

## AUTUMN MEETING 2018: The Physicians of Myddfai.

The meeting took place between the 28<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> September and was based at the Plough Rhosmaen, Llandeilo; members also stayed at the White Hart Hotel and a number of local members attended as non-residents.

Friday 28<sup>th</sup>

We assembled at The Plough Rhosmaen at 2 pm and made our way in members cars to Dinefwr Park on a beautiful still and sunny autumn afternoon. The party then divided with most being led by Dr Sian Rees to walk up to the castle. Heather James led another group on a short walk in the park.

Sian Rees pointed out that the castle perched on a crag above the Tywi floodplain is on such an obviously defensive position that a prehistoric fortification has been suggested but no evidence has been found nor that it was, as Welsh tradition asserts, an early medieval fortified site. Thus the castle may well be a new work by the Lord Rhys, Prince of Deheubarth, in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century. Even during his lifetime and certainly after his death in 1197, the Lord Rhys's sons – and grandsons - fought over control of his lands in Deheubarth and over possession of Dinefwr Castle. Particularly pertinent to the theme of our weekend was the fact that Rhys Gryg was finally confirmed in control of Dinefwr since the 'physicians' Rhiwallon and his sons are named as his court physicians in the preface to one of the Welsh medical books. The great circular keep and adjacent Welsh gate at Dinefwr may have been Rhys Gryg's work. In 1213 his castle was besieged by his own brother Rhys Ieuanc and even though the defenders, the *Brut* tells us, retreated to the tower, this too was taken. However much of what we see today dates to the Edwardian conquest of the late 13<sup>th</sup> century with a new gate and a remodelled entrance passage. Considerable sums were spent on the castle in the 1320s and repairs and some new building carried out after Glyndŵr's Revolt. Thereafter it seems to have been abandoned in favour of Newton House.

Heather James led the second group towards Newton House, and pointed out the row of cottages forming one side of a courtyard to the side and rear of the 1850s house. Parts of surviving buildings on other sides of the courtyard may belong to Gruffydd ap Nicolas's new house of the mid 15<sup>th</sup> century which replaced the castle as principal residence. Pausing in front of the house she showed a plan of the park and the location of the recently discovered Roman forts. Whilst Capability Brown visited Dinefwr in 1775 a great deal of the park landscaping, of which he approved, had already been carried out by George Rice and his wife Cecil. A short walk to the north and then west of the House provided a splendid view and an appreciation of the veteran trees and park landscaping.

The whole group then reassembled outside the house where Dr Don Williams spoke about his fascination with the famous breed of White Park Cattle. It is popularly believed that they descend from the white cattle with red markings specified as the honour price for any insult to the King in the Welsh Laws. Whilst white cattle were undoubtedly present in medieval herds it is unlikely that the present herd has such an ancient descent. The modern herd's descent is minutely documented in the Dynevor Herd Book and the health of the present herd is due to its acquisition in 1974 by Lawrence Alderson who returned some to the Park

in 1992 and continues to advise the National Trust. Don Williams said that he had been struck by the similarities between the breed and the Italian Chianina white cattle. When the Roman forts were discovered and excavated in the Park in 2003 he could not but wonder whether the British White Parks might have originally been a Roman introduction. With his contacts he proposed that the National Trust undertake some DNA testing of the two breeds. His first overture was rebuffed but a few years later met with a more favourable reception. DNA samples were taken – but, as he ruefully admitted, they did not show any linkage between the British and Italian breeds!

A change in the evening Programme had to be made and Heather James had prepared an overview fact sheet on the subject of the Physicians which she went through with a short powerpoint presentation. Some of the content would she said be dealt with more fully in the Saturday morning lectures but the whole subject was so diverse that a whole week's Meeting was probably necessary to cover it all! The notes covered the historical setting of the courts of the Lord Rhys of Deheubarth and his descendants and the descriptions of the office and duties of the court Physician in the Laws of Court sections of the various versions of the Welsh Laws. Only a brief introduction was necessary to cover the medieval medical books and tracts to be dealt with by Dr Morfydd Owen; similarly medieval medical beliefs and practices and herbal remedies would be covered over the weekend. Finally some notes on Myddfai's place in the medieval administrative and territorial divisions of Cantref Bychan were provided and an account of the legend of The Lady of the Lake and her sons, from whom the eldest, Rhiwallon, the Physicians descend.

The second half of the evening was spent in looking at a diverse array of books on early botany and medicine, part of the Carmarthenshire Antiquarian Society's fine collection now owned by Dyfed County Council and kept at Carmarthenshire Museum in Abergwili. Jill Davies has been cataloguing this collection and had made a selection which she presented to the Cambrians. Amongst the books on show was a fine edition of Gerard's *Herbal*. The reliance of the medieval physicians on the properties of plants and herbal remedies on classical texts was well illustrated by Samuel Chouet's 1657 *Magni Hippocratis Medicorum* which contains latin translations of 60 Greek medical texts. A modern edition of *Llysieulyfr Meddyginiaethol a Briodolir I William Salesbury* was on display. Salesbury was influenced by William Turner's *A New Herbal* and the Welsh names he gave to the plants appeared in print for the first time. The smallest but arguably the most interesting of the books on show was a minute, 5 x 3 inches of a Welsh translation by Dr David T Jones of Llallyni of Nicholas Culpeper's 1658 *The Complete Herbal* which has 100 tiny hand coloured lithographs illustrating it.

