

A translation, by the author, of an article originally published in Welsh in the 2015/16 volume of the Anglesey Antiquarian Society's *Transactions* with the title:- '*Lles mawr i ardal amaethyddol' neu 'Meithrinfa i ffolineb ac anystyriaeth'? Hanes yr Ymrysonfeydd Aredig ym Môn cyn y Rhyfel Mawr (The Ploughing Matches of Anglesey before the Great War).*

**Gerwyn James**

## **The Ploughing matches of Anglesey before the Great War**

Before cricket, football and rugby became popular sports on the island in the final decades of the nineteenth century, one of the principal pastimes and pursuits of the rural inhabitants of Anglesey (Ynys Môn in Welsh) was competing in, and watching, ploughing matches. These competitions first appeared on the island in the second decade of the century, and by the 1860s and 1870s, when they were at the height of their popularity, hundreds of competitors and thousands of spectators were being drawn to these events throughout the bleak and dreary winter months. However, due to significant social changes occurring in the closing years of the century, the matches began to decline, and by 1914 it was apparent that the 'golden age' was at an end. Yet, despite the popularity of this phenomenon, few historians have ventured to chronicle this very interesting topic in our history. The aims of this paper is therefore to record and chronicle this largely forgotten aspect of our agricultural history, and to attempt to reassess and re-evaluate the role of ploughing matches in the social life of Anglesey.

### **The early years : 1813 until c. 1850**

Ploughing matches first appeared on Anglesey during the Napoleonic Wars, and it was largely due to the influence of the so called 'spirited proprietors', who gave birth to the movement. This after all was the era of the Agrarian Revolution; the period when new ideas in agriculture became fashionable amongst the upper classes. This was the age when thousands of acres of common land were enclosed, and when experiments were taking place in crop rotation. It was in this period that new breeds of cattle and sheep emerged, and great developments occurred in the sphere of agricultural technology.

Food shortages, and the historically high price of corn were also an issue of concern. The French Revolution had clearly shown that there was a causal link between agricultural crisis, famine and revolution. With the war against France showing no signs of a resolution, and with Methodism challenging the Established Church, and making great inroads on the island, members of the rural ruling classes felt that they were slowly losing their grip on power, and had come to the conclusion that something had to be done to improve the lives of ordinary people, and in order to do this, radical changes had to be made in the world of agriculture.

However, the main difficulty facing agriculture at this time was the innate and deep-rooted conservatism of farmers; men who were deeply suspicious of change. Most farmers at this time were still using tools and equipment that would have been familiar to the mediaeval peasant, and ploughing was a typical example of this conservatism. The Old Welsh plough, <sup>1</sup> according to several commentators was a huge, ungainly and awkward object. According to the poet Gruffydd Hiraethog, who died circa 1564, the old wooden plough resembled a large anchor which had to be drawn with great difficulty by eight oxen. <sup>2</sup> According to George Kay, writing at the end of the eighteenth century, Welsh farmers were still using this cumbersome and unwieldy mediaeval implement. The length of the beam of the plough used in the northern counties, he records 'is commonly 7 feet; and, from the point of the sock to the after part of the head, above four feet.' <sup>3</sup>

As a result, the advocates and promoters of the Agrarian Revolution came to the conclusion that a more efficient system of ploughing had to be introduced, and that the conservative Welsh farmers had to be encouraged to adopt a new type of plough - namely the revolutionary iron 'Scotch Plough', which was drawn by a pair of horses, rather than by a large team of oxen. This new system, they argued, would result in a quicker and thus more effective form of ploughing. Indeed, by the late eighteenth century, there were several enlightened landlords promoting these new ideas on the island. The work of the Reverend Henry Rowlands, of

Llanidan, was probably familiar to many members of the island's landed gentry. In 1704, he had written an important volume on agriculture entitled *Idea Agriculturae*.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, the essay was not published until 1764, but change was undoubtedly in the air. During the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the Druidic Society of Anglesey (1772-1844), was formed and this was the first group of reformers who actively promoted some of the new ideas on the island.<sup>5</sup>

However, it was another organisation, the Anglesey Agricultural Society, (established in 1808), that succeeded in promoting the merits of the 'Scotch Plough', and it was this group that organised the first ploughing match held on the island.<sup>6</sup> On Friday, 12 February 1813, a ploughing match was held on a field on the outskirts of the market town of Llangefni, in the presence of 500 farmers from Anglesey and the neighbouring county of Caernarfonshire. The ploughmen were asked to plough half an acre of land, and to do it in less than four hours. They had to use a pair of horses, and had to complete the task without the support of a driver or helper. Three competitors entered the event, representing three prominent Anglesey agriculturalists, namely, John Williams, Tregarnedd, Mr. W. Williams, Castellior and Mr. James Williams, Treffos. The Tregarnedd ploughman won the event in a time of two hours and 26 minutes. Unfortunately, in this early period, only the name of the owner of the plough is recorded; the name of the ploughman, who won the event, is rarely mentioned. One ordinary worker however, is mentioned in the report written in the *North Wales Gazette*, because the three competitors on that historic day had used ploughs designed and created by Thomas Williams, of Dyfnia Bach, Llanfair Pwllgwyngyll. According to the *North Wales Gazette*, these innovative new iron ploughs had created quite an impact on the crowd assembled :

