

Introduction & Patrons

There are nine Welsh bardic poems that refer to members of Blanche Parry's family. One poem, by Guto'r Glyn, gives the family's definitive pedigree:

Siôn (John) → Harri → Gruffudd → Harri Ddu → Miles ap Harri → Henry Myles.

The bards concerned are:

Guto'r Glyn
Gwilym Tew
Hywel Dafi (Howel)
Huw Cae Llwyd
Lewys Morgannwg

Welsh poetry is not as widely known as it should be and its importance in providing primary evidence concerning Blanche's family has not previously been appreciated. The songs of the bards, which were often accompanied on a harp, were part of the culture of Blanche's family. Those in attendance heard the poems at Raglan Castle, where there were resident bards, and at Newcourt itself, a house which was a part of the bardic circuit. Many bards were involved but those with specific references to Blanche's immediate family were Guto'r Glyn, who was flourishing from 1430s-1493, Gwilym Tew 1460-1480, Hywel Dafi 1450-1480, Huw Cae Llwyd 1431-1504, and Lewys Morgannwg 1520-1565 [1]. In manuscript form the following songs / poems are written in 15th-16th century Welsh. Here they are given in modern Welsh each with a literal English translation.

Bardic verse dates from the first mention of a post-Roman bard in the mid-5th century. In the 6th century Taliesin and Aneirin, who created the *Gododdin*, were the first bards whose names are known. Indeed, it is Taliesin who is considered the founding father of the praise tradition, which depicted an ideal of warlike characteristics with personal largesse towards retainers [2]. The Welsh bards' songs / poems were written in particular rhyming patterns. The standard form by the 15th century was the *cywydd*, plural *cywyddau*, which was in a strict metre, of seven-syllable lines where the end-rhyme was alternately stressed and unstressed. Another popular form was the *awdl*, plural *awdlau*, a long poem composed in one of twenty-four strict metres which employed *cynganedd* (harmony), an arrangement of sound using alliteration, rhyme and stress.

The tradition of declaiming epics as after-dinner-entertainment that incorporated the serious intent of preserving the people's history and traditions, originated at least as early as the Iron Age but those verses did not survive the Roman occupation when the educated classes preferred Greek and Roman tales of heroism. The 'new' post-Roman bards could be attached to the various regional courts but they were often also itinerant, receiving great respect wherever they went. Such status persisted into the late Mediaeval period. A visiting bard was usually placed in a seat of honour next to his host at the high table on the dais at the end of the hall. His poetry could be appreciated by everyone and especially by his patrons, which provides proof for the households being Welsh-speaking. The tradition ended when increasing anglicisation of the ruling classes meant that the noble families, who had hitherto supported the bards, no longer understood and/or sufficiently valued Welsh. Conversely the fact that bards celebrated Blanche's great-grandfather, grandfather and father meant that Welsh was their first language and, therefore, the language of Blanche's home. The nomenclature of her brother showed that this Welsh influence was still there in her childhood, even though her mother was English.

The patrons of the bards were all-important. These included the families of Herbert, Stradling, and the Vaughans of Tretower, as well as Blanche's family.

Sir William Herbert was pre-eminent among these patrons. He was the son of Sir William ap Thomas of Raglan and Gwladys, daughter of the Dafydd Gam mentioned by William Shakespeare in *Henry V*. Their effigies can still be seen in Saint Mary's Priory Church, Abergavenny. Sir William was, therefore, the half-brother of Sir Roger Vaughan of Tretower. In 1459 he married Anne Devereux.

Sir William had been captured in France in 1450 at the Battle of Formigny and presumably ransomed. He was knighted soon after and was able to start rebuilding Raglan Castle with the proceeds of the cross-Channel trade, including Gascon wine, that he shipped to Bristol. He had evidently not decided on his political allegiance as he did not fight for the Yorkist cause at Ludford Bridge in October 1459. He was rewarded for this by the government of the Lancastrian King Henry VI by being made Sheriff of Glamorgan and Constable of Usk Castle in 1460. However, Richard Duke of York was executed in December 1460 after his defeat at the Battle of Wakefield. His son was Edward Earl of March, soon to be King Edward IV, and the most powerful of the marcher lords. Herbert joined him in time to be so instrumental in the decisive Yorkist victory at the Battle of Mortimer's Cross in Herefordshire in 1461, that he was created Baron Herbert of Raglan. In 1462, the year he became a Knight of the Garter, Henry Tudor, later King Henry VII, became his ward. Herbert consolidated North Wales for King Edward IV and was rewarded by being made Chief Justice of North Wales in 1467. In 1468 the value of his military support was recognised when King Edward created him the Earl of Pembroke (1st creation).

