

Farming and slate

by Mike Snell

The early history of the Humphreys family



The first authenticated record of the family Humphreys is the marriage of Griffith Humphreys and Catherine Williams at St. Mary's Parish Church, Dolbenmaen in Caernarfonshire, on October 31 1842.

Griffith was born in Llanfihangel-y-Pennant, which is just a few miles up the Cwm Pennant valley from Dolbenmaen. When he married he was a 23-year-old farmer living at Tyddynyfelin in the parish of Penmorfa, while his new wife was living at Glanygors – a small community of several dwellings on the edge of the village of Garn Dolbenmaen – with her farming family, which was led by her father William.

Penmorfa is a small town a few miles south of Garn Dolbenmaen and was, for much of the 19th century, the administrative parish covering many villages in the area, including Garn Dolbenmaen, Dolbenmaen and the Cwm Pennant valley. Up until the 1900s, the area thrived with most people working as servants on the many farms or in the region's slate mines. Today farming is much less labour intensive and slate mining has almost ended. Tourism is now the predominant non-agricultural industry.



“Humphrey, at just 12-years-old, is working in service as a shepherd”

The national census of 1851 shows 34-year-old Catherine living with her young family at nearby Cefn Tryfar. Griffith was living away from home on the day the census was taken; he was a farm labourer at Lynewydd, a 183-acre farm run by Richard Williams. The children were Jane, aged eight, Mary, six, William, four, and two-year-old Humphrey, all of whom were born in the Penmorfa area.

Ten years later, however, the census shows that the family had moved close to Catherine's former home at Glanygors Graianog. Living with Griffith and Catherine are still Mary and William but with two new siblings – Catherine, aged seven, and Ellen, three. Both Jane and Humphrey have left home. Jane, at the age of 18, is now working as a domestic servant for

farmer William Jones and his wife Martha at their 10-acre farm, Brynefail-isaf, in Garn Dolbenmaen. Humphrey, at just 12-years-old, is also working in service as a shepherd at Tyddyn Mawr in the Cwm Pennant valley. The 1871 Census shows just Jane and Mary, who are both unmarried and employed as general servants, living at Glanygors with Griffith and Catherine. Humphrey, who is now aged 22, is still living and working as a farm servant at Tyddyn Mawr.

Intriguing

The most intriguing member of the family recorded in the 1871 Census is a six month old boy, Owen Humphreys, whose relationship to the head of the family (Griffith) is described as “grandson”. In fact, Owen was Jane Humphreys' son and was illegitimate. His birth certificate shows that he was born on 21 September 1870 at Glanygors, and there is no father's name recorded. Neither do we know anything of what happened to his mother, Jane, who does not feature in any subsequent censuses. In 1891 Owen is seen to be living and working at Tyddyn Mawr (where his Uncle Humphrey had worked for so many years) as a 20-year-old farm servant. It is thought that Owen emigrated to the United States in 1895 – sailing on the SS Lucania from Liverpool and arriving on March 16 – as there is no record of him in the 1901 Census.

What of Humphrey Humphreys, who was clearly following in his father's farming footsteps? He married Catherine Jones on 12 October 1878 at Ffestiniog Register Office. Humphrey was 29

and his bride just 21. At the time Humphrey was living at a place called Gilfach, in the Cwm Pennant valley, and Catherine at nearby Blaen y Pennant.

Three years later the family were living at Bryn Glas, Garn Dolbenmaen, and the census of 1881 records Humphrey, who was now aged 31, as a farmer with three-and-a-half acres of land, but whether he owned the property, rented it or was a tenant, is unclear. With Humphrey and



This house is Gilfach, in the beautiful Cwm Pennant valley, where Humphrey Humphreys was living and working when he married.



Catherine was their first child, William, aged two. However, their home was shared with another family – Eleanor Pritchard, aged 33, and her three children. Eleanor was Catherine's married sister and was described in the census as a "farmer's wife", but her husband was clearly not living at home when the census was taken. Eleanor's children were: Samuel, aged five, Owen, aged three and one-year-old William.