'The ploughs of all the competitors were by Mr. Thomas Williams, of Defnia, near Braint Turnpike, who appears to have effected some very admirable improvements in this most useful implement - in addition to the number before made by him, he received orders on the ground for no less than Thirty new ones, which afford a striking proof of the spirit with which this mode of ploughing is likely to be taken up in the county..' <sup>7</sup>

Gradually the new iron plough became fashionable and popular, and this in turn, this gave further impetus to the ploughing matches, with Sir Richard Bulkeley of Baron Hill, (1801-1875), one of the great landowners on the island, becoming one of the chief promoters. Around February 1836, he began to hold annual competitions on his estate, and these matches soon became very popular. In 1837, 19 ploughmen entered the Baron Hill match. In February 1839, 31 men took part, and between 600 and 1,000 spectators were there to witness the event. According to the report in the *North Wales Chronicle*, every plough, except one, was made of iron. The following year of 1840, saw another significant increase in the numbers of competitors; 33 ploughmen took to the field that day.<sup>8</sup> The evidence therefore seems quite clear. It appears that the efforts of the 'spirited proprietors' had been incredibly successful, and by the 1840s it seemed that the new iron 'Scotch Plough' had almost entirely supplanted the old wooden Welsh Plough. In fact by the 1840s the local newspapers were by now advertising several varieties of Scotch ploughs, made by companies such as Barrowman, Ferguson, Clark, Morton, Wilkie and MacDowd.<sup>9</sup> It was also apparent that local blacksmiths were by now being heavily influenced by these new developments. One eye-witness who was present at the Aberffraw and District Ploughing match in 1844, reported that :

'It must be a source of gratification to the Anglesey farmer, to have amongst them artisans who can now compete with the celebrated Scotch smiths in the manufacture of ploughs. The implement which took the first prize this day was made by Mr. Richard Williams, of Treban, and a better piece of workmanship we never beheld. It possesses all the essential qualities of the Scotch plough, but is much lighter, both in the material used in its construction, and in its draught through the soil.'<sup>10</sup>

### **'The Golden Age' : the second half of the nineteenth century**

The ploughing matches therefore soon became a very popular pastime, and followers and supporters came from all sectors of society. As we have seen, the landed classes were originally the driving force behind the movement, but by the 1860s and 1870s we see a radical transformation in the nature and character of these competitions. During this period a number of local ploughing societies were formed throughout the island, and

as a result, ploughing matches became less elite in nature. From the 1860s onwards it is the farmers and other members of the rural Welsh middle classes who take control over these events. This perhaps is not surprising, because in this period, this group seemed to be taking control over of most rural institutions in Wales. They were already the dominant group in the sphere of religion, in particular the life of the chapels, but they were also coming to the fore as members of the new School Boards, and by the 1880s and 1890s they had become powerful members of the county, district and parish councils.<sup>11</sup> It is also worth mentioning that the language of the ploughing matches changes during the second half of the century. In the early years of the century a great deal of the administration and advertising was done either through the medium of English, or on occasions bilingually. Many of the advertisements and reports are to be found in the columns of newspapers such as the *North Wales Chronicle* and the *Caernarvon and Denbigh Herald*. During the second half of the century however, this all changes, and Welsh becomes the dominant language of the ploughing match. During this period the main reports are invariably found in papers such as *Yr Herald Gymraeg*, *Llais y Wlad*, *Gwalia* and *Y Clorianydd*.

As ploughing matches became more and more popular, a number of local committees were formed in order to organise these events. During this 'golden age' tenant farmers appear to have been the main advocates and promoters, supported by a few local businessmen, craftsmen and publicans. The Llanfair Pwllgwyngyll committee, which was active during the early 1880s was typical. All of the members were solid, respectable, middle-aged men, with the majority earning their living by means of agriculture. Eight had been born on the island; two hailed from the adjacent county of Caernarfonshire, and only one member could be described as an 'outsider'. Robert Watson, the Plas Llanfair farm manager, was a Yorkshireman.

**Table 1**  
**Llanfair Pwllgwyngyll Ploughing Society Committee 1881** <sup>12</sup>

Name	Address	Parish	Birthplace	Description according to 1881 Census	Age
William Williams, Chairman	Garnedd Goch	Penmynydd	Penmynydd, Anglesey	Farmer of 210 acres employing 6 labourers	56
Lewis G. Williams, Secretary	Prince of Wales Vaults	Llanfair Pwllgwyngyll	Llechgyntarwy, Anglesey	Spirit Merchant	42
Robert Watson	Plas Llanfair	Llanfair Pwllgwyngyll	Machin, Yorkshire	Farm Bailiff	42
Griffith Jones	Tŷ Mawr	Llanfair Pwllgwyngyll	Aberdaron, Caernarfonshire	Farmer of 95 acres	81
John Jones	Tŷ Mawr	Llanfair Pwllgwyngyll	Llanfihangel Ysgeifiog, Anglesey	Farmer's son	33
Richard Pritchard	Dyfnia Fawr	Llanfair Pwllgwyngyll	Llanfair Pwllgwyngyll, Anglesey	Farmer of 61 acres	53
Rowland Davies	Efail Newydd	Llanfair Pwllgwyngyll	Llanfair Pwllgwyngyll, Anglesey	Corn Merchant	40
William Owen	Bryn Eira	Llanfair Pwllgwyngyll	Abergwyngregyn, Caernarfonshire	Farmer of 29 acres	45
John Williams	Hologwyn	Llanddaniel	Llanddaniel, Anglesey	Farmer of 84 acres	38
John Williams	Ty'n Coed	Llanddaniel	Llanddaniel, Anglesey	Farmer of 60 acres	44
Owen Jones	Pant Lodge	Llanfair Pwllgwyngyll	Heneglwys, Anglesey	Farmer	33

