

The Six Welsh Catholic martyrs

This is the story of the brave men who died for their faith.



RICHARD GWYNN



JOHN JONES



JOHN ROBERTS



PHILIP EVANS



JOHN LLOYD



DAVID LEWIS



They all suffered cruel and harsh executions.
This account gives graphic details of persecution
at the hands of their barbaric and sadistic torturers.

Introduction

from Peter Tennyson, Author

This is my story as a Welsh Catholic seeking his roots. I was born in Swansea and baptised in St David's Priory. When I was six years old my mother died, then lived with my Dad's Irish family in Liverpool, later attending St Edward's College. There I was nicknamed "Taffy" because of my Welsh birth but I knew little about the land I came from as a young child.

My main association with my heritage was through Saint David who was the patron saint of Wales. Not far from Liverpool, across the Welsh border, is Holywell, where St Winifred was martyred. These saints were in the forefront of my memory, through my Welsh connection, more about them later in this narrative.

Pope Paul VI canonised 40 English Martyrs in 1970 submitted by Cardinal Godfrey, whose nephew, Maurice was in my class at school. Amongst them were six Welshmen, who I came across in Butler's "Lives of the Saints". I was given this book when I passed the 11+, by Mrs

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Peter Tennyson, age 11+

Bridget Barry, who had inspirational faith, the mother of 2 priests, one was an army padre killed in action in 1944.

These Welshmen suffered martyrdom almost a century apart. Persecution of Catholics continued from when King Henry VIII broke from Rome until the so called "Popish Plot". In the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, it became high treason to attend a Mass when she enforced the Protestant religion. Richard Gwyn, a layman, poet and teacher refused to conform and was cruelly executed. 14 years later a Franciscan monk from Caernarvon, John Jones, suffered for his fearlessness, he was brutally tortured and executed. Priests continued to be persecuted when King James VI, ascended the throne. This fate fell upon John Roberts, a Benedictine priest in 1610.

On Titus Oates's testimony, the "Popish Plot" to assassinate King Charles II, in 1678, was fabricated. John Lloyd from Brecon was falsely accused, along with another priest, Philip Evans. They were executed in Cardiff. While soon afterwards, in Usk, the last martyr was David Lewis. Despite their heroic bravery all these martyrs had continued to practice their faith under the threat of persecution, refusing repeatedly to accede to the draconian laws that restricted Catholics from practising their religion while demanding they follow the new creed.

To my parent's memory, Frank and Greta nee Phillips.

WELSH MARTYR 1

Richard Gwyn



Richard was married supporting a family as a schoolteacher. He first came into conflict as a Catholic with the authorities in his home town of Llanidloes. In 1579, he was arrested and jailed in Wrexham but escaped, remaining a fugitive for 18 months. Richard returned to the town when he went to find a priest with an urgent message. An old adversary David Edwards observed him, whose servants overcame Richard after a scuffle. He was put in irons and thrown into the "black chamber" to await trial. A justice of the peace ordered he be confined in Ruthin Castle, where he was again manacled.

Richard was offered freedom if he would disclose the Catholic parents whose children he taught, refusing to attend the Anglican services and so he was returned in chains.

By Christmas 1580, Richard, with other prisoners, were detained in Wrexham Jail, where he was held in manacles night and day. Brought before the Chief Justice, Sir George Bromley at the Assizes, he ordered Richard to be taken forcibly to church. He resisted was then charged with brawling, being sentenced to spend days in the stocks. Nor would he pay fines imposed on him, which infuriated Bromley, who confined him to Denbigh Castle.

In the Spring 1582, Richard and two other Catholic prisoners returned from there to face the next Assizes. Again all three refused to conform, they were taken to Bridgnorth Castle where they were subjected to more torture. Their interrogators brought them before Sir George Bromley, who declared “these wretches should be hanged like dogs”.

Then in October 1584, these three prisoners were arraigned before the Assizes, charged under the Treason Act. The jury unconvinced by the contradictions in the perjured evidence used against them.

Sir George, the judge threatened them with dire consequences if they did not pronounce Gwyn guilty. He then sentenced him to be hung, drawn and quartered.

On the day of his execution, many wept as he left the prison including his gaoler who came to admire him. Richard’s wife and children received his blessing before he was taken to Wrexham Market for his execution. There he died in great agony as his disembowelling was botched by this gaoler. After the cruelty of his death those who had tormented him were the afflicted with great stress. Sir George Bromley months later lost his reason, becoming an idiot.

