

## Kidwelly, Carmarthenshire

John Thomas 1881

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*Was this really a childhood accident?*

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## John Thomas

So. Did John Thomas die in a horrible childhood accident? Or did he meet his end at the hands of a cold-eyed killer? Or two killers? Or perhaps even three?

Judge for yourself.

You will find John today in the cemetery of All Saints Church in Llansaint. He is there with his brother, high on the hill above Kidwelly. Theirs is the first grave on the left as you enter the churchyard. It is a quiet and attractive place and when the light catches the stone at the right angle you can read the inscription clearly.

*William, son of Evan and Letitia Thomas of Kidwelly  
Town, who died February 11 1878 aged 14.  
Also John, son of the above, who died February 4 1881,  
aged 11.*

Poor John. Killed on an errand in Kidwelly.

Poor Evan and Letitia. February must have been such a grim month for them. Two sons. One grave. Families could be so fragile in those days.

Evan was a shoemaker who lived with his family in Tin Mill Row. The family were honest, though poor, known for their hard work and thrift. On Wednesday 2 February 1881 Evan sent his 11 year old son John to deliver a pair of shoes to Mr. Anthony of Muddlescombe Farm. It was

a distance of about a mile.

On arrival, John was paid a half sovereign and told to return with the necessary one shilling change. He was given some lunch and he left at 2.30 pm.

His journey took him past the home of David Mazey and his family. He was an Irishman who worked at the tinplate works. He was married to Jane, his second wife, and they had two boys, David and Benjamin. Their home was chaotic and their house was a wreck. It was called Stockwell and was old and decaying. The garden was overgrown and the windows lacked glass and were covered by old clothes draped over them. The family were not well liked. Jane was described as aggressive and vindictive. The two boys, aged 10 and 12 were often beaten viciously by their mother and had developed a sinister reputation of their own.

In 1880 they had been involved in a rather suspicious incident. In August they had been playing with a boy called Fisher down by the river. Half an hour later they returned home carrying his clothes, saying he had drowned.

At the inquest, the young David Mazey said they had walked into the water together and that Fisher had sunk out of sight. There were no other witnesses.

Tongues wagged. These boys were dangerous, unruly, and, whilst nothing could be proved, perhaps liars too. Best to stay away. But boys don't listen, do they?

It was on his walk home to get the change that John Thomas disappeared. Soon his anxious parents were searching for him. Was he playing? Hiding? Lost? And when was the last time anyone had seen John? Well, a neighbour had seen him going into the Maze house.

In the evening, Evan and Letitia called on the Maze's but Jane denied that John had been there. She refused to ask her boys about it, saying that they were asleep. I am sure Evan and Letitia didn't sleep much.

A full scale search was organised the next day but of John there was no sign. Then that night, Jane Maze turned up at the Thomas house, expressing concern and offering support. Suddenly she revealed that John had been playing in front of her fire with a half sovereign and that from somewhere or other he'd given one of her boys a half crown. The Thomas family were not to worry. She would pay them back. Letitia said that she would rather her son than the money. But at least they had a lead.

On the Friday the police went straight to the Maze house where they found the body, partially covered by weeds in a ditch in the overgrown garden. John's skull was completely split open. His brains they found in a

neighbouring garden. There was an inescapable conclusion. The police immediately arrested the two boys and their mother and charged them with wilful murder.

Kidwelly was in uproar. The brutality of the crime and the reputation of the Mazeys was enough. They were obviously guilty. People gathered at Stockwell to view the place where the body was discovered. They would also have seen the simple swing hanging from an apple tree in the middle of the garden. It was merely a stick attached to a rope but to the Mazeys, it was an alibi.

The boys had been playing. John had lost control and smashed straight into the tree, causing massive and fatal injuries. The brothers had panicked and hidden the body. They hadn't told their mother.

At the inquest on Saturday the Mazeys story was quickly dismantled. Damning evidence was produced.

Why had the Mazeys boys gone round Kidwelly on Thursday trying to change a half sovereign? They had eventually changed it at Mrs. White's shop. They spent some of it, and most of the change from that transaction was in their pockets when they were arrested. The rest they had hidden in a hedge.

And why was it that when she was told about the body in her garden, Jane Mazeys cried out 'Oh my dear

Benjamin! Poor little fellow!?’