The local ploughing committee was therefore a vital and significant organisation, and the members controlled all aspects of the event. They chose the location of the match, penned the rules, appointed judges, advertised the event, organised the stewarding and the after-dinner meal, and they also raised the funds for the prize-money on offer.

A typical ploughing match held on the island during this period, would usually be divided into three sections or classes. The first class was restricted to champions, or in other words, the men who were experienced

ploughmen, and according to the country poet Hugh Ellis, of Llanbedrgoch 'each one an old hand'. ('..bob un yn hen law '). These men became champions by winning a first prize at a previous match. The second class was open to experienced men, who had not yet succeeded in winning a competition, and the third class was reserved for the young, inexperienced men and youths, who were taking their first tentative steps in competitive ploughing.<sup>13</sup>

More often than not, the committee would meet regularly in a local public house to discuss business; places such as the *Prince of Wales Vaults*, in Llanfair Pwllgwyngyll, which was kept by the local secretary Lewis G. Williams. Indeed, the village publican was often a key member the local ploughing committee. Another prominent Anglesey publican at this time was David James Jones, who was the landlord of the *Crown*, in Llanfechell. As a young man David Jones had been a soldier, who had served in the Crimea. Having retired from military life, he became a police constable in the newly formed Anglesey Constabulary, before retiring for a second time in order to run the *Crown*.<sup>14</sup> One of the biggest decisions facing the committee year on year, was very often the choice of a suitable location, and fields belonging, or located in close proximity to a public house, were often chosen as venues. Fields owned by, and located adjacent to the *Crown* in Llanfechell, the *Bull* at Llannerch-y-medd, the *Prince Llewelyn* at Aberffraw, and the *Valley Hotel*, just outside Holyhead, were convenient and popular venues. Beer flowed freely on ploughing match days, and a ready supply of alcohol was regarded as essential for getting the crowds through the turnstiles.

By the 1860s and 1870s the local ploughing matches were probably at the zenith of their popularity, and Table 2 is an attempt to analyse the events of one season's competitions.

**Table 2**

**An analysis of ploughing matches held during the 1868-9 season** : taken from *Yr Herald Gymraeg* and *North Wales Chronicle* 1869

<b>Date of the Ploughing Match</b>	<b>Day of the Week</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Number of Competitors</b>	<b>Reference in the Herald / NWCh*</b>
31/12/1868	Thursday	Bodedern	13	09. 01. 1869
05/01/1869	Tuesday	Llanfair M.E.	9	16. 01. 1869
12/01/1869	Tuesday	Bryn Du	13	16. 01. 1869
21/01/1869	Thursday	Llanddaniel	18	30. 01. 1869
05/02/1869	Friday	Llangristiolus	-	13. 02. 1869
05/02/1869	Friday	Bryngwran	18	13. 02. 1869*
25/02/1869	Thursday	Pontrhydybont	-	06. 03. 1869
25/02/1869	Thursday	Llanfechell	-	13. 03. 1869
02/03/1869	Tuesday	Gwalchmai	-	13. 03. 1869
02/03/1869	Tuesday	Llangristiolus	15	27. 03. 1869
08/03/1869	Monday	Penmynydd	20	20. 03. 1869

The primary sources dealing with the work of these committees are unfortunately virtually non-existent, but it is however, possible to recreate a fairly accurate picture of this aspect of ploughing, based upon reports and adverts found in local newspapers. This sample shown in Table 2, which covers a period of ten weeks, saw eleven matches taking place in almost every corner of the island. On average, a match would have been held every 6.2 days. The number of competitors, where the evidence exists, was 106, and on average therefore some 15.1 competitors turned up for each match. However, there were in all probability, many more matches than this. Elfyn Scourfield,<sup>15</sup> in his study of this topic in Carmarthenshire, has shown that in many rural areas, it was common for competitions to be advertised locally, not via the columns of local newspapers, but rather by means of posters placed in shop windows, workshops and blacksmiths' forges. We could therefore, be seriously underestimating the number of ploughing matches held.

One curious detail that we might find difficult to comprehend today, is the fact that most of the competitions appear to have been held on Tuesdays and Thursdays; very few matches appear to have taken place on Saturdays. Saturday, during this period, was obviously regarded as unsuitable or inconvenient for some reason or other. But, why was this? Could it be that farmers, and possibly their wives, were concerned that a match held on Saturday might be regarded as inconvenient and would without doubt interfere and hinder the arrangements regarding the Sabbath on the farm? With the evidence being so scarce, this explanation, must I am afraid, be regarded as pure conjecture.

However, the main feature without doubt of these matches in the second half of the nineteenth century were the appearance of huge crowds of people who were drawn to these events. Once again, we need to look at the newspaper evidence for sound and solid historical evidence.