Undoubtedly, times were hard for the Humphreys, and for thousands of farm labourers like them in North Wales. Employment options were limited but one industry was booming and might have tempted Humphrey with the possibility of improving the family's position. Slate had been quarried in North Wales for centuries but by the 1890s the industry was at its zenith when half a million tons were produced and nearly 17,000 men were directly employed. Welsh slate was exported all over the world from small ports

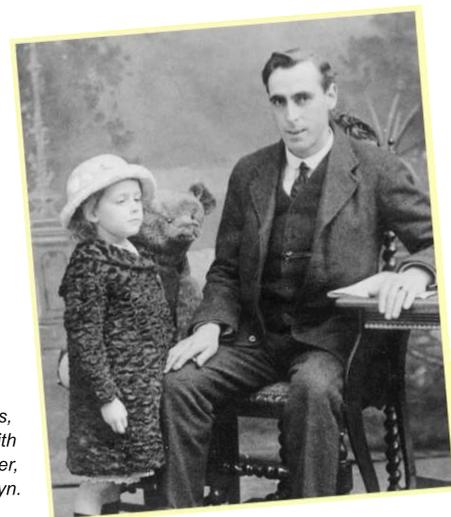
like Porthmadog, or purpose built harbours like Port Dinorwig or Port Penrhyn. The main production areas were around Blaenau Ffestiniog, Bethesda, Llanberis, Nantle, Corris and Llangollen/Glyn Ceiriog, but there were many more smaller mines across the region.

Conditions for the quarrymen were harsh in the extreme and accidents were frequent. Unguarded machinery, roof falls and lung disease all took their toll. Working underground in the slate industry was more dangerous than in coal mining. Health and safety legislation was non-existent. Conditions in the quarry barracks – where men lived throughout the week – were appalling but in spite of this a great spirit of comradeship grew up.

Struck down

Some time after 1881, therefore, Humphrey became a quarryman. There is no record where he was employed, although local sources in Garn Dolbenmaen believe that he would have worked at the big mining centre at Blaenau Ffestiniog. Tragedy

hit the family in November 1890 when Humphrey was struck down by meningitis; he died at home, at the age of 41, and his death was formally registered by his father, Griffith. When he died Catherine was pregnant with the couple's sixth child, Ellen, who was born just a few months later and never knew her father.



Griff Humphreys, pictured with his daughter, Doris Evelyn.



The 1891 Census shows Catherine living alone at Bryn Glas, Garn Dolbenmaen, with her children: William Eifion – now aged 11 and at school, Hugh Griffith (b. 27 December 1881), Griffith (b. 27 June 1884), Elizabeth, familiarly known as Lizzie (b. 3 November 1886), Catherine, familiarly known as Kate (b. 1889) and Ellen J (b. 1891).

Grieving

Living very close by at this time was Evan Jones and, like Catherine, he was grieving for his spouse. Evan was 47 and farmed at Caer Ffynon, and already had a young family – Anne, aged 22, Ellis, 14, Ellen, 12, and Elizabeth, aged 10. Evan and Catherine married in the autumn of 1893 and Caer Ffynon became the new family's home. The 1901 Census records Evan and Catherine, together with a number of children from the Humphreys and Jones sides. These included Hugh, Kate and Ellen Humphreys, and Evan, Margaret and Joseph Jones, who had all been born to Catherine. Also recorded was two-year-old Owen Jones who was Evan's grandson and who was presumably the son of one of Evan's older children. Anne, Ellis, Ellen and Elizabeth Jones had all left home.

By 1901 Griffith Humphreys was a widower, Catherine having died a few years earlier. He was living at Glanygors with his daughter Ellen, who had by now married



Owen Jones, and the couple had an eight-year-old son John. Griffith died of old age at Glanygors on 23 August 1894.