WELSH MARTYR 2

John Jones



He was next martyr in that Elizabethan period. Born in 1530 on the Llyn Peninsula close to the pilgrimage church of St Bueno, his original birth name was Griffith Jones. Coming from a staunch Catholic family who maintained their faith he entered the Franciscan Convent in Greenwich but on its dissolution in 1559, during King Henry VIII’s reign, fleeing to France to continue his vocation.

He embarked on his mission to England after ordination as a priest in 1585. Despite risking capture, through greater danger, John evangelised the Catholic faith, returning to continue his mission, in Elizabeth’s reign. This time he was caught and held in Wisbech Castle for over three years.

It was seen as subversion as many Catholics supported the alternative claim of Mary, Queen of Scots to the throne held by her cousin, Queen Elizabeth. She had placed her “rival under house arrest” for 20 years, until she had Mary executed in 1587, conspired by Francis Walsingham’s false concoctions against her.

Captured priests faced severe punishment but John Jones returned twice to England. More suspicion fell on Catholics as the Spanish Armada threatened to invade. He was a missionary of many disguises using eight different names to thwart his captors during these missions. Under the pseudonym of Robert Buckley, he was caught and awaited trial in Marshalsea goal. However, John, now aged 60, escaped from detention, returning to France in 1590.

He now resided in Rome at the Ara Coeli amongst his fellow friars. Such was his determination to continue his missionary work that he sought an audience with Pope Clement VIII for approval to return for which he received the papal embrace. The Pontiff told John, “Go, because I believe you are the true son of St Francis. Pray to God for me and for his Holy Church”.

Without fear of the dreadful fate facing him, Friar John made another

heroic journey. He ministered to Catholics, known as “recusants”, still practising their religion secretly in England. This was under the vigilance of Francis Walsingham, the chief spymaster supervised by William Cecil on the Queen’s behalf. Under this sinister secret service Richard Topcliffe operated, this grim man was a notorious torturer with a hatred of Catholics.

Friar John returned to England in 1592 to serve Catholics secretly holding Mass. Against this background, John used his various aliases, moving from place to place. Nevertheless, when holding Mass in the home of two adherents, after a tip-off, John was captured by Topcliffe. He underwent the rack and was subject to severe beatings in the torturer’s home interrogating him about his activities as a priest but the friar endured these barbarities with great bravery.

Friar John was kept in Marshalsea Prison again, with other fellow prisoners, imprisoned along with John Rigby, who was reconciled with his own Catholic faith, inspired by the Welshman’s fortitude and persuasion. He was cared for by Jane Wiseman, who attended to his wounds. All three were to suffer martyrdom. After two years imprisonment John Jones was tried under the Treason Act,

sentenced to be hung, drawn and quartered. This was to be carried out in Southwark on 12th July 1598 when the execution was to be early in the morning to avoid a riot.

A large crowd gathered at what is now the Old Kent Road but the executioner failed to bring a rope for the hanging. John used his powerful oratory on the assembled throng to declare his loyalty but why he remained true to his faith despite facing death. The hangman returned with his rope as the bystanders were enthralled by John's preaching. Many in the crowd were more touched by his prayers for them than by the false testimony of his torturer, Topcliffe.

After the noose was placed around John's neck as the executioner went to drive the horses away, from under the gibbet, several men attempted to hold them back to hear John's entreaties. The execution continued and John's dismembered body placed was on poles around the area. These remains were retrieved as relics by fellow Catholics, one of whom was imprisoned for his act. Some were returned to Pontoise where John had trained for the priesthood after his first exile. He was the last Welsh martyr to be martyred for allegedly plotting in the reign of Elizabeth. Now he has his own feast day, commemorated 12th July, the day of his execution.

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The long reign of Elizabeth was followed by the coronation of James VI of Scotland, the son of her rival Mary. Now to be King James I of England, unifying the two kingdoms but this brought no respite for those of the Catholic faith. Enter a new priest who was to be the third Welsh martyr.

WELSH MARTYR 3

John Roberts



Born in Merionethshire, John converted to Catholicism, when he went with another student to Notre Dame, Paris in 1603. After he studied law at Oxford, graduating to the Inns of Court in London. John Cecil, an English priest, advised him to enter the English College, Douai in 1598.

The next year he joined the Abbey of St. Benedict, made his novitiate at Santiago de Compostela. John made

his profession and was ordained in 1600. He set out for England in 1602, although observed by a Government spy. With his companions, they managed to enter the country but were arrested and banished.