**Table 3**  
**Some crowd numbers reported in the local press : 1845 to 1902**

Date	Farm	Parish	Number of competitors	Crowd numbers	Reference
Friday 17. 1. 1845	Trecastell	Aberffraw	12	'multitude'	NWCh 21. 1. 1845
Tuesday 15. 2. 1859	Saith Aelwyd	Llangefni	22	'a great many hundreds'	NWCh 26. 2. 1859
Friday 30. 1. 1863	Llysdulas	Llanwenllwyfo	19	'a great concourse'	NWCh 14. 2. 1863
Tuesday 5. 2. 1867	Glanyrafon	Pentraeth	28	'a large concourse of spectators'	NWCh 9. 2. 1867
Thursday 16. 1. 1868	Gwydryn Hir	Llanidan	35	'a very large concourse of spectators'  'nifer aruthrol o bobl' (a great number of people)	NWCh 25. 1. 1868 Herald Gymraeg 25. 1. 1868
Saturday 18. 1. 1868	Wern	Llandegfan	25	'Daeth yno lawer iawn o edrychwyr.' (Very many spectators were there)	Herald Gymraeg 8. 2. 1868
Friday 28. 2. 1868	Bryngors	Bryngwran	15	'There was a large gathering of the agricultural class..'	NWCh 7. 3. 1868
Tuesday 14. 2. 1882	Trescawen	Llangwyllog	74	'hundreds of persons'	NWCH 18. 2. 1882
Wednesday 21. 2. 1883	Tan y Fron	Cemaes	14	'oddeutu pum cant' (around five hundred)	Y Genedl Gymreig 28. 2. 1883
Monday 9. 2. 1885	Tan y Graig	Llandegfan	13	'yr oedd cannoedd o bobl yn bresennol.' (hundreds of people were present)	Y Genedl Gymreig 18. 2. 1885
Friday 13. 2. 1885	Pen Nant	Llangefni	dim cofnod	'lliaws' (a multitude)	Y Genedl Gymreig 18. 2. 1885
02. 1886	Cellar Farm	Aberffraw	28	'about 1,500'	NWCh 20. 2. 1886
Wednesday 29. 1. 1890	Tŷ Croes	Bryngwran	18	'daeth cannoedd yn nghyd.' (hundreds came together)	Y Genedl Gymreig 5. 2. 1890
Tuesday 10. 2. 1891	Cellar Farm	Aberffraw	25	'about nine hundred people passed the gates.'	NWCh 20. 2. 1886
Tuesday 7. 2. 1893	Bodgyndaf	Llaneugrad	dim cofnod	'daeth cannoedd lawer o ddyeithriaid yn nghyd,' (hundreds of vistor came together)	Y Genedl Gymreig 14.2. 1893
Wednesday 29.1.1902		Llangoed		'yr oedd 700 wedi ymgynnull'. (700 had assembled)	Gwalia 11. 2.1902

One location that regularly drew large crowds was Cellar Farm, Aberffraw; a community located on the western edge of Anglesey. In February 1886, it was reported that 1,500 people had assembled there, in order to watch 28 of the best ploughmen in the district competing. It is difficult to imagine today that as many people turned up to witness this event, held in a remote rural parish in western Anglesey, as were present in Welsh football cup finals, or to watch international football matches played at Wreccsam during the 1880's. In 1887, for example, 1,500 went through the turnstiles to see Chirk challenge Davenham in the Welsh cup final played at Crewe, and 1,500 went through the turnstiles to see Wales play Scotland at Wreccsam in March 1881.<sup>16</sup>

By the final quarter of the nineteenth century, it was clear that the day of the ploughing match was regarded as a general holiday amongst rural workers, and the country poet Hugh Ellis, Llanbedrgoch, has painted a wonderful picture of the event, capturing the excitement and colour of the proceedings.

Mae heddiw yn ddiwrnod ras 'redig ;  
Dowch fechgyn, i'w gadw'n ddydd gŵyl ;  
Cychwynnwn, awn yno ben bore  
Rhag colli dim munud o'r hwyl ;  
Ceffylau a throliau ac erydr  
A dynion wy'n weld ar bob llaw  
Yn prysur gyfeirio tuag yno –  
Dechreuir aredig am naw.

(Today is the day of the ploughing match. Come on lads, let's celebrate the holiday. Let's go there, let us go first thing in the morning. Let's not miss a minute of fun. Horses and carts and ploughs, And men, I see all around. They are all busy making their way there. The ploughing begins at nine o'clock.)<sup>17</sup>

The excitement and colour associated with the ploughing match were important factors which drew in the crowds. A great deal of preparatory work was done by the competitors in the days leading up to the match. The horses had to be cleaned and prepared; the manes and tails carefully carefully, and the harnesses and gear had to be well polished. In Llandegfan, in 1875, we are given a rare glimpse of this aspect of the event, and we are given an excellent description of the 21 teams who competed at Mill Bank Farm. All of the horses, were, it was said, 'well turned out on the field, having been rubbed, and ribboned, and pleated, so that they appeared handsome and splendid.'<sup>18</sup> And not only were prizes awarded to the best ploughmen, accolades were also awarded for the best turned-out team, and for the best pleating and for the cleanest harnesses. It is no surprise therefore that the ploughing match also appealed to spectators from outside the world of agriculture. In Llannerch-y-medd, in 1870, for example '.. gentlemen, clergymen and preachers, sailors, and all sorts of craftsmen ' were present on the field.'<sup>19</sup>

One anonymous critic writing in yr *Amseroedd* had also noticed this curious development.

