

Well-kept secrets

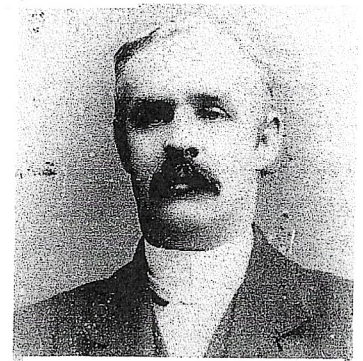
Here Arthur John David and Morgan Morgan turn to the matter of old-fashioned 'alternative' medicine. (What follows should not be tried at home! Orthodox medicine now tends to forbid the use of oil on burns! ed.)

- A Mind you, there were a lot of local remedies for different ailments weren't there Mog. Secrets they were too – some of them.
- M Oh yes, look at what old Sion Glamor did to Edmund Siedi's face after that explosion in the shed. Remember Edmund getting blown out of the shed? Old Sion had some kind of oil or other didn't he. He did a wonderful job on Edmund
- A Aye, and all that is gone and lost. Sion Melia's mother had it. She was another who had the secret, and Davy Evans's wife too.
- B Then there was John Jones, Creigiau.
- A I remember Davy Evans's wife cured the face of a man who was badly burned in Trefforest. Didn't leave a mark on him.
- M Sam Thomas, TW's father, had the secret, too, mind – given to him by *his* father, William



T.W. Thomas

The TW mentioned here is Thomas William Thomas who was a faithful member of this History Society until he passed away a few years ago in his late nineties. TWT as he was known to all, was a very much respected local figure whose background was Gwaelod y Garth, Bethlehem chapel, the Eisteddfod, and Liberal politics. More than anything, he loved the locality in which he had been born and nurtured. In a recording he made with Robin Gwyndaf of St Fagan's Folk Museum (with posterity obviously in mind), he actually reveals the secret of the remedy referred to above. I have translated it from the Welsh for the Garth Domain.



T.W.T.'s father
Sam Thomas (Eos y Garth)

'My grandfather was from Tresimwn (Bonvilston) and was brought up in a house to which there was an alternative approach road, referred to by the few English in that area as 'The Back Way'. This caught on, and was corrupted by Welsh speakers into 'Bacwai'. My grandfather became known as 'William Bacwai' and brought the name with him when he married my mother and moved to Gwaelod y Garth the area of her birth. They lived at Maesyrrhaul (Mesaril) where they kept about forty mules which he used for transporting iron ore to the Melingriffith Works. One day, a man called by on his way from Caerphilly Fair to the Mountain Fair. He was an Egyptian doctor, who, when he saw the mules grazing in the field, asked my grandfather if he could buy one of them from him. The transaction took some time because neither of my grandparents spoke any English (or Arabic for that matter – ed.) and the visitor had no Welsh. However the deal was done eventually, and instead of handing over money, the Egyptian doctor gave my grandfather a recipe for an ointment which was to become famous in this area as 'Plastar Bacwai'. It was produced in pieces, each about the length and thickness of a forefinger, sold for a penny per piece and was excellent for all sorts of things – a cut on the hand for instance. It would be necessary to hold the piece in the flame of a candle, so allowing drops of it to fall onto a length of clean cloth – the dressing, which was then placed immediately on the cut. That ointment was sent in response to requests to New York and Scranton, Pennsylvania; it was well-known in those parts. You hear it said even today "Oh, how I wish I had some plastar bacwai to put on this cut!". I remember helping him make it when I was a lad: First you obtained some pig lard and beeswax to put into a saucepan (TWT said the amounts were pure guesswork). This would boil gently on the side of the hob for a day or two. A bucket of cold water would be brought into the house and stood overnight so that the temperature of the water would match that of the room. Once the boiling process was completed, the mixture would be poured into the water whilst being stirred vigorously. After a while, the stuff would be sticking like toffee to the stirring rod. When cool, this could be removed, kneaded by hand on a board, and shaped into finger-lengths. By now it would have hardened somewhat and could be cut into the pennyworth sizes. The only thing that was left to do then was to store the pieces in cold water in containers like sweet-bottles until required for use.'