

Notes from Local Interest Group Meeting 24th April 2025

Present (in Hall): John Price (JP), Joan Hughes, Ann Dean, Maureen Lloyd (ML), Pat Williams, Allison Joyce, Gaynor Price, Iris Lloyd, Vicky Gore, Joan Lloyd, Donna Price, Gladys Price (Drewern), Jenny Francis, Margaret Price (Yardro), Elsa Harflett, Bronwen Jenkins, Sylvia Bigglestone, Leonie Weightman, Sarah Cope, Malcolm Lloyd, Cheryl Williams (Upper Hengoed), Maureen Davies, Celia Jones, Jackie Mills, Rob Davies, Howard Dean, Anne Goodwin, Rachel Jones, Gareth Jones, Avryl & Roy Lloyd, Edwina Griffiths, Gina Goodge, Victor & Cherry Williams, Sue Croose, Jane Lloyd.

On Zoom: Wendy Ozols, Grace Davies, Jennifer Lewis, Marilyn Price, Diana Lloyd, Sylvia Illingsworth

Apologies: Dainis Ozols, Tim Francis, Anita Bailkoski

ML welcomed everyone to the meeting and said that she was especially pleased to see such a large number of people in the Hall for tonight's talk. She explained that Ann Dean and Joan Hughes would be talking about Mona Morgan, and that John Price would be adding more information at the end of their talk.

"Growing up in Kilvert Country" – Mona Morgan.

Ann explained that she and Joan would be basing their talk on Mona's book and that she intended to read us some extracts from it to give us a flavour of her life. Ann began by telling us that Mona had been born at Gwerndufnant on 4th August 1916. She was the youngest of three children at this time. Whilst she was still a baby, the family moved to Drewern Farm, Glascwm. Sadly, in 1922, her brother, Arthur, died of rheumatic fever and Mona remembered being taken to his bedroom to say goodbye. Despite this very sad event, Mona and her sister, Muriel (Mu), had an extremely happy childhood, although they had to make their own entertainment.

The family then moved to Newchurch where her father had bought a farm, Pontfaen. The parish of Newchurch was unusual in the area in that it had an English name, whilst all of the other local settlements were known by Welsh names, such as Rhosgoch and Bryngwyn. There were no large houses or manor and the settlement consisted mainly of small farms and smallholdings, with most people being from the same social background. It was a very close-knit community. Mona had noted in her book that the locals were often called by their name, followed by the name of their farm, perhaps because so many people had the same surname and so this would avoid confusion. The farms in the area all had very traditional Welsh names, like Tyn-y-Cwm and Dolbedwyn.

Pontfaen was about 90 acres, with a mixture of arable and pasture; it had two permanent meadows. There were two workmen who helped on the farm. Mona's mother was an extremely busy lady – life as a farmer's wife was not easy and there was always a great deal of work for her to do. She had no servant to help her with the chores and there were no labour-saving devices. She describes her mother as being small, trim, nimble and quick. She was the first to rise in the morning and she would light the fire and then get breakfast ready for everyone. Then she would pack the children's satchels and see them off to school. After this, she would milk the cows by hand and skim off the cream to make butter, which was hand churned. Whilst she was working, she would often sing her favourite hymns. She would then go out to tend to the poultry, collecting the eggs and cleaning out the henhouse; the hens were one major source of income and so this was an important job. There was no running water in the house and so all of the water had to be collected from the well outside.

Water would be heated over the fire or the grate, the latter of which had to be black-leaded regularly. She also scrubbed the flagstones. Making the beds was not a particularly easy task either as they were filled with goose feathers and had to be shaken well every day; this created quite a bit of dust! Then there were the meals to prepare for the men in from work for their lunch. This consisted mainly of bacon or boiled fowl (if one of the hens had given up laying), or roast or stewed rabbit if one had been caught. The family seldom had fish unless they had obtained a salmon from a poacher. A favourite pudding was jam roly poly, which would be tied in a cloth and cooked along with the meat. For tea in the evening a loaf of bread would be put on the table with jam or cheese and people would help themselves; there was usually a cake or tart as well. When Mona's mother had any spare time, she would make patchwork quilts and rag rugs.

Ann then went on to tell us about the children's visits to the May Fair. The children absolutely loved this occasion; there was very little entertainment available to them when they were young and so the fair was "a big deal". Mona and her sister Mu would save up money that they had been given so they could have a little more to spend at the fair. Their mother tried to restrict how much they spent and would examine their purses to make sure that they were not taking too much with them. However, the girls would hide some of their savings in their shoes so the extra money would not be found, but this would make walking uncomfortable! There were always prizes to be won on the stalls, but they were very hard to win. Although they often came home empty handed, they always had a really good time and would talk about the fair for weeks afterwards.

At this point Joan took over to talk to us about the Hiring Fair. This was always held at the same time as the May Fair and was where the farmers would go to look for potential workers. On the morning of the fair, workers would be paid their annual wages. They would spend some of this money on clothing and the rest they would save, perhaps for a time when they wanted to settle down and marry. They were paid about 25 shillings per week. On the morning of the fair the men would wear their suits and the girls would wear aprons, which they would take off once they had been hired. Mona wrote that Pontfaen had a waggoner called Ernie who was a good worker. However, they would all tease him because he had no girlfriend. He did eventually find a girl and he settled down.

