

**matt jones**

From the *South Wales Echo* (Cardiff, UK), July 1st, 1996.

### **Dylan's last resting place**

*People from all over the world make the long trip to a tiny town in West Wales to pay homage to poet and author Dylan Thomas. **Matt Jones** followed in their footsteps to wallow in the atmosphere of a town that comes to life in the words of the great man.*

“To begin at the beginning...” The opening words of Dylan Thomas’ *Under Milk Wood* are soft-spoken through headphones as I set out on an improvised walking tour of Laugharne on a pilgrimage to the small West Wales town immortalised in the poet-drunk’s “play for voices”.

There is no better way to see Laugharne than through Dylan’s eyes, with his words and word images caressing the ear and feeding the imagination, with the rhythms of his perspective providing a soundtrack and filling the town’s quiet, Georgian-windowed streets with a cast of eccentric characters whose spoken thoughts were first uttered via pen and paper in Dylan’s nearby home and cliff-top writing shed.

Captain Cat, Ocky Milkman, Polly Garter, Mrs Organ Morgan, Nogood Boyo and Rosie Probert still walk the streets, clean their doorsteps and haunt the living when you amble around Laugharne with *Under Milk Wood* playing on your personal stereo. Choose from Dylan’s New York broadcast, or the classic Richard Burton version, or the most recent 1988 recording, with Anthony Hopkins as First Voice, produced by George Martin, of The Beatles fame. That version even has the sounds of the town in the background: The lapping waters, rattling masts, birdsong and singing children.

Unfortunately, you can’t rent personal stereos and tapes anywhere in this least touristy of tourist destinations. If you want a memorable experience of Dylan’s Laugharne, Llareggub in the play, if you want to see moles in the snouting, velvet dingles, or hear dogs barking in the wet-nosed yards, you must have your own Walkman.

“Time passes. Listen. Time passes...” In the years since Dylan’s death, after a drinking binge in New York in 1953, Laugharne has been a popular destination for legions of fans. Roald Dahl visited it in the early 1960s, saw Dylan’s writing shed, formerly a garage for the town’s first motor car, and exclaimed: “That’s for me!” He went home to Buckinghamshire and built a brick replica of the shed, in which he wrote his children’s stories.

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“We have people of all nationalities here, Japanese, Indians, Dutch, you name it,” says Lorraine Scourfield, who works in the Boat House, Dylan’s “seashaken house on a breakneck of rocks”, which is open to the public throughout the year. “And Dylan’s family still visits. His daughter Aeron comes once or twice a year. She’s a regular.”

The Boat House, a whitewashed three-storey cottage perched above Dylan’s sloeblack, slow, black, crowblack, fishingboat-bobbing sea, has eyeliner-blue framed windows and a belt-brown veranda running around the middle. It was probably a boat-building and repair centre before it was converted into a home in the early 19th century.

Now, around 25,000 Dylan pilgrims file through its small rooms each year, seeking intimacy with, or inspiration from, a writer people seem to either love or hate.

The house is best approached along the Strand, a shoreline path from the car park near the town’s Norman castle, a crumbling grey fortress immortalised on canvas by the artist JMW Turner.

A steep flight of steps takes you up to the blue shed where Dylan spent afternoons scribbling and juggling words after mornings quaffing beer at Brown’s Hotel, on nearby King Street.

From the shed, a cliff-top path linking the town and house takes you the remaining 20 yards to steps that lead down to the cottage’s front garden, crowded with flowers and sea-salt scented. Its front door, it seems, is always open, as it was in Dylan’s day, when writers and academics from around the world came to visit.

In the house’s guidebook, Aeron Thomas, now living in Surrey, recalls: “It never rained in my memory when I lived with my family at the Boat House. On my visits there since we all moved away, shortly after my father’s death, whether it shone or rained, seeing the Boat House again with its views of the estuary and hill has made that happy time live again.”

Lorraine Scourfield’s favourite time of year is winter. “In summer it’s a tourist attraction, but in the winter it takes on a different character,” she explains. “It’s more of a home then, and your imagination can run riot. You can almost hear the voices of *Under Milk Wood*’s drowned dead in the Taf Estuary. It’s a magical place to be