

## Englynion on gravestones

*We all know that the heavy hand of the nineteenth century has left a deep impression on our church buildings. The same is true of our churchyards as well, writes Lyn Dafis*



John Thomas (1838-1905), Grave of David and Jane Thomas, Glanrhyd, Llanfair Clydogau, c.1875 (National Library of Wales)

Until the beginning of the nineteenth century not much attention was given to memorials and tombs in churchyards after burial. After all, the dead were in a much better place. But gradually they became to be seen as a link between the living family and the deceased. Visiting graves became more common and so a programme of renovation and improvement followed.

Grief became more public and this was reflected in more emotional and flowery inscriptions. These were used to pay tribute to the deceased rather than warning the living to be ready for the 'day'. At this time the practice of placing verses, or more specifically *englynion*, Welsh-language, strict-meter, four-line elegies became common on gravestones and monuments. *Englynion* are written following the rules of *cynghanedd* a singularly Welsh form of poetics. It is estimated that there are over 25,000 *englynion* on graves worldwide.

Over the years a number of enthusiasts have collected and published these *englynion*. As we read them we are transported to a world of different attitudes towards grief and remembrance.

Here is an example from the churchyard of S. David's Church, Capel Bangor. It is on the gravestone of David Edwards, Darren Office, in the parish of Llanbadarn Fawr who died on 25 April 1870 aged 31.

Dygodd y Darfodedigaeth — Dewi  
I dŷ oer marwolaeth;  
Ond Duw er gwell o'r gell gaeth,  
A'i dwg uwch llygredigaeth.

[Tuberculosis brought Dewi [i.e. David] to the cold house of death; but God for better will take him from that cell of captivity to a place above corruption.]

Another example is the *englyn* on the memorial to Thomas Blackwell in St. John's churchyard, Ysbyty Cynfyn who died on 4 August 1872 aged 67.

Mae'n ddistaw hunaw fan hon — ŵr astud,  
Oedd ddirwestwr cyson;  
Un mwynaidd llariaidd a llon,  
Digroester a da gristion.

[A diligent man lies quietly in this place, he was a consistent abstainer; a gentle and humble one full of joy; kind and a good Christian.]

It is wonderful tribute to an individual and that's perhaps why it was recycled and used on other memorials in the area according to Dr Euronwy James' research.

You will probably find an *englyn* or two on gravestones in most churchyards in St Davids diocese, except for those parishes located below the Landsker in Pembrokeshire and Carmarthenshire.

If you are interested in learning more about *englynion* on gravestones then there is a very interesting Facebook public group, Englyn Bedd. It is associated with a Twitter account, @EnglynBedd.

### Further reading

- M. Euronwy James, *Englynion beddau Ceredigion* (Gomer, 1983)
- Sarah Rutherford, *The Victorian cemetery* (Shire Publications, 2008)
- Trevor Yorke, *Gravestones, tombs and memorials* (Britain's Living History). (Countryside Books, 2010)