Also by 1901 three of the Humphreys children were already making their own way in the world. The youngest, 14-year-old Lizzie, was working as a general servant for a family in Dolbenmaen village. William had decided to leave Wales and try his luck in Birkenhead on Merseyside as a tea salesman. His 16-year-old brother, Griff, had opted to go with him and the pair lived together in lodgings at 62 Grange Road

*Top: Caer Ffynon, Garn Dolbenmaen.
Above: Catherine Humphreys (left) is pictured with her daughter-in-law Elizabeth Humphreys (née Jones), and her grand-daughter, Thelma Humphreys (sitting, left, next to a friend).*

West. Griff worked as an apprentice joiner.

were married.

William married Mary Elizabeth Parry at St. John's Church, Birkenhead, on New Year's Day 1903, and the young couple lived at 31 Claughton Road. William's brother, Hugh Griffith, was Best Man and had, perhaps, thoughts of a future in the United States already on his mind. William and Mary went on to have four children, Gwyneth, Enid, Arthur and Glyn, and remained settled in Birkenhead until their deaths in 1949 (Mary) and 1956 (William).

Humphrey Humphreys' three remaining children, Hugh Griffith, Elizabeth and Catherine all decided to make their mark much further afield than in England. Firstly, Hugh emigrated to the United States in 1904 (following, it is thought, in the footsteps of his cousin Owen). He eventually settled in New Hartford, in New York state's Oneida County, and founded a successful farming dynasty that continues to thrive today. Elizabeth and Catherine followed their brother some years later and settled with their families in Remsen, a few miles north of New Hartford.

Griff Humphreys also decided to make his future in the Merseyside town. As a young man living on his own he would turn, from time to time, to his local fish and chip shop for a cheap and easy supper. It was here that he met Elizabeth Jones, who worked behind the counter. They also married at St. John's Church on 3 June 1906, but this was a wedding with a difference. Elizabeth's mother Margaret had died some years earlier and her father, John, Married again – to Mary Moore.

Back in Birkenhead, Griff and Elizabeth were starting their own family: Stanley was born in 1907, although he died at the age of six, Doris (b. 1909), Irene (b. 1912), David (b. 1914), Ethel (b. 1919) and Thelma (b. 1921). Irene married a Church of Wales minister, the Rev. Meurig Roberts, and had four sons; David married Eileen Edwards and had two sons and a daughter – all of whom later emigrated to Canada; Ethel married Birkenhead hairdresser George Farnworth and had two daughters; and Thelma married Merchant Navy seaman Ronald Snell and had one son.

Surprised

Elizabeth and Mary didn't particularly get on and she and Griff decided not to tell anyone – particularly Elizabeth's stepmother – about the wedding! Consequently, two surprised passers-by were asked to act as witnesses, including the prosaically named Samuel John Christmas McDiarmid! Griff had been living at 53 Exmouth Street and Elizabeth at 177 Grange Road when they

The Humphreys family, pictured **below right** circa 1930s: **1**, Ella Jones (wife of Evan Jones); **2** Gwyneth Humphreys (daughter of William Humphreys); **3** Evan Stanley Humphreys; **4**, William Humphreys; **5**, the Rev. John Roberts; **6**, Owen Jones (step-grandson of Catherine Jones); **7**, Arthur Humphreys (son of William Humphreys); **8**, Elizabeth Humphreys (wife of Griffith Humphreys); **9**, Griffith Humphreys; **10**, Hugh Humphreys; **11**, Catherine Jones; **12**, Ellen Roberts; **13**, Evan Jones; **14**, Mary Humphreys (wife of William Humphreys); **15**, Buddug Humphreys (wife of Evan Stanley Humphreys); **16** and **17**, Richard and Evan Humphreys (sons of Evan Stanley Humphreys); **18**, Unknown; **19**, Huw Jones (son of Owen Jones); **20**, Llywela Jones (wife of Owen Jones).

