

Case Studies

BILL AND AGNES THOMAS

from Bakersfield, Vermont, U.S.A.

A chance meeting via a genealogy mailing list led Bill and Agnes Thomas from Bakersfield, VT to meet Angharad. Bill's grandfather William Thomas, emigrated from Llanllechid in Caernarvonshire to the slate mining area of Poultney, VT in the late 19th century. He was a slate miner by trade and had worked at the world famous Penrhyn quarry in Bethesda, Caernarvonshire, before seeking his fortune in America along with many other Welsh folk.

Bill's grandfather often talked about Wales, and of his own father John Thomas who also worked at Penrhyn Quarry. By now, Bill had only the merest amount of information about the exact location in North Wales that his grandfather had come from, let alone where his Great Grandfather was buried. He had a postcard with a picture of a church on the front and the word Llanllechid on it. That wasn't much to go on.

But when Bill sent those details to Angharad, she was able straight away to identify the parish church as Llanllechid, which is situated in the slate mining area of Caernarvonshire close to the town of Bethesda, and of course Penrhyn Quarry. Within the next few days a foray into the cemetery at the church in Llanllechid drew fruit with the discovery of John Thomas' grave. Angharad was able to accurately identify the grave as that belonging to Bill in a precise way, because Bill already had a strange puzzle relating to his Great Grandfather on his hands! After John Thomas' name on the postcard, there was also another word "clark". Now, unable to ascertain whether that was part of John Thomas' name or not, it became clear when Angharad found the grave that it related to something else altogether.

John Thomas "The Old Clark", was the clerk at the Penrhyn Quarry and was recorded thus on his grave stone. Note that the word "Clark" was spelled phonetically on the gravestone, the Puzzle over! It wasn't long before Angharad was able to piece together a full tree of ancestors and descendant for Bill.

A trip to Wales was planned, and whilst waiting for their arrival, Angharad set to planning an itinerary for them so that Bill and Agnes could get the best out of their genealogical trip back to Wales.

Day 1 was spent resting and catching up on the long flight over, but on day 2 a trip to the Penrhyn Quarry at Bethesda was undertaken. By prior arrangement with the Manager of the Quarry, Bill, Agnes, Angharad were taken around the whole quarry by the assistant manager and shown around the various slate dressing sheds. A truly special experience, particularly for Bill who was able to tread in his ancestors footpaths. The picture shows them all in hard hats, enjoying the good weather at Penrhyn Quarry.

From there, after a sustaining lunch at a local pub, it was on to the old homestead where Bill's Grandfather was born. Angharad discovered Bill's grandfathers birth in the parish registers, and was able to find Bills Great Grandparents on the various censuses living at Llandegai, near Bangor in Caernarvonshire.

Close by is the parish church of Llanllechid and Angharad contacted the church warden beforehand so that Bill and Agnes could have a look through he records in the church vestry and also have a guided tour of the church itself.

The cemetery was certainly a poignant visit for Bill, he had assiduously carried a small amount of Vermont earth from his Grandfather's graveside to place on his Great Grandfathers grave in

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Elanllechid. In the photo you can see Bill depositing the earth and taking a small amount back with him, so that a bit of Welsh earth can make its way to his Grandfathers final resting place. We ended our visit to the cemetery with a stone rubbing session, which kept everyone nice and warm!

It turned into a particularly pleasant day, the warden Mr Ken Jones asked us all back to his farmhouse for tea, and a long chat was had by one and all over a traditional Welsh country tea.

On Day 3 came a visit to Penrhyn Castle near Bangor, which is now in the hands of the National Trust. In the time of Bills grandfather it was privately owned by the powerful and wealthy Penrhyn family who owned the slate quarries and also owned land in Jamaica. When searching through the 1881 census Angharad came across Bill's Great Aunt working as a lady's maid in Penrhyn Castle, so it was interesting for him to have a look around the Castle where his Great Aunt had once worked.