'Heblaw yr amaethwyr, eu meibion, a'u gweision, bydd llawer iawn o grefftwyr yn colli eu hamser i fyned i'r lleoedd hyn. Ceir gweled teilwriaid, cryddion, seiri meini, seiri coed etc., yn myned yn llawn brwdfrydedd tua maes yr ymrysonfa. Ond pa ddewin all ddyweyd i ba beth y maent yn myned - dynion na wyddant fwy am aredig nag a wŷyr asyn am gerddoriaeth. A rhyfeddach eto, ceir gweled merched wrth y degau yn cyfeirio eu camrau tua'r lle!' (Apart from the farmers, their sons, and servants, many craftsmen also take time off to go to these events. Tailors, cobblers, stonemasons, carpenters etc., can be seen enthusiastically going towards the ploughing field. But can any wise man enlighten us as to why they are going there - men who know as much about ploughing as a donkey knows about music. And even more curious, is the fact that tens of women also attend these events!)<sup>20</sup>

By the 1870s the ploughing match had become so popular, that they could be regarded as being on par with agricultural shows, horticultural shows, fairs and hiring fairs. One pious commentator writing in the *Amseroedd* was quoted thus. ‘Rhaid i bob mab fferm, a phob gwas hefyd gael myned i’r gysegr-ŵyl hon, onide ni bydd dim hwyl arnynt am wythnosau.’ (‘Every farmer’s son, and also every farm labourer has to attend this holy festival, otherwise they will be in a bad mood for weeks afterwards.’)<sup>21</sup>

As a direct result of the popularity of these matches, one very significant development occurred, namely, the status of the ploughman rose considerably during the second half of the century. Competitive ploughing was, after all, a highly skilled activity. A man had to plough a third of an acre in a period of seven or eight hours. Completing this task within a certain time-period, to a high standard, and under competitive conditions was difficult. Yet, in the early years of the century, there are few references to individual ploughmen in the press reports. As late as 1857, at a match held at Fryars Bach, Beaumaris, we learn that : ‘At 11 o’clock the proceedings commenced, at the conclusion of which, the man servant of Mr. Owen, Cae-mawr, gained the first prize.’<sup>22</sup> The farmer, who was the owner of the team and the plough is mentioned, but the name of the winning ploughman is not recorded. He is merely described as ‘the man servant’. The farmer therefore is given the honour and the credit (and the financial prize) - and the actual craftsman who won the event is utterly ignored. This is of course similar to what happened in other spheres, such as horse racing, for example. In horse racing, it was the winning owner who is given the plaudits and the financial rewards, with the jockey receiving a share of the winnings. The evidence, as shown in Table 4, appears to indicate that the winning ploughman at this time received roughly a third of the entire prize money on offer.

**Table 4**

**Prizes awarded at a Ploughing match held at Amlwch in 1842**<sup>23</sup>

Prize	Prize Money on offer	Sum awarded to the owner of the plough	Sum awarded to the ploughman	The percentage awarded to the ploughman
1	£2 - 10s - 00d	£1 - 10s - 00d	£1 - 00s - 00d	40.0%
2	£2 - 00s - 00d	£1 - 05s - 00d	15s - 00d	37.5%
3	£1 - 10s - 00d	£1 - 00s - 00d	10s - 00d	33.3%
4	£1 - 00s - 00d	12s - 06d	7s - 06d	37.5%
5	15s - 00d	10s - 00d	5s - 00d	33.3%
6	10s - 00d	6s - 06d	3s - 06d	35.0%

But, by the 1860s and 1870s the situation was being radically transformed. By this time, crowds would travel a fair distance to see some of the best ploughmen in action; men such as Seth Lewis, (1842-1928) Fedw, Penrhoslligwy, Owen Lewis, and William Roberts. William Roberts, was so highly regarded that people, had by the 1860s, stopped calling him by his real name, and were constantly referring to him as ‘*Yr Arddwr Mawr*’ (The Great Ploughman). ‘*Yr Arddwr Mawr*’ was a tremendously popular and prolific competitor throughout the 1860s and 1870s.<sup>24</sup> Another successful competitor was Evan Parry, Ceginddu, Brynsiencyn. Following a win at a match in Brynsiencyn in February 1876, the crowd, according to the *Herald* reporter, went home in good spirits, carrying Evan Parry through the village whilst ‘cheering triumphantly’.<sup>25</sup> By the closing decades of the century, the status of the ploughman was still high. In 1889, a manual was published in the Welsh language, entitled, *Llawlyfr yr Aradwr*, (The Ploughman’s Handbook) written by someone calling himself Sion yr Arddwr. This was a manual designed to give advice and guidance regarding competitive ploughing. This book, which was aimed at, and targeted at young men, is again proof of the popularity of ploughing matches and of the rise in the status of the champion ploughman.