John Roberts arranged to return to England, working among the plague victims in London In 1604. He left Spain with four postulants but was arrested again. He was not recognised as a priest but was banished once more. Undaunted, he returned to England this time in 1605. He was detained in the house of Thomas Percy, involved in the Gunpowder Plot. John was found not guilty of being involved but was imprisoned in Westminster for seven months, then exiled in July 1606.

He spent most of the next fourteen months at Douai where he founded and became the first Prior of English Benedictine Monks. They had entered through Spanish monasteries, before he began St Gregory's Monastery at Douai. John Roberts returned to England in October 1607 when two months later, he was again arrested.

This time he was locked in the Gatehouse but escaped, living in London for about a year. His liberty was cut short when he was arrested in May 1609 and taken to Newgate Prison. He now faced execution,

only for the French Ambassador, Antoine de la Broderie to intercede on his behalf when his sentence was reduced to banishment. John Roberts visited Spain and Douai but returned to England within the year. He was captured once more on December 2nd, 1610, when finishing Mass while still wearing his vestments. He was incarcerated again in Newgate.

He faced a speedy trial and found guilty. Ministering to God's poor people in England would cost him his life. On 10th December, he was hung, drawn and quartered at Tyburn. Many observed in stony silence because of the good work he had done for them. Although his body was recovered and taken to St Gregory's, Douai, it disappeared during the French Revolution. John Roberts' feast day is 25th October.

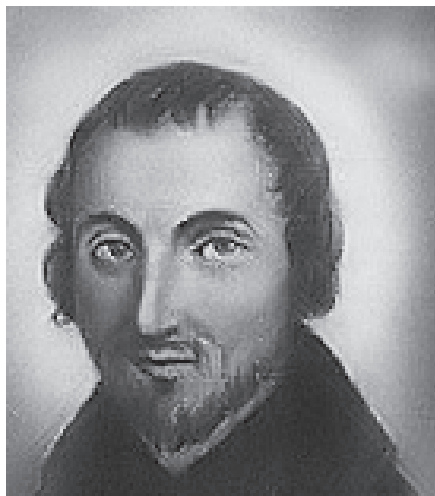
It seems another era since the early Welsh martyrs gave their lives for their faith. It was nearly 80 years later when fanaticism over Popish plots reared up again. Due to Titus Oates whose treachery led to the Gordon Riots when he made false allegations that there was a plot by Catholics and Jesuits in particular to assassinate King Charles II.

A Catholic priest, Father Huddleston had saved King Charles' life after the Battle of Worcester. He became

The Queen and his late mother's chaplain, both were practising Catholics but King Charles did not intervene over the actions resulting from Titus Oates's falsehoods with others involved.

WELSH MARTYR 4

Philip Evans



The first victim was a Jesuit priest, Philip Evans. Born in Monmouthshire in 1645, he studied at the English College at Saint-Omer, under the Jesuit order. Afterwards, he joined the Society of Jesus when 20 years old. Later ordained in Liege he was sent to the English Mission in 1675, serving 4 years in South Wales, working amongst his community with diligence. He was fearless in caring, with zeal and charity, for the Catholics entrusted to him.

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Fr Philip refused to leave Wales when persecution of Catholics under the Titus Oates plot intensified in 1678 because his false accusations were made, in particular, against the Jesuits. The government normally offered a reward of £50 for the arrest of a Jesuit, but the local Welsh magistrate, a rabid Calvinist, offered an additional £200 for his arrest. Despite this threat, he remained as Christopher Turberville's chaplain. Philip Evans was arrested by the constables in Sker, Glamorgan for refusing to take the oaths of allegiance and supremacy. He remained in solitary confinement in an underground cell, then taken to Cardiff Castle where he joined Fr. John Lloyd, a diocesan priest.

Because the prosecution could not find witnesses to testify, their trial was delayed for five months until May 1679. Eventually, under duress a woman and daughter claimed they had received the sacraments from the Jesuit. Both priests were found guilty and sentenced to be hanged, drawn and quartered but their executions were deferred. They were allowed to exercise but during a tennis match, he received news the next day they would be executed. He asked if they could finish the match but this was denied and so he took his harp back in his prison cell. He sang his praise to God, elated by the news, over his calling him to be a martyr.