Ann then told us about Mona's schooling. Mona and Mu attended the local primary school at Cwmgwilym. Here several ages would be taught in one class with just one teacher. There were virtually no books and the children were all very shy around strangers because they did not see that many different people on a daily basis. When a new male teacher came to teach at the school he struggled to get the children in the infants class to answer his questions; he was the juniors' teacher and the infants were obviously wary of him.

Mona recounts an occasion when she and Mu had been taken to a ploughing match. She recalls seeing her father running down the field to tell them that the doctor had brought them a baby brother in his bag. This little boy was called Billy and Mona would often be asked to look after him if her mother and grandmother (who lived with the family) were busy. On one occasion when Mona was minding him he accidentally opened the window catch and fell out of the window. Just then, some horses came galloping past and Mona was frightened that he would be hurt. She ran to tell her mother, but did not like to interrupt her and her grandmother whilst they were talking. Eventually her mother asked her what was wrong and on hearing about the accident they all ran outside to rescue Billy, who was not hurt at all. Fortunately for Mona, she did not get into trouble. Billy was a bit accident prone it seems. When he was about 10 years old, a terrible gale hit Newchurch making the trees sway and all the animals fretful. Billy went outside during the storm and was hit on the head by a tile which had fallen from the roof of the barn. This rendered him unconscious. He had a

dent in his head and needed an operation to make him better. Apparently, he had a scar for the rest of his life.

Joan then told us about Mona's ambition to become a teacher. As a child, she would often play teacher with her dolls. She was a bright child and was encouraged by the family to study and often let off chores around the house and farm, much to the annoyance of her siblings. She passed her 11+ and got a place at Llandrindod Grammar School. Because this was too far from home for her to travel there every day, she boarded in digs in the town. On leaving school, Mona became a pupil teacher at Painscastle School and then gained a post as an uncertified teacher in Hereford Street School in Presteigne. After a year, she was transferred to the school in her home village in Newchurch before moving to New Radnor, from where she was released, in 1950, to follow a teacher training course at Cartrefle College, Wrexham. So, she had at last achieved her ambition. Her teaching posts included New Radnor, Ledbury and Clyro. It was recorded that she was always extremely smartly dressed. She was a very serious teacher and adored by her students. Mona was also very successful at getting her students through the 11+. Throughout her teaching career, she always lived at home or in digs with a landlady and so she was not particularly domestic. When she lived in Ledbury, she ran the Sunday School and also put on concerts, plays and pantomimes. It was not until she retired that she married Reg, who she had met through the Kilvert Society, and they had 33 years of very happy marriage. Her final years were spent living in Cartref care home in Hay. She died in February 2012 (two years after Reg) and is buried with her husband. She was an honorary life member of the Kilvert Society and, along with her book about growing up in Kilvert country, the society published her booklet, "Twenty Four Walks in Kilvert Country", which also has sections on aspects of rural life in the area.

John Price then took over the talk. He spoke about attending Mona's funeral in 2012, and mentioned parts of the eulogy read at her service, printed in a tribute from the Kilvert Society Journal. In her book, 'Growing Up In Kilvert Country', Mona mentioned visiting Aunty (Margaret, Mildred) and Uncle (Richard Rogers) of Penwain, Ciltwrch, Glasbury. In 1921, Uncle and Aunt Penwain had a visitor from America. Margaret's cousin, Elizabeth Ann Sheen, who was born at Penarth, Cregrina, in 1855, had sailed over from Wisconsin on 'The Empress Of India'. Elizabeth's mother Ann, née Watkins Sheen, was born at Graigfawr Farm, Bettws, Hundred House in 1824. She had emigrated to Wisconsin with her husband James Sheen, Penarth, Cregrina, before 1870. Amazingly Ann's woollen wedding dress from 1846 still survives and is in the possession of her descendants in Wisconsin.

Ann's brother, John Sheen Watkins, was Margaret's father and Mona's great grandfather. Another brother, Dantsey Sheen Watkins, is the ancestor of the Watkins family, Caentymelin Farm, Hay. John's great great grandmother, Margaret Watkins, who married John Boore, Brynflwyd Farm, was Ann's sister. Elizabeth had brought her camera from Wisconsin and on her visit she photographed Penarth Farm, the Box Farm, Penbank Farm and Matts Common house

Many years later, in the mid-1960s, John recalled how he was taken to London with three other boys from Clyro Primary School by teacher Mona Mantle (Morgan). En route, Mona left her car with her parents at Ledbury and they continued their journey by train. John had taken a camera to London, but only seems to possess one photo from his visit, some polar bears at London Zoo!

John also spoke about 'Twenty Four Walks in the Kilvert Country', a very rare book that Mona had written in 1980 featuring many local walks.

ML thanked Ann, Joan and John for their most interesting and well researched talk. The photos were of particular interest, especially to those who know Newchurch and who knew Mona and her family. It is always fascinating to learn about rural life in years gone by. People often managed with very little money, few possessions and extremely limited entertainment, but they lived their lives well. Mona's book is well worth reading and contains some wonderful descriptions of the local area, as well as hers and her family's life.

Many thanks to the ladies who provided the refreshments at the end. Very special thanks once again to John Price for making it possible for the Zoom audience to enjoy the evening's entertainment.