This rise in the status of ploughmen within rural society is also reflected in the work of the local bards and poets. On Anglesey, in the years between c. 1880 and 1914, country poets began to sing the praises of these men, usually through the medium of the four line stanza, called the *englyn*. In 1880 Ioan Gwyngyll sang the praises of John Massey Williams, son of William Williams, Garnedd Goch, Penmynydd, following his success at a ploughing match at Llanfair Pwllgwyngyll.

Os yr â Massey i ymryson - eilchwyl

I Walchmai neu Arfon,

Gorchfyged a myned Môn

Yn null cawr ennill coron.

(If Massey goes a ploughing – once again

To Gwalchmai or to Caernarfon,

Let him be victorious

In the manner of a giant, to win his crown.)<sup>26</sup>

A generation later, we find an anonymous poet recording the achievement of William Williams, Rhosbothan, Llanddaniel, who won first prize at a match at Llangefni.

Yr arwr er yr arian - aradrwr

Wnaeth wrhydri weithian ;

Clod y byd i gyd ar gan,

Erys byth i Rhosbothan.

(The hero despite the money - a ploughman

Whose recent gallantry will ensure

That we shall forever commemorate

The triumph of Rhosbothan.)<sup>27</sup>

In less than a generation therefore, the champion ploughman had been transformed from a low-status, anonymous farm labourer, and was now praised and eulogised as a ‘hero’, and indeed a ‘giant’ within his local community.

### **The Critics of Ploughing Matches**

Many of the supporters and enthusiasts within the world of agriculture at this time were of the firm opinion that ploughing matches were without doubt positive and beneficial events, and had succeeded in raising agricultural standards throughout the island. Time and again reports appeared in the local press praising the work done by competitors. In Bodedern in 1904, for example, it was stated that everyone was of the opinion that “.. na welwyd gwell aredig mewn un man erioed.” (‘..never was there seen, anywhere, better ploughing.’). The secretary of Llangoed match also believed that great benefits to be derived from the matches. He wrote - “Nid oes ddadl nad yw ymrysonfeydd o’r natur yma yn lles mawr i ardal amaethyddol. Dangosent i’r oes sydd

yn codi fod urddas yn perthyn i lafur. Gobeithia yr ysgrifennydd y bydd y campwaith a welwyd ar yr achlysur yma yn symbyliad i eraill yn Môn fynd a gwneud yn yr un modd, rhoddi nod uchel o’u blaen ac ymgeisio i’w chyrraedd. ” (There is no doubt that these matches are of great benefit to agricultural areas. They show the present generation that there is dignity pertaining to labour. The secretary hopes that the masterpieces created at this event will inspire others on Anglesey in similar fashion, to set themselves high standards, and to attempt to reach that aim.)<sup>28</sup>

However, there were critics - especially certain individuals from within the nonconformist establishment. As we have seen, the ploughing match became a holiday in many areas, and without doubt, one of the main attractions on match day was the presence of alcohol, and beer flowed liberally at these events. It had long been a tradition to reward the ploughmen with a good supper and a steady supply of beer. Ploughing, after all, was hard manual work, and the men often required beer to quench their thirst. Sir Richard Bulkeley, for example, always ensured that there was a steady supply of food and drink at the competitions held at Baron Hill. In 1859. “The ploughmen” according to the *Chronicle* reporter, “..were most liberally supplied with boiled and roast beef, and old *cwrw da*, (good beer) at the farm yard. ”<sup>29</sup>

And, as there was so much beer consumed in the public houses, and in the temporary refreshment tents erected on the field, we also, throughout this period, find a number of critics and opponents voicing concerns regarding behaviour at these matches. Even committee members realised that excessive drunkenness was damaging the good name and the image of the matches. In Llangeinwen in 1866, for example, the president appealed to those present, to stay away from the public houses, and he hoped that none of them would “..wneyd eu hunain yn is eu cyflwr na’r anifail” (‘ degrade themselves to a state that was lower than an animal.’<sup>30</sup> Indeed, more often than not, it was the drunkenness and bad behaviour, rather than the quality of the ploughing, which made the headlines in the local newspapers the following week. The Llanfechell match, in February 1869, was a case in point. That day, beer sold by David Jones in the *Crown* was the source of a great deal of drunkenness and disorder. One spectator, who called himself *Amaethwr* (Farmer) was appalled by what he saw.

‘Anfoesoldeb. Ar y 23ain o’r mis diweddaf, cynhaliwyd ymrysonfa aredig yn y gymdogaeth uchod, yr hon a nodweddiad i raddau anghyffredin gan anfoesoldeb. Yr oedd holl *roughs* yr ardaloedd wedi ymgynnull i’r lle - llwon a rhegfeydd yn seinio yn barhaus dros y maes - tafarndai y pentref yn orlawn o yfwyr selog drwy y dydd - nifer fawr o’r edrychwyr yn fwy na hanner meddw yn mhell cyn nos - a dygwyd gweithrediadau y dydd i derfyniad yn nghanol meddwod, cabledd, ac ymgecru, os nad rhywbeth gwaeth. Y mae y fath ymrysonfeydd yn felldith i ardal.’

