



an extract from "In Tune"

March 2006

The Quarterly Newsletter from the Oxford Welsh Male Voice Choir

Bugeilio'r Gwenith Gwyn

Having sung the song at the St David's day concert, here's a little more about the true story of the Maid of Cefn Ydfa, as promised. A short walk up the hill from where my mother-in-law lives, in Maesteg, is the hamlet of Llangynywd. Just to the south are the remains of what was once a large farmhouse known as Cefn Ydfa.

This tragic true story dates back to the 1700s, when women in Wales had no legal rights of ownership. Cefn Ydfa was owned by William Thomas, who died, leaving the farm to his wife Catherine and two-year-old daughter Ann. As Ann grew up, she developed a fondness for Wil Hopcyn, a local thatcher and handyman who did odd jobs around the manor house. Wil's reputation was that he "played the field". (The translation of his original poem was that he *Loved* as fancy took him, though this seems to have been changed to *Lived* as he fancied). So in order to protect the estate, Mrs Thomas hastily arranged a marriage to the son of a local squire, Anthony Maddocks.

Concerned that the arranged marriage might not take place, Ann's mother locked Ann in the mansion's cellar to avoid any "mischief" until the wedding day. Forlorn, Wil wrote Ann this love poem known as *Bugeilio'r Gwenith Gwyn*, and in her desire to reply, she used sycamore leaves for paper and her own blood as ink. Eventually, losing all hope and with nothing more to be done, Wil knew he must depart.

Some months later, Wil dreamt that Ann's new husband had died and she was free; he hurried back to claim his true love. But upon his arrival in Llangynywd, Wil found her bedridden, dying of a broken heart whilst her uncaring husband was away on a hunting trip. Wil arrived just in time to declare his love, but Ann died in his arms.

Ann's husband Anthony Maddocks inherited the Thomas estate and married another heiress a few months later; Ann's mother lost everything. Wil remained a bachelor until his death in 1741 and became a nationally renown bard. His love poem was later set to an even older harp air and has become one of Wales' most beloved folk songs. The graves and monument to Ann and Wil can be visited at Llangynywd, Mid Glamorgan.

The English title for the song is "Watching the White Wheat" - because apparently wheat turns white as it ripens. (Maybe this is a reference to Ann maturing?)

I have three different versions of the Welsh lyrics so I can't say if these are Wil Hopcyn's originals. For the many of us who only understand English, a translation is included.

Philip Gibbs.