### **Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> September**

Introducing the first speaker, Heather James said that she had been intrigued by a small booklet she had purchased in the shop at Myddfai Community Centre, entitled *The Liminal Lakes of South Wales* by V.A. Grant and had contacted the author whom she now introduced to the Cambrians. The author explained that he had used a pseudonym – which of course can be read as 'vagrant' - and that his real name is Alan Paddison. This was a deliberate choice to convey the uncertainties and dualities of the worlds of myth and legend and the very real places that in many cases they are located. Lakes he asserted were very

much 'liminal' places on the borderline between reality and the imagination. Not surprisingly therefore do we find that the legend of the fairy mother of Rhiwallon the physician emerging from the lake of Llyn y Fan fach in the Black Mountain near Myddfai . Such locations were seen by the medieval poets and no doubt their celtic predecessors as both the entrance to *Annwn* , the underworld, and the realm of imagination.

The President, Dr Mark Redknap, thanked Mr Paddison for his talk which he said had caused him to think again about Llangorse Lake and the location of the early medieval crannog , the excavation of which he was in the course of writing up.

The next speaker, Dr David Thorne, is Chairman of *Cymdeithas Enwau Lleoedd Cymru*/The Welsh Placename Society. He began by pointing out the many traces in the toponymy of the Myddfai area that recall the Physicians and locate incidents in the legend of the Lady of the Lake such as 'Pant Meddygon' and 'Llidiad y Meddygon'. He has made a particular study of the element *meddyg* in the placenames of Cantref Mawr and Cantref Bychan. This is not a common welsh place-name element but studied in relation to the administrative divisions of the *cwmwd* and *cantref* a pattern emerges which suggests an hereditary office of a physician in each of the *cwmwdau* of Cantref Bychan and Cantref Mawr which can tentatively be linked to the period of the Lord Rhys and his sons in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. He singled out and showed distribution maps of other elements in north Carmarthenshire possibly related to medical practice, namely 'honey' names since honey was an antiseptic much used by medieval physicians as well of course as a sweetener. He singled out the name *tyllgoed* (holed tree) which could have indicated the location of nests of wild bees in the much more extensive forests and woods of northern Carmarthenshire in the medieval period.

David Thorne was warmly thanked by his fellow place-name scholar, Dr Glenda Carr who paid tribute to his work on the preservation of welsh place-names.

The final lecture of the morning moved on to another related but very different subject by Dr Donald Williams, namely *Meddygon Myddfai – a modern cohort*. He began on a personal note explaining how he had been born at Glanceidrych, a farm near Myddfai , in what was then a monoglot Welsh community. From an early age he had been aware that the great Sir John Williams, physician to Queen Victoria and founder of the National Library of Wales, had come from a farm in nearby Gwynfe. He had attended Llandovery Grammar School and then became a medical student at what is now the Royal London Hospital. He was aware of many other Welsh doctors on the staff and this was the beginnings of his interest in Welsh medical history. He moved to Swansea where he was a consultant psychiatrist and finally senior registrar in psychiatry in south Wales. On retirement he began to contribute to local *papurau y bro* and amass an ever growing list of the many doctors in recent times who have come from the Myddfai area. This led him to found the *Cymdeithas Meddygon Myddfai*/The Physicians of Myddfai Society in 2014 which holds an annual day conference at Myddfai Community Hall. The concentration can be described as a clustering effect perhaps similar to the clustering of talent in the performing arts in the Afan Valley and Port Talbot – and he finds it hard not to also attribute the concentration to the knowledge of the traditions of the earlier Physicians of Myddfai.

Don Williams was thanked by Dr Lindsay Morgan who said that whilst he had been a colleague in Swansea it was really his wife, Dr Val Morgan who had worked closely with Don. He paid tribute to Don's outstanding work in psychiatry over many years in Swansea and South Wales.

We then boarded the bus to Myddfai. We were met at the new Community Hall and Visitor Centre by Robin Barlow who gave a brief talk on this impressive building. Opened by HRH the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall in 2011 it hosts a variety of activities, has a café and a shop and all profits go to the Myddfai Ty Talcen charity. A recent addition are the planters and flower beds flanking the entrance containing plants whose herbal use would have been familiar to the Physicians of Myddfai. We enjoyed an excellent light lunch made on the premises and then made our way to Myddfai Church where we were addressed by past President and Wales Herald Extraordinary, Mr Thomas Lloyd.

