



Thomas Heslop
SHOT

1814

Llandyfyriog, Ceredigion
Thomas Heslop, 1814

Alas, Poor Heslop

Five men in a field, meeting in accordance with well-established rules. For two of them, their honour and pride had been so ravaged that there could only be one way in which the affront could be resolved.

A duel.

Thomas Heslop and John Beynon were accompanied by their seconds and a local doctor was in attendance, ready to pick up the pieces.

It was Saturday 10 September 1814 and they had all come together in Danwarrin field in Llandyfyriog near Adpar, which is just the other side of the river from Newcastle Emllyn.

The field they had selected was divided by a stream. Beynon and Heslop stood on either side of the stream, facing away from each other. The rules were re-stated by their seconds, Walters and Hughes. They were to walk 10 paces before turning and firing.

Neither would, nor could, back down now. There was no going back.

They began to pace out their deliberate steps.

Who can tell what thoughts were flashing through their minds as they counted down towards such an awful conclusion? Just a few short steps separating them from injury or vindication, or possibly both. One, two three, four...

Except that things did not go according to plan.

Because after only five paces Beynon turned and shot Heslop in the back. He died almost immediately.

This was a shocking affront to the accepted rules of engagement, though if self-preservation is paramount and the adrenaline is pumping so furiously, then it is an action that we can perhaps understand. He hadn't played by the rules, but who amongst us can ever know his fear? How many of us today could have calmly measured out those 10 steps, knowing what might be at their conclusion?

John Beynon was a local solicitor, who owned a small farm called Llwyncadfor. He may also have served as coroner for Carmarthen. He enjoyed his status as a landowner and was probably something of a wheeler-dealer. We know for example that he had recently sold land at auction following the death of his mother. Most

importantly however, Beynon was a man who enjoyed his shooting. This was how he met Thomas Heslop.

Heslop had been born in Kingston, Jamaica and was currently living in Carmarthen. He was 34. He appears to have been very well connected, as we can see in his last will and testament, written on Friday 9 September, the day before the duel and now lodged in the Public Records Office. In it he refers to his friends in Clapham, to his wife Elizabeth. He appoints his son Abraham in Surrey as an executor. To his second at the duel, '*my esteemed friend John Walters,*' he leaves his double barrelled shotgun and his pistols. Those that were never used. He looks forward to meeting them all '*in another, better world.*' Was he truly apprehensive? Or was he confident in his ability to blast a hole in an irritating country solicitor?

So what could have happened that could have brought these men so suddenly to confront the possibility of death in an undistinguished field in West Wales?

Heslop was down in Newcastle Emlyn with some of his friends on a shooting party, probably hosted by John Beynon. It hadn't gone well but they all gathered together at Beynon's invitation for dinner on Thursday 8 September 1814 in the Old Salutation Inn in Adpar.

As the evening wore on, a dispute developed. Heslop was not happy because he claimed that he hadn't been permitted to shoot when and where he pleased. He hadn't been able to decimate the partridge population as much

as he would have liked. There had been too many restrictions and this had prevented him from having a good time. He put the blame fairly and squarely on Beynon. As host, Beynon tried to take the heat out of the situation by changing the subject. He started to make derogatory remarks about the barmaid, in the manner of pub bores everywhere, questioning her virtue, suggesting her availability.

It is interesting, isn't it? However much times change, the behaviour of the drunks in the bar remains the same. Sadly, this particular laddish moment was one that went spectacularly wrong.



St. Tyfriog Church in Llandyfriog

HESLOP CALLED BEYNON A VILLAN AND A SCOUNDREL
AND CHALLENGED HIM TO A DUEL.
HOW SUDDENLY AND UNEXPECTEDLY IT CAME ABOUT

Heslop would not be calmed. He had worked up a fine head of steam and now had something more concrete and immediate upon which to focus his anger. He made strong objections to what Beynon said and, in defence of the poor barmaid, slandered by a pompous drunk, called Beynon *a villain and a scoundrel* and challenged him to a duel. Beynon accepted.