On July 22nd, the sheriff took both priests to be executed in Gallows Field near Cardiff. When Philip mounted the ladder at the gallows, he said, "This is the best pulpit a man can have to preach in, therefore, I cannot forbear to tell you again that I die for God and our religion's sake." He was 34 years old and was one of the many Jesuits to be martyred in England and Wales.

WELSH MARTYR 5

John Lloyd

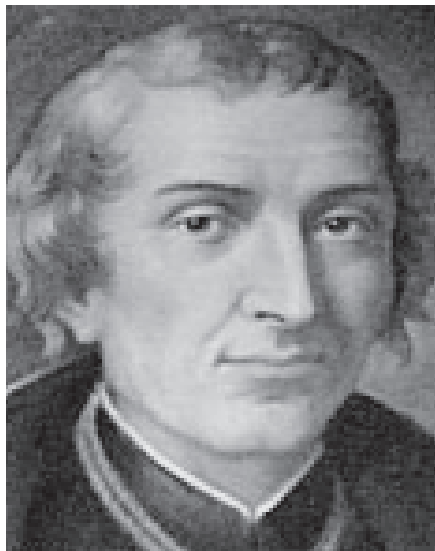


Born about 1830, little is known about John Lloyd's early life. He entered the seminary in 1649 at Valladolid, later ordained a priest in 1653. John left to mission in his native Wales in 1654, here he attracted John Arnold's attention, a justice of the peace who pursued him. Many Catholics lived in Treivor and Llantillo, where he said Mass, as well as Penrhos. He was captured and confined in Cardiff Castle in the same dungeon as Fr Philip Evans. Arnold's allegations against them arose from the Popish plot persecutions.

Although many Catholics were brutally treated in an attempt to make them testify that they had witnessed these two priests performing their sacred functions, none did. Later, an old lady was bribed into testifying against him, on false evidence, John Lloyd was condemned on the sole ground of his priesthood. He had to witness the barbarous sentence of death carried out on his companion priest, Father Philip Evans, SJ. On the scaffold, in Gallows Field, he proclaimed his own faith simply, asking forgiveness of anyone he may have offended, urged his fellow Catholics, saying to bear their sufferings with patience. "I never was a good speaker in my life." He was a true man of God.

WELSH MARTYR 6

David Lewis



The last Welsh martyr to suffer the same fate also a victim of the vile Titus Oates's false accusations, was David Lewis. During his 31 years from 1616 to 1647 as a missionary in South Wales, Fr. David was known to the faithful as Tad y Tlodion, "Father of the Poor." A native of Wales, Lewis came from a mixed marriage, his Protestant father and Catholic mother whose brother was a Jesuit priest. He studied law in London, while on a long visit to Paris, he became a Catholic. After his parents died during an epidemic, he went to Rome, enrolling at the English College, where he was ordained and entered the Jesuit order in 1645.

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Fr David returned to Wales but despite his good work, he was arrested and brought to London. A couple who had been Catholics turned him in; he was arrested just as he was about to begin Mass in November 1678. Other witnesses claimed they had seen him say Mass and perform other priestly duties. Interrogated with John Kemble from Hereford about the "plot" by Oates in London's Newgate Prison. With his fellow conspirators William Bedloe, Stephen Dugdale and Miles Prance, they were unable to prove anything against them. Lord Shaftesbury advised them to give evidence about the "plot" or renounced their Catholic faith, to be spared. Again Fr David refused to co-operate, he was condemned to death by Sir Robert Atkyns.

He was brought to Usk in Monmouthshire, to be executed, carried out under John Arnold's direction on August 1679. The Sheriff, who admired Fr David's good works, kept postponing his execution, refusing to attend it. Before he was to be hanged Fr David prayed at the Gunter Mansion. At the gallows, he spoke so well of his commitment to Catholic faith that the crowd were moved, even the executioner feared they could stone him if he killed the priest.

In his dying speech, Fr David pleaded “discover the plot I could not, as I knew of none; and conform I would not, for it was against my conscience”. His last words were: “I speak not as a murderer, thief or such-like malefactor, but as a Christian, and therefore am not ashamed”. The hangman fled the scene then a blacksmith was paid to take his place. In a tribute to the esteem in which Fr David was held by the mainly Protestant crowd, they insisted that he should hang until he was dead and receive a proper burial. The blacksmith finished the execution but posthumously disembowelled him.

