they 'take coffine up to Penrhos (Trawsfynydd) in John Evans trap to Cwmbychan then convey it over Roman stepes'.

All of the work performed by Thomas and Parry—from repairing cart wheels to making coffins—was of a highly individual nature, tailored to specific requirements, and this determined the different categories of furniture they produced. Certain traditional types were still in demand, and they made milking stools on 23 June 1885, and spent eight days on a dresser in 1897. They made a number of settles, some painted, and charged £1. 4. od for one for 'R. Williams Coeducha' in 1884, but only 15s. od for another for 'Thomas Jones Fachwiddal' in 1888. The time taken on other settles ranged from one and a half to four days, and as there is very little variation in style within the area, they were probably of different sizes and possibly made of different woods. At least some of the furniture must have been of local timber since oatmeal chests, which were clearly still a feature of farmhouse kitchens, were invariably made of oak. Furniture was only an occasional purchase on the farms, and there is regular repair work, 'Repairs to O. Owen dresser' cost £1. 6. od in 1884, and they spent two days in August 1885 'at Faeldref farm fixing furnitcher of Mrs Morgan'.

The flexibility needed to carry out their traditional tasks enabled Thomas and Parry to adjust to changing needs, particularly the demand for fitted furniture in the large number of new buildings erected at this time. They won a 'contract of new schoolroom at



3. Painted deal settle. These were found in every farmhouse and were one of the main furniture types produced by Thomas and Parry



4. Table with one long narrow leaf. This type was made by Thomas and Parry



5. *Cupwrdd Gwydr* or glass cupboard. This bears a pencil inscription saying it was made by John Griffiths in 1904 for a new farmhouse at Dolbebin



**6. Built-in glazed
cupboard. A
number of these
were made in deal
for houses in
Llanbedr**



7. Interior of Capel Gwynfryn, Llanbedr. Fitted in 1898

Cwmnantcol signed on the 18 July 1894 for the sum of £355. 10s. 0d'. involving windows, doors and roofing, and the following year made desks, tables and cupboards; and in the adjoining chapel they had spent twelve days in situ making pews and two days making desks in 1891. Another 'contract of Gwynfryn Capel signed 29 March 1898 for the sum of £202. 0s. 0d'. involved rails, turned lamposts, and a table. Many of the houses in the village have simple built-in glazed cupboards, and in June 1891 Parry spent a day making one for Wilson Roberts, and a further day fixing it. They fitted a number of shops, and in 1896 spent six days in the workshop making counters for Daniel Jones, and seven days on installation. They also capitalised on the small number of wealthy English families who were settling in the area, and in 1886 made a shooting stool and cupboard for Samuel Pope Q.C, the former Recorder of Bolton; and in 1892 a gun cabinet for the 'smoke room' of Mr Alloway.

By 1900 furniture production in this area was becoming a specialised activity, with 'cabinet makers' in Portmadoc and furniture retailers in Barmouth and Dolgellau. Although on the 20.5.1886 they 'begin washing stand and dressing table for William Jones', they did not attempt to equip themselves for a larger market, and a more typical, if enigmatic, entry from June 1883, reads 'at Dinas see the gils leg. mak box to lay the leg'. followed the next day 'at Dinas fixin box on the daughters leg'.

On the 15.7.1892 Thomas proudly records 'at Elexion voting at Harlech for *Ellis*. *Ellis* majority over tory 3248'. Four years later Thomas E. Ellis M.P lamented the passing of traditional craftsmanship, and attacked the arrival of the 'pretentious and characterless cupboard with a thin veneer over badly-seasoned and cracking timber and with loose and rickety hinges'.

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