Surviving accounts show that when he was not on official or military duties William Herbert was at Raglan Castle throughout the late 1450s and 1460s. The bard Guto'r Glyn entertained him there, describing the Great Tower which *stands above all other buildings*. Herbert rebuilt the gatehouse and laid out new courtyards on a magnificent scale, the bard Dafydd Llwyd describing the castle as having a *hundred rooms filled with festive fair* [3].

However, William Herbert's acumen for being on the winning side finally deserted him in July 1469 when he was defeated at the Battle of Edgecote and then executed by the Earl of Warwick. He was buried in Tintern Abbey. His brother Sir Richard Herbert of Coldbrook, also a patron of the bards, was beheaded at the same time and is buried in Saint Mary's, Abergavenny in the place Sir William in his Will had chosen for himself. One of the earl's three known illegitimate sons was William Herbert of Troy who married, secondly, Blanche the daughter of Simon Milborne and sister of Alice who married Henry Myles. Subsequently, Blanche, Lady Troy became Princess Elizabeth's Lady Mistress.

Sir Harry Stradling lived mainly at Saint Donat's Castle. Like his father and grandfather, he was styled Knight of the Sepulchre in reference to their pilgrimages to the Holy Land. Sir Harry died in 1453 in Jerusalem. Sir Harry's mother was Jane, daughter of the future Cardinal Beaufort. Sir Harry himself had an adventurous life as he was taken prisoner in the Bristol Channel by the Breton pirate Colyn Dolphyn, as he was crossing from Saint Donat's to his house in Somerset. He had to be ransomed and, to raise the funds, was forced to sell parts of his estates in Monmouthshire, Oxfordshire and Glamorgan, including Westgate House in Newport which seems to have been a part of his wife's (Elizabeth Herbert) dowry when she married Sir Harry [4]. Panels painted in 1590 in the Lady Chapel of St. Donat's Church record his misadventure. He was an adherent of the Herberts, his wife, Elizabeth, being the sister of

Sir William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke. Their daughter, Joan, married the son (Miles ap Harry) of Sir Harry's friend Harri Ddu. Joan and Miles were Blanche's paternal grandparents.

Joan's brother, Thomas, inherited the estates and it was at this time that the Stradling family became really important in supporting the Glamorgan bards. His son was Sir Edward Stradling and his patronage was such that Lewys Morgannwg considered himself his household bard. In turn, Sir Edward's son was the Sir Thomas who was involved with the icon of the Holy Cross (see biography) and Sir Thomas' son, another Sir Edward, was Blanche's correspondent.

Sir Roger Vaughan of Tretower (a house that can still be visited) was a half-brother of Sir William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, their mother being Gwladys, the daughter of Dafydd Gam. Sir Roger was a prominent Yorkist. He was also an adherent of Herbert and served on commissions. He fought at Mortimer's Cross in 1461 and, on the orders of Edward Earl of March whose own father had been so recently executed, led the elderly Owain Tudor, King Henry VII's grandfather, to execution in Hereford. A number of bards dramatised the event. Sir Roger was himself beheaded, in revenge, at Chepstow when he was captured by Jasper Tudor, Owain's son. Jasper had briefly been Henry Myles' overlord when his marcher lordships included Abergavenny [4]. Sir Roger was also a bardic patron and elegies were sung on his death. His heir maintained the family's patronage of many of the Welsh bards.

Sir Roger's second son was Roger Vaughan of Talgarth, an area where Miles ap Harry had had lands. The Vaughan family's close connection with Blanche's immediate family dated from the marriage of Thomas Vaughan, second son of Roger Vaughan of Talgarth and the daughter of Robert Whitney. This Thomas married Elizabeth, Henry Myles' daughter and Blanche's sister, who brought him Tregunter / Trefgwnter as her dowry. (Presumably John, Miles' son had died without issue and Tregunter, which had been bequeathed him in his father's 1488 Will, had reverted to his brother, Henry Myles.) The two daughters of Henry Myles' son (Blanche's brother, Milo) would become the wards of Thomas Vaughan's nephew, Sir William Vaughan of Porthaml who married Joan to his own son and Elizabeth to his grandson. It was this Sir William Vaughan who, in 1536, provided such pleasant hospitality for Bishop Rowland Lee, Lord President of the Council of the Welsh March that, two years later, the Bishop was to commend him to Thomas Cromwell.

References

Full details concerning the sources for the Welsh poems are in the biography.

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1. Biographical sources: Dictionary of Welsh National Biography.
2. Dafydd Johnston (1994), *The Literature of Wales, a pocket guide*, University of Wales Press; The Western Mail.
3. John R. Kenyon (2003), *Raglan Castle*, Cadw.
4. T.B.Pugh, editor (1963), *The Marcher Lordships of South Wales 1415-1536*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press.