

Plaque unveiling ceremony, The Manor House, South Leigh

Saturday 7th June 2025 at 3 pm

Speech made by Martin Spurrier

Professor Wynn Thomas, Professor Emeritus of English at Swansea University who has come all the way from Swansea today to be our guest of honour,

Professor Robert Evans, Regius Professor Emeritus of History at Oxford University and Chair of the Oxfordshire Blue Plaque Scheme,

Eda Forbes, Secretary to the Board,

County and District Councillors,

Our own Parish Councillor Jackie Thomson representing our Parish Council,

Guests, residents, family and friends (and grandchildren)

Welcome to the Manor House or, as Dylan Thomas described it in 1947, this *pokey cottage full of old people, animals, and children*. Indeed, he continued, *And everyone I want to meet, I have to meet outside somewhere, generally, and preferably, the pub*'. He later writes of three cows having broken into the outside lavatory.

But more on that later.

I have great pleasure to hand over to Professor Robert Evans, Chair of the Scheme

[They both speak]

Thank you Professor Robert and Professor Wynn.

Things haven't changed much in South Leigh since Dylan Thomas lived here.

His letters written from The Manor House – of which there about 50 to my knowledge, one of which I own – start on 19th Sept 1947 and end on 27th February 1949 after his dotting benefactor, Mrs. Margaret Taylor, had bought this property for him and his family to live in.

It's reported that Dylan and his wild Irish wife Caitlin McNamara moved here having disgraced themselves in London. While staying a friend's flat while they were away, the Thomases found the drinks cupboard firmly locked. So, they took some of their hosts' family silver to Chelsea Antique Market and flogged it for a bottle of booze!

Dylan was quite good with words! With nowhere to go, he approached the ever-forgiving Mrs Taylor and wrote, "I'm as homely as a tea-caddy, but have no pretty pot." Not for the first time or last, she fell for it and bought this house for them! Dylan rented it for £1 week and 2 shillings for the rates.

Despite the mixed reputation for his behaviour, Dylan was loved here in South Leigh.

When Dylan wasn't working, he was at the pub, or travelling, mainly to the BBC in London from the railway station the remains of which are just over there at the bottom of our drive.

Here, at the Manor, chaos seems to have dominated his febrile domestic life so, for peace and quiet, he worked in a brightly painted gypsy caravan in an adjacent field. It is documented that Caitlin in a rage one day turned his caravan over with him in it and so the ever-doting Margaret had it moved to another field. We have excellent provenance that that field was at Alan Wilson's College Farm two more fields away, over there. Alan is with us. Indeed, today, in the farm yard still lie the axles and wheels of the caravan, the upper half of which was relocated to Camden Town in London, but for which I can find no further evidence.

When he arrived here, Dylan was 34. Caitlin, co-directed the bedlam. She was beautiful and a writer, too. At 18 she was a member of a London chorus line. She lived beneath a rick of flaming red hair, a fag in her mouth, with feral children attached to her apron, and animals everywhere.

Their relationship was passionate and tumultuous. They loved, fought, drank and she would dance on the table in the pub, and do cartwheels down the middle of the bus according to Lionel Drinkwater, a cow man at the time at Church Farm, just up Bond's Lane behind you.

Other contemporary interviews with South Leigh residents report him as 'an extraordinary little man' but he was 'adored' here. A local friend's aunt was the cleaner at the pub at the time, and when she'd arrive at 6 am, on occasions would find Dylan happily snoozing in the corner from the night before. Dylan asked Harry Moody the milkman to leave bottles of beer on his doorstep, not milk.

Further local interviews reveal a shambolic, brilliant, tormented, infuriating, yet captivating, hard-drinking smoker whose charisma could be spell-binding. His Welsh voice was hypnotic and, as we know, he could perform magic with written words but also conversation around the pub table. He was the local shove ha'penny champion.

Ethel Gunn, wife of the station master who lived at Jane and Richard's house, Gunn Cottage, just over there (Jane is with us), said that Dylan Thomas was very popular if slightly moody, and Bill Mitchell, who succeeded Mr. Gunn, confirmed that Dylan never borrowed money from anyone in South Leigh. Another reported that when there was money, 'it flew out with the Champagne corks'.

Twice a week, Dylan took the train to London for his BBC work and for '*hunting bread and butter*' as he put it. Caitlin called them 'his vanishing tricks'.

On his way home instead of turning right from the station to come home, he'd go left first to the pub (as I do frequently). Then on his way back according to Herbert Green who owned the then Post Office (now The Old PO) he'd drop in for supper and another drink. Mr Green made good beer in his kitchen. Later, they'd help Dylan into South Leigh's only car and put him to bed back in his caravan.

Finally, the Thomas family relocated from South Leigh to Dylan's dream – what he called his magical gobstopper, the Boat House at Laugharne – in May 1949. Of course, he soon became restless there, too.

Then, while on a reading tour in the US for a decent fee, after a long night out in New York, he collapsed. He was resuscitated by a mysterious Dr Feltenstein, who was known for his '*winking needle*'. But, the second time he jabbed him, Dylan didn't recover and died in Greenwich Village on 9th November 1953. He was 39.

So, we have established the Dylan Thomas lived here, but how do we know that he actually worked on 'Under Milk Wood' while living here?

The Board certainly put me through the hoops on this matter over two years, and they no doubt did their own homework, for which many thanks. The evidence is in black and white.

In July 1947, Dylan Thomas wrote to his parents saying, "I want very much to write a full-length – an hour or an hour-and-a-half – broadcast play and hope to do it in South Leigh, this autumn".

Then, in '*Dylan Remembered, Interviews by Colin Edwards and edited by David Thomas*', John Davenport, an eminent literary critic and co-author with Dylan Thomas of the novel *Death of the King's Canary*, he confirmed that Dylan worked on the play at South Leigh observing that 'Under Milk Wood' took six years to write.

In Colin Edwards' interview with villager and actor, Harry Locke, a good friend of Dylan Thomas and a neighbour, he commented that Dylan had written a substantial part of the first half at South Leigh. In that interview, Harry revealed that Dylan had told Harry that he had written him in to Under Milk Wood as 'No Good Boyo', to which Locke responded ... 'You sod!'

And there is more, but that's enough for now.

Thank you Professor Wynn for coming from Swansea to be our guest of honour, and we thank everyone again for being here. We thank the Board and Eda for the two years' work that has resulted in today's Blue Plaque, which is the first in our Parish and will be a permanent reminder of Dylan Thomas' time in South Leigh.

Louise and I will be most happy if you will now join is for a cup of tea.

And a short note in closing for our local residents: As I have noted with Harry Locke, it is clear that some of the loony characters in Under Milk Wood were based on folk in this village! Maybe, and only maybe, that is why its original title was, 'The Village of the Mad'.