How suddenly and unexpectedly it came about. Heslop must have been confident of his ability to win or he would not have pursued so trivial a circumstance. His confidence was such that it obviously unsettled Beynon. His local reputation demanded that he should respond, but he probably found himself out of his depth, in the horrifying position of facing death at the hands of a skilled gunman as a result of an ill-judged and boozy comment about a barmaid. If he could only turn back time...

Perhaps this is the reason he shot Heslop in the back. But whatever the reason, the local people were outraged at such dishonourable conduct. It was a shocking thing to have done. But then it all got worse.

At his trial in Cardigan, Beynon was found guilty of manslaughter, which was probably the only verdict the jury could have returned. However, consider the fact that in the court records his legal status is confirmed. Beynon is described as an attorney. It is easy to believe that his colleagues arranged events for him. He escaped any sort of lengthy prison term. He was to remain in prison only until his fine was paid.

And he was fined one shilling.

Public opinion was outraged at this perceived injustice. Did the people of Cardiganshire object to the way he had transgressed against the accepted code of the gentleman or was it that they just didn't like him? However it was, they were after him. It is said that he had to go into hiding in a cellar near the bridge in Newcastle Emlyn to escape summary justice. He fled to America, so they say.

Whilst the man from the West Indies stayed behind in a small country churchyard in West Wales.

Of course the past is never still. It is always ripe for re-interpretation. There are those who would now exonerate Beynon, who say that the traditional tale is wrong. That



Thomas Heslop's grave

BEYNON TURNED AND SHOT HESLOP IN THE BACK.
HE DIED ALMOST IMMEDIATELY

he didn't shoot Heslop in the back. But whatever new research might reveal, he still lies in a Welsh cemetery. You will find the worn tombstone that marks Heslop's grave at the back of Llandyfriog Church. It is a very attractive place, on the banks of the River Teifi. Drive out of Newcastle Emlyn along the A475 to Lampeter and you will find it on the right hand side after you leave Adpar. Turn down a long drive to the church. There is plenty of space to park.

Heslop's grave is a rectangular tomb, close to the wall of the church. It has subsided slightly along one side. The slab that faces the rain has worn but you can still determine what it says.

Sacred

*To the Memory of
Thomas Heslop.
Born 27 June 1780
Died 10 September 1814.
Alas Poor Heslop.*

Alas, indeed. How unexpectedly life can turn out.

From Jamaica to a quiet grave by the river Teifi.

From Jamaica to become a little footnote in history as the last man to die in a duel in Wales.

This story first appeared in my book, *Stories In Welsh Stone*, which is, sadly, no longer in print.

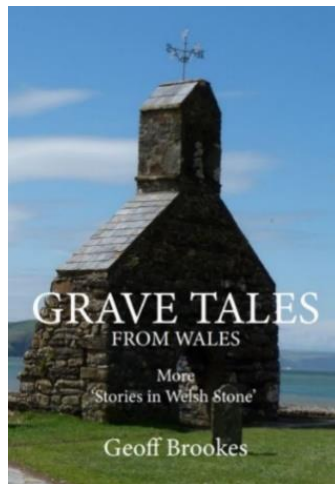
However, sequels to that book have now been published as *Grave Tales From Wales*>

Volume One published in June 2021

Volume Two published in March 2022

These stories are fascinating extracts from Welsh history, all prompted by gravestones or memorials that you can visit across the whole of Wales.

If you have enjoyed the sad story of Thomas Heslop there are more like this – in fact 65 of them – waiting for you to discover in those two volumes of **Grave Tales From Wales**.



For more information or to buy a copy visit the Cambria Books website

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You can buy copies on either site and there is a special offer too if you buy both volumes together!

Here is a short video which introduces some of the stories in Volume One