(Immorality. On the 23rd of last month, a ploughing match was held in the above neighbourhood, the main feature of it being immorality. The *roughs* of the neighbouring districts had gathered there - and cursing and swearing were to be heard throughout the field - the public houses in the village were full of regular drinkers throughout the day - a great number of spectators were more than half drunk, well before nightfall - and the day’s proceedings culminated in drunkenness, blasphemy, and brawling, if not worse. Such matches are a curse to a community.)<sup>31</sup>

A year later, a similar incident was recorded - this time at Llannerch-y-medd. According to the testimony of one eye-witness, serious drunkenness and bloody fist fights occurred, and if the roughs were responsible for the bad behaviour seen at Llanfechell, then it was idlers who were at the root of the problem at Llannerch-y-medd, “.. heb ddim ganddynt mewn golwg wrth ddyfod ond cael diod feddwol ” (‘[idlers] who had only one thing on their minds namely, to get hold of strong drink.’<sup>32</sup> The traditional ploughing match supper held at the end of the proceedings could also create difficulties. Following a good day’s ploughing at Bryngwran in 1869, things quickly got out of hand. The *Herald Gymraeg* reporter stated that ; “Yr oedd yn ddrwg iawn gennym weled cymaint o arwyddion y diodydd meddwol ar lawer y noson honno”. (‘It was sad to see the influence of alcoholic drink on many that evening.’)<sup>33</sup> In fact, a ploughing match without incident was also newsworthy, as was the case in a match held at Llanrhuddlad in February 1899. “Aeth pobpeth yn mlaen yn dawel, ac aeth pawb adref yn sobr, heb un arwydd fod neb wedi dod i gyffyrddiad a dim diod feddwol, yn ôl yr hen arfer gyda’r ras ’redig’..” medd Hen Arddwr, gohebydd y *Genedl Gymreig*. ( According to the *Genedl*

*Gymreig* reporter ; ‘ The whole event passed off quietly, and everyone went home sober, and there was no indication that anyone had been drinking, as is customary in ploughing matches.’)<sup>34</sup>

But, by the early 1880s an increasing number of nonconformists and temperance reformers on the island began to take a stand against this unseemly drunkenness and disorder. This period on Anglesey coincided with the so called *Diwygiad* Richard Owen - a religious revival that swept through the island, and it is possible that it was this evangelical resurgence that sparked the strong opposition to competitive ploughing seen during 1883-84. The first protest occurred in January 1883, when the Independent Order of Good Templars, a colourful temperance group, petitioned the Anglesey Quarter Sessions. The petitioners made reference to the drunkenness associated with ploughing matches, and that this drunkenness, they argued, was fuelled primarily by the temporary or occasional licences given to the organisers of matches. More often than not, said the Good Templars, these licences were often awarded for a 12-hour period, which meant that the refreshment bars could be open from eight o'clock in the morning till eight o'clock at night. Following the Clerk of the Court's intervention, the magistrates agreed to exercise more care in future when dealing with applications for temporary or occasional licences.<sup>35</sup>

The following spring, the matter was raised once again. A debate on ploughing matches took place at the monthly meeting of the Anglesey Calvinistic Methodists (now known as the Presbyterians), with a prominent Methodist minister, the Rev. Simon Fraser, taking the initiative. Fraser had also witnessed the drunkenness and mayhem at matches and believed that “..fod y cyrddau ysgeler hyn yn warth i'n gwlad.” (‘these wretched events are a disgrace to our country.’) The Methodists once again decided to send a memorandum to the county magistrates expressing regret that occasional licences were still being given to organisers “.. yn groes i benderfyniad diweddar yr ynadaeth.” (‘..contrary to the recent magisterial resolution.’)<sup>36</sup> Then, in May 1884, two anonymous articles appeared in the *Amseroedd* supporting the Rev. Simon Fraser's standpoint, and viciously lambasting the ploughing matches. The author had a long list of grievances. He believed that the matches incurred severe financial losses to agriculture ; they promoted drunkenness and carousing ; they defiled the Lord's Day ; they promoted the use of bad language, and they were in his words ; “yn feithrinfa i ffolineb ac anystyriaeth”. (‘a nursery for foolishness and inconsideration.’)<sup>37</sup> However, the question of awarding occasional licences seems not to have been resolved, and the matter was raised time and time again. The Gymanfa Gyffredinol (the Governing Body of the Calvinistic Methodists), was still debating this thorny issue as late as 1912.<sup>38</sup>

On Anglesey at this time, defiling the Sabbath was regarded as a very serious transgression. But how could individuals attending ploughing matches, usually held on Tuesdays or Thursdays, be guilty of Sabbath breaking? Apparently, according to the Methodists, it was the custom for rural-dwelling youths in the 1860s and 1870s, to revisit the ploughing match field on Sunday afternoons, in order to discuss, re-evaluate and reappraise the work performed by the winning ploughmen. Members of the local ploughing committees were aware of this activity, and match Presidents, on several occasions, had to warn the young men from engaging in this type of behaviour, and would emphasise the importance of remembering the Sabbath day, and for the need to keep it holy.<sup>39</sup> Another influential group of critics from within the nonconformist community were the educationalists. On several occasions these people complained that ploughing matches were disrupting the education of rural children. On match days, rural schoolmasters invariably closed their schools at lunch time, as they knew that few children would bother attending school during the afternoon session. Penysarn school, for example closed one afternoon in January 1888, and Parc y Bont School, Llanddaniel, was closed due a match held locally in February 1892.<sup>40</sup>