Myddfai is a small settlement and the size of its double-nave church is testament to the prosperity of this area of dispersed settlement on the flanks of the Brecon Beacons in the late Middle Ages and sixteenth century. It was restored with characteristic care in 1991 by the late conservation architect Roger Clive-Powell. After describing the architectural history of the church Thomas Lloyd turned his attention to the monuments, the heraldry of the hatchments and the local families. He had also brought along several portraits and local views from his own extensive collection. In the east chancel there is a fine monument of 1785 to Erasmus Williams of Llwynwormwood whose descendant the Rev Sir Erasmus Henry Griffies Williams, a wealthy and somewhat high-handed man held amongst his many offices that of Chancellor of St Davids Cathedral. The Llwynwormwood estate was the largest in the parish in the 19<sup>th</sup> century but was heavily mortgaged and finally sold off in 1912. We also looked at the finely lettered ledger stones in the west chancel including one of 1727 to Henry Owen which alludes to his ancestor Bishop Morgan Owen of Llandaff. The gravestone of the greatest interest for the Meeting was however that to David Jones (1719) and his son, John Jones both 'surgeons' of Myddfai which is in the church porch.

We then boarded the coach once again to drive to Carreg Cennen Castle splendidly visible on its crag in the most magnificent sunny autumn afternoon as we approached from Trap village. Some of the party stayed in the café in the timbered barn built by the Llewellyn family, renowned for their organic farming methods and longhorn cattle. Most however walked up the hill to the castle sited on its limestone crag with the open moorland of the Black Mountain as a backdrop. Dr Sian Rees said that she could not point out anything in the surviving structure of the castle that dated back to the late 12<sup>th</sup> and early 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. Nevertheless it is likely that the Lord Rhys built a castle here at what was the administrative centre of the commote of Iscennen. In the 1216 partition of the Lord Rhys' lands arbitrated by Llewellyn the Great, Iscennen went to Rhys Gryg. There are records of expenditure on Carreg Cennen castle in the wars of conquest by Edward 1 and in 1283 castle and lordship were granted to John Giffard and it is likely that the core of the structure we see today was built by him. A detailed account of repairs and rebuilding dated to 1369-70 survives, when the castle (through the Lordship of Kidwelly) was part of the vast possessions of the Duchy of Lancaster. The outer ward was then in place and also the elaborate barbican had by then been added to the core Inner Ward. There was some discussion as to why this remote castle had such complex defences but Sian stressed the prestige element in their construction by

the marcher lords. It remained an important stronghold through the Wars of the Roses of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and it may have been Gruffudd ap Nicholas who had a gun port inserted into the north-west tower. However with the final victory for the Yorkists and in the reign of Edward IV the castle was ordered to be systematically slighted and demolished.

The dramatic site began to attract the attention of the Romantic travellers in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and was the subject of a watercolour by Turner. The Cawdors, inheritors of the Vaughan estates, undertook consolidation and indeed rebuilding. A few intrepid Cambrians went down the slippery descent of the narrow passage ( the 'cliff gallery' down to a watery cave which has produced finds of prehistoric and Roman date.

The final event of the day was a lecture after dinner by Dr Morfydd Owen on the medical books, medical knowledge and their wider transmission in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century in the first printed text by the Tonn Press, Llandovery. She described with illustrations the eleven Welsh manuscripts containing medical material, the most famous being The Red Book of Hergest, subject of a lecture in the Summer Meeting. Its inclusion with all the other poetry and tales of the Mabinogi in the Red Book showed that educated Welsh men of the time considered medical texts to be part of their reading material. A pamphlet manuscript , Bodleian Rawlinson 467B, is interesting in the present context of the weekend; Morfydd said that later additions showed that it was in the Myddfai area in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and was given to Edward Lhuyd. The late 15<sup>th</sup> century MS Mostyn 88 now in the National Library has remarkable illustrations of blood letting points of the body and parts of the body influenced by the signs of the zodiac. Other mss were clearly handbooks and well used at that. She stressed that despite the language there was little or nothing that was specifically Welsh in the contents of these mss and they were part of a general European tradition. Whilst the mediciners dealt with hygiene, prognosis, diagnosis and treatment they operated within the humoral theory propounded by Galen in the second century and treatments were intended to restore the balance of the four humours and the four elements. She hoped to carry out more research into the decision by the Welsh Manuscript Society to publish the translation ( *The Physicians of Myddfai: Meddygon Myddfai*) by John Pughe and the Rev John Williams ab Ithel from a selection of manuscripts, together with an account of the legend of the Lady of the Lake in 1861.

### **Sunday 30<sup>th</sup>**

A slightly reduced number of members boarded the coach for the final event of the weekend: a visit to the National Botanic Garden of Wales at Llanarthne. We first visited the Apothecaries Hall where the complete contents of an Edwardian chemist's shop have been reinstalled. Here we were met by David Hunter, a retired GP who is a volunteer at the Botanic Garden, convincingly 'in period' behind the shop counter in a white coat, starched collar and splendid moustaches. We were able to look at – and indeed handle – various pills, syrups, powders and tinctures and see how tablets were made. The particularly strong medical contingent in the Cambrians attending the Meeting were soon in deep conversation with David Hunter with reminiscences aplenty. A display in the building of how plants are used worldwide attracted interest and the newly created Apothecary's Garden on the slopes next door still had many plants on bloom and leaf. Free time was also allowed to explore the Garden further, of especial interest to those on their first visit.

The Meeting then closed at noon, with members dispersing by car, coach and train and thanks were expressed to Heather James for its organisation.