

THE DOLGELLAU PLYGAIN – in the 1840s

This description appeared in a publication called *Bye-gones*, published in Oswestry. It is one of the most detailed description that exists from this period. The article was published in 1895, but the reminiscences come from the time of William Payne's boyhood in Dolgellau. In the last paragraph, he states that "all my old friends have passed away". Assuming that people at that time lived, on average, until their 60s, we can calculate that W.P. was a boy around the 1840s (unless all his friends died unusually young!).

PLYGAIN.—DOLGELLEY WHEN I WAS A BOY (Jan. 9, 30, Feb. 6, 20, Aug. 21, 1895).—Referring to your paper of Aug. 21, under this head, the following lines may be apropos:—We used to think very highly of the then ugly old church at Dolgelley—not ugly to us—magnificent to us at Christmas, when decked with holly and extemporised chandeliers for the Plygain, for memory carries me back to those pure and simple times, when the Church was innocent of worshiping by artificial light except at the Plygain, when two large hoops were decked with holly, and fitted all round concealed by leaves stood innumerable little tin sconces, which held candles. These hoops, suspended by long ropes from the roof, were the chandeliers—until Dissent and the spirit of innovation drove the parson (the Rev Henry Weir White, afterwards Archdeacon of Merioneth) to have a night service (a third), when sumptuous chandeliers in brass appeared, adorned with the names of the Churchwardens. As the old Roman officers used to say—"So and so, being Consuls," it was with us, "So and so, being Churchwardens."

Now for the Plygain. The ecclesiastical glory of the year, the triumph of Church worship, was the Plygain. What splendour in dressing! What splendour in burning and glowing dips! What new carols, and who would be among the new carol singers, who so venturesome and brave—the new carols of the old singers! What football matches were to come off after church? Whom would Dr. Williams invite to his Christmas breakfast? What doles would be made on Christmas Eve? I see old Mrs Griffiths standing on the top of a large inverted iron boiler by Watkin Anwyl's shop, with a crowd of old people around, to whom she is doling out coppers, and I hear the cries of "Bendith Dduw i chwi" from the many, as a pound of copper spread satisfaction within and without Mrs Griffiths.

Now is the appointed morning. Just after five the church bells (eight) ring out, the sound of many feet, and laughs and shouts are heard in the streets. Now come into town from miles and miles around (for our parish is thirteen or fourteen miles long), old and young, Churchmen and Dissenters (Oh, the blessed day of peace, for even theology throws off its rancours for the Plygain), now the church is in a blaze, now crammed, body, aisles, gallery, now Shon Robert, the club-footed shoemaker, and his wife, descending from the singing seat to the lower and front part of the gallery, strike up alternately, and with brave voices loud and strong, without artificial aid of pitch pipe, the long long carol and old favourite, describing the 'Worship of Kings, and of the Wise Men, and the Flight into Egypt, and the terrible wickedness of Herod. The crowds are wholly silent and rapt in admiration.

Then the good Rector, and his Curate, David Pugh, stand up, and read the Morning Service abbreviated, finishing with the prayer for All Conditions of Men, and the benediction—restless and somewhat surging is the congregation during prayers—the Rector obliged sometimes to stop short in his office and look direct at some part or persons, but no verbal admonishment.

Prayers over, the singers begin again more carols, new singers, old carols in solos, duetts, trios, choruses, then silence in the audience, broken at appropriate pauses by the suppressed hum of delight and approval, till between eight and nine, hunger telling on the singers, the Plygain is over, and the Bells strike out a round peal.

The oat cakes in the Browas, the swig, the strong ales, the cakes, the cold meats, are soon being ravenously devoured at Dr Williams's, and all his neighbours' houses, far and wide, the young ones afterwards going to football and ball playing, the older ones criticising the carols till church time and dinner come round, when feasting finishes the day. Who were the company at Nannau, who spending Christmas at Caerynwch, who was at Dr Williams' Browas Breakfast this year?—was discussed the next day. His was the leading breakfast, and the only time when that worthy displayed his greatest hospitality. Was Mr Jones, the lawyer, was Dr Evans, was Mr Payne, were Mr Ellis Rees and Mr Roberts of Caerynwch, was Mr Robert Jones the tanner, was Mr Evan Jones of the Swan, was Mr Richard Williams of the Skinner's Arms, were young David Pugh and Owen Jones (John's brother, my old friend)? Who was there? Who was absent? Any one? Any new friend? Did the Browas maintain its character? Did the ale? Was anyone so degenerate as to ask for tea from the women in the kitchen or their parlours? Also how many pheasants Jack of Penybank had killed before the 1st of October. These questions and the weight, quality, and price of various fat geese consumed the day before—for the goose was the orthodox dinner, or the key-stone of the arch—these questions were fully discussed over pipes and ale.

Such was Christmas time spent in that dear old town when I was a boy. All my old friends have passed away. May they rest in peace.

Plygains were Plygains in those days.

WILLIAM PAYNE.

Southsea.