Titus Oates’s testimony was finally discredited but this man who caused such unrest and false testimony later faced a backlash for the fifteen executions of innocent priests after the plot he fabricated. Following this conspiracy, the last remaining Welsh-speaking Catholic clergy were executed or exiled. David Lewis was the last Welshman to become a Jesuit until 2001, more than 300 years later.

These Welshmen are now no longer hidden amongst the other worthy English martyrs but revered in their own right. When they were all raised to sainthood on 25th October 1970, this remains their feast day. The memory of these Six Welsh Martyrs are honoured in Wales; some with

their own feast days. What these early Welsh martyrs went through for their faith was instilled in them from the days of earliest saints of Wales, for which both truth and legend exist.

We can ask why these continued to be more famous and renowned, when they lived so many years before lesser known martyrs. St David and St Winifred are celebrated in the places that take names commemorating their saintly deeds. A city as well as cathedrals are named after St David while the town called Holywell is the place of St Winifred’s martyrdom. She was of royal lineage.





St. David

Born in Ceredigion around 500 AD, his mother was St Non. St David was educated in Cardigan. Afterwards, he went to Glastonbury, where he rededicated the abbey. He returned to Wales to found his own in which he urged his monks to lead a simple life of hard work and prayer. He moved the seat of the church's government from Caerleon to Mynyw, which became the Cathedral City of St. David's, later a place for pilgrims to visit to his shrine throughout the Middle Ages.

During those days, the heresy of Pelagius grew, which denied original sin and to live without God's grace. Along with St Augustine of Hippo, St. David too strongly resisted this heresy spreading into Wales. He presided over the synod declaring the doctrine wrong. He was acclaimed as a renowned preacher, being the symbol of unity throughout the land of his birth.

St. David was elected as a bishop, he notably performed miracles. He raised a dead child back to life and aided an old blind man regain his sight. A strange occurrence was when

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the ground rose up as large hill when he stood speaking to a big crowd.

He famously lead the army into battle ordering his troops to pick leeks from a field. Worn in their hats, they distinguished themselves from their enemies, leading them to victory. This tradition is still followed by the Welsh Guards on St David's Day. He was canonised by Pope Calixtus II in 1120 AD, recognised now as the patron saint of Wales. He died in 589 AD, leaving his message, "be joyful and keep the faith".

Another Welsh town, far to the north from South West Wales, by its significant connection with a female saint, is Holywell in North East Wales. It bears that name, following the martyrdom of St. Winifred. The link through Holywell was associated later Lourdes in France. Her name in Welsh is Guenevra which in the anglicised form is now Winifred.

St. Winifred

St Winifred was a princess. She was the daughter Tewyth, the ruler of Flintshire. Her mother, Gwenlo was the sister of St Bueno. Winifred was born only 11 years after the death of St. David but claims are made that her life was legendary because of the events surrounding her. She was a maiden of great personal charm and with rare gift of intellect.

With her parent's consent, she wished to lead a life of piety, strongly influenced by her Uncle Bueno. At the age of 15 she devoted herself to virtue. She prepared to dedicate herself to God with great austerity. Her fame and accomplishments were becoming widely known. Caradoc, son of Prince Alen, a nearby ruler, resolved to marry her.

He approached her at home while she was alone and pleaded with Winifred to be his wife. Frightened by his vehement passion, she fled from the house towards the chapel, where parents were at Mass being said by her Uncle Bueno. Consumed by rage, Caradoc pursued her. What happened next for this forthcoming virgin and martyr is claimed by to be mythical. Caradoc caught her near the chapel and drew his sword, severing her head with one blow.

Where her head fell, a spring gushed forth. Hearing her cries of anguish, her parents rushed out of the chapel, with Bueno covering her body with his cloak. He retrieved her head, which had rolled away, placing them together he restored her life. Winifred bore a scar around her neck all her life. As Bueno chastised Caradoc, the murderer fell dead. Winifred's father, Tewyth established a convent on his land where she became abbess and more nuns joined her, where Holywell is built.

During that time the Saxons made inroads into Wales, driving Britons more inland. Winifred went on pilgrimage beyond the Vale of Conway. She met St. Elwy at Gwytherin, who wrote her life story. She remained there with the nuns who went with her, 15 years after she was miraculously saved by her Uncle Bueno. St. Winifred died in 660 AD, prior to her death witnessed by her followers, she had a vision of Christ. The original holywell continued as a place of pilgrimage until it was destroyed in the Reformation. St. Winifred remains the Patroness of Wales and her feast day is 3rd November.