The post mortem examination provided gruesome details that were unlikely to calm down an angry populace. The skull had been cracked open laterally across the forehead. The brain had disappeared, apart from a small portion that appeared to have been taken out and then replaced. The upper jaw was smashed. The lower jaw broken in 4 places. The body was almost completely drained of blood. There had been huge trauma to the head, caused it seemed by some sort of blunt instrument.

A new impression was now forming. That perhaps two young boys couldn't have inflicted such appalling injuries alone. They could not have been strong enough to inflict such savage injuries. It might have needed an adult. It might in fact have been Jane, the woman who told the frantically searching mother that it seemed as if the ground had swallowed him up. Perhaps the murder weapon was either the old spade or the mattock that were lying in the garden. There appeared to be hair attached to the mattock.

The family might have got away with the Fisher death. But not this time.

They were committed to trial in Swansea in May and were smuggled out of Kidwelly to Carmarthen gaol. To

many there didn't seem to be much point. They'd done it. All they needed to find out which one had hit him.

Yet, shockingly, in Swansea the family were found not guilty.

The boys blamed each other and tried their best to reduce their role in the tragedy. But there was a common thread to their stories. They had started to talk when they had been in transit to Carmarthen. Yes, John Thomas had been in the garden playing on the swing. According to Benjamin, John had climbed up on to a wall and then suddenly fallen head first on to the flagstones. John managed to speak '*Oh Dai bach, rhoi dy law*' ('*David give me your hand*') before he died. According to David, he had fallen through the roof of a derelict shed. After he hit the ground he said '*Dai*' three times and then expired.

They agreed that they carried the body to the top of the garden and tried to bury it. '*Something white came out of the head. I took that and threw it across the road into Mrs. Gower's garden,*' said David. The brain. He then washed the blood away with water from a bucket. They agreed that they had taken the half sovereign. They also agreed that they hadn't told their mother because they were afraid they would get beaten.

It was impossible to establish the precise details of what happened. The revelation that some of John's blood had been found on Jane's clothing merely added more

uncertainty. Doctors confirmed that the injuries could possibly have been caused by a fall, though it was highly unlikely and were not prepared to commit themselves. Today we can see the difficulties there might be in reaching a safe conviction without the evidence of forensics. Somebody had split open his skull, but no one could prove who had done it.

The jury retired for only 5 minutes before returning their verdict of not guilty. The judge commented that it was one of the hardest cases he had ever dealt with and the Mazey's were released. The public however were less concerned with proof. They knew what had happened.





The Mazeys had to leave Kidwelly. What sort of choice did they have? Innocent in the eyes of a few. Guilty in the eyes of the many. The town was set against them. The truth about what happened left Kidwelly with them. They left behind them a mystery and a tragedy but carried so much else away with them. They moved in to the New Dock area of Llanelli but there were continual disturbances.

*Men, women, and children congregated in large numbers before their lodgings every evening, and with tin kettles and tin saucepans and yellings kept the inhabitants awake until a late hour. On Friday evening they had to seek the protection of P.C. John Williams and P. C. Thomas Davies. The feeling had run so high that they were afraid of their lives. The efforts of the police officers to disperse the large crowd were unavailing. At last a conveyance was sent for, and after some difficulty they were got into the conveyance and driven away at full speed, the yells of the mob being awful; and a little after midnight they were safely lodged at the Llanelly Union Workhouse, where they now remain. The feeling of the mob appears to have been directed against Mrs Mazey.*

And where was poor John Thomas? Where was he ‘safely lodged’? Beneath a fading stone in a distant cemetery. His life and his potential snuffed out so unexpectedly on that February afternoon, delivering shoes for his father.

You will find John in the cemetery of All Saints Church in Llansaint.

Leave Kidwelly on Ferry Road and go up the hill towards Ferryside. Turn left along Heol Gwermont and drive into Llansaint, a distance of about two miles. The church is in the centre of the village.

Thomas is there with his brother. Theirs is the first grave on the left as you enter the churchyard.

*This story appeared in my book, *Stories In Welsh Stone* which, sadly, is now out of print*

However, I have written two sequels to the book, called *Grave Tales From Wales* and here is a brief introduction to Volume One

If you would like to find out more about my work – both non-fiction and fiction, then follow this link to my website where you can find out about current availabilities.

There is plenty to read there, too!

[How to Buy – Geoff Brookes](#)