In reality, however, these nonconformist detractors constituted a very small minority indeed, and there are several examples of religious leaders who in fact openly supported and encouraged ploughing matches. There were several Methodist deacons who were active promoters of the competitions; men such as Lewis and John Jones, (father and son) of Llwyn Onn, Llanedwen; Hugh Prytherch Thomas, Aberffraw; Thomas Jones, Gelliniog Wen, Dwyran; and William Jones, Pwll Pillo, Rhoscolyn. Another prominent advocate, who was also a well-respected ploughing adjudicator, was William Williams, Garnedd Goch, Penmynydd, who was a

prominent Baptist. Indeed, two of his brothers were ministers with the denomination. Therefore, not every nonconformist by any means, opposed the ploughing matches.

Having realised that the matches were incredibly popular in rural Anglesey, and that their protests had not borne fruit, some temperance reformers began to use more positive tactics in order to try and encourage sobriety and improve behaviour at matches. Rather than by the usual means of preaching and condemning these events, some reformers attempted to use more subtle tactics in order to improve matters. In some areas, attempts were made to organise ploughing matches under the auspices of Temperance Societies, as happened at Llannerch-y-medd in 1892.<sup>41</sup> Then in 1899, another interesting development occurred, when a ploughing competition was arranged as part of the Llanddona Eisteddfod (Literary, Cultural and Musical Festival).<sup>42</sup> However, very few of these alternative ploughing matches actually took place, and in reality, the temperance movement had very little success in its attempt to promote these non-alcoholic events.

## Decline

By the closing decade of the nineteenth century, the 'Golden Age' was inexorably drawing to a close. By the 1890s the nature of rural society was slowly, but surely, changing. Elementary and secondary schools had been established in all areas of the island, and as a result, many ambitious and educated young boys and men began to see a future for themselves outside the world of agriculture. As a result, many young men left the island in order to find work in the large towns and cities. In the midst of all this social change, new forms of entertainment came into being. Partly due to the influence of education, football suddenly became very popular, and in the 1880s and the 1890s, football clubs were formed throughout the island. At a ploughing match, held at Llangefni in 1889 only six ploughmen entered the fray, and despite the fact that the standards were high, William Williams, Garnedd Goch, an experienced adjudicator, expressed concern. The writing was clearly on the wall. According to the *Chronicle* reporter "Mr Williams.. observed that ploughing matches were losing ground, and he hoped that the young competitors would do their utmost to raise the useful and interesting matches to their old standard.."<sup>43</sup>

Ploughing matches however, still remained a popular pastime until about 1918 ; in fact, food-shortages and government regulations regarding agriculture, ensured that more land than ever before was ploughed up during the era of the Great War, and this in turn gave a short-term impetus to the ploughing matches. But by 1914-18 the 'Golden Age' had long since passed. One interesting and novel development however did take place in 1918, when a ploughing competition was arranged for the girls of the Land Army based in North Wales. Preliminary matches were held throughout North Wales, with the local winners progressing to a grand-final at Rhuddlan. Despite this revolutionary development, it is interesting that the *Clorianydd* reporter used this event, not as a portent of what was about to happen, but rather as an excuse to look back nostalgically on past glories. "Pwy wyr" meddai, "na ddaw'r dydd y sonnir am ferched Môn fel 'champions' y ras redig, ac y daw enwau rhai ohonynt mor hysbys ag oedd Seth Lewis, Owen Lewis, 'mab yr Hafod', ac eraill yn y sir ychydig flynyddau'n ôl." ('Who knows' he said 'that the day might soon come when we will be referring to some of the Anglesey girls as ploughing champions, and that some of their names will be as familiar as were those of Seth Lewis, Owen Lewis, the son of Hafod, and others on the island a few years back.')

The Great War and the Great Depression of the 1920s and 1930s were further blows for these matches. Emigration continued, small farms were incorporated into larger ones, and there was a further decline in the numbers of farm labourers. On top of this, there were changes in agricultural production. An increasing number of farmers turned to cattle and sheep production. From now on grass production was vital on a farm. Then, in the 1940s and 1950s, the final nail was driven into the coffin of competitive ploughing, when 'y Ffyrgi Fach', the Grey Ferguson tractor, replaced the horse on the majority of island farms.

From now on, ploughing would be invariably done by means of a tractor, and the age of ploughing by means of horse-power came to an abrupt end.

In conclusion, the ploughing match was a significant agricultural and cultural institution on Anglesey in the years before the Great War. It became a powerful forum for disseminating new ideas amongst agriculturalists, and helped to improve the skills of farmers, farm labourers and blacksmiths. The ploughing match however, soon became more than an educational event or an opportunity for the exhibiting of new technology; the social aspect was remarkably significant. The competitions brought rural inhabitants together during the bleak winter months, and as with the fair, the hiring fair, and the public house, ploughing match day injected colour, enjoyment and pleasure into people's lives, and by doing this it succeeded in alleviating some of the tedium and monotony which was such a feature of the lives of downtrodden farm servants. But, as we have seen, not everyone supported this development. In fact, many nonconformists were strongly opposed, and regarded these matches as being nothing less than a 'curse' and 'a nursery for foolishness and inconsideration.'

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