Llandaff Cathedral, near Cardiff with over 50 churches, many schools, colleges, a university and a hospital in Wales are dedicated to St. David such is the high regard the Welsh people have for him. There are numerous schools named after St. Winifred including one close by Holywell in St. Asaph and in Swansea attended by my youngest sister, Marie.

Most memorably, the St. Winifred's school choir from Stockport made the Christmas No.1 in 1980, recording *Grandma* also with Brian and Michael on *Match stalk men*. In 1990, *Better World* was a hit song for Mother Teresa's charity in India.



ST WINIFRED
FEAST DAY: 3RD NOVEMBER



ST DAVID
FEAST DAY: 1ST MARCH

Returning to the Six Welsh Martyrs, schools and churches are named after them. Therefore this story is in recognition of their pupils and teachers plus the congregation. They are:

St. Richard Gwyn Catholic High schools in Barry and Flint;

St. John Lloyd RC Comprehensive School, Llanelli;

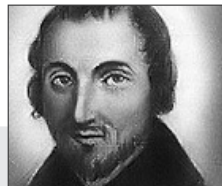
St. Philip Evans RC Primary School, Cardiff. (St. David Lewis School, Newport is now closed).

The Church of Our Lady and **St. Richard Gwyn**, Llanidloes (his birthplace)

St. John Lloyd Church, Trowbridge, Cardiff.



RICHARD GWYNN

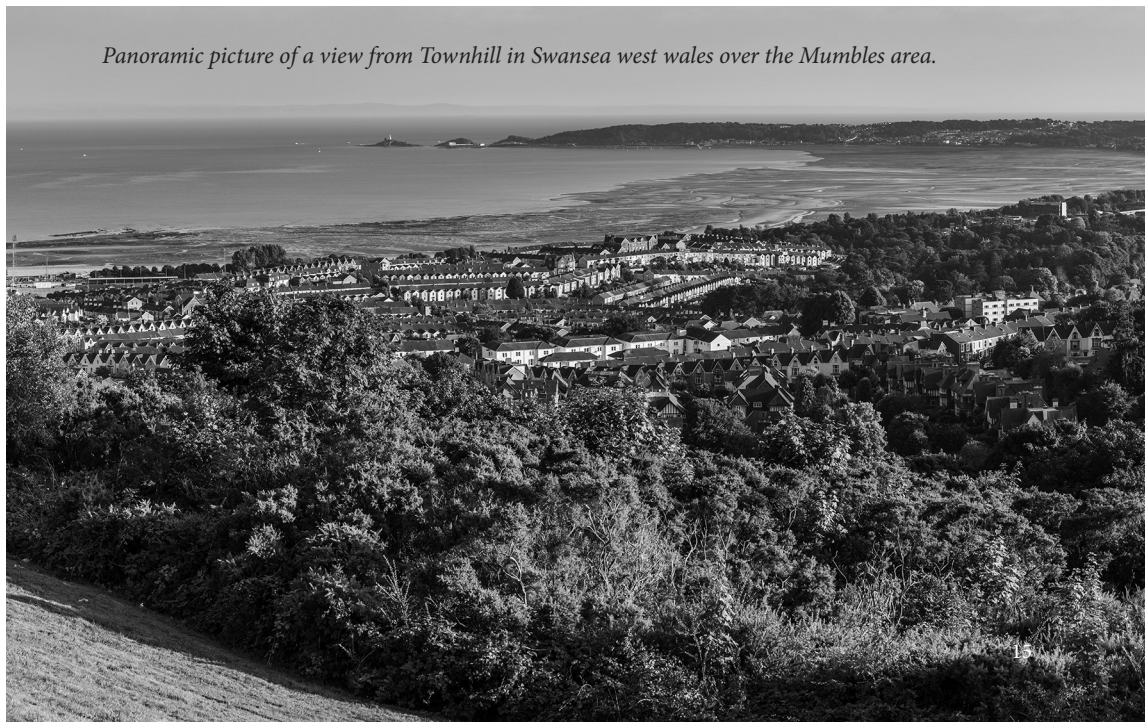


PHILIP EVANS



JOHN LLOYD

Panoramic picture of a view from Townhill in Swansea west Wales over the Mumbles area.





Peter Tennyson, age 88

This story was written by Peter Tennyson, a parishioner at St. John the Evangelist Church, Gravesend, Kent and a formerly of St. Edwards College (Catholic Institute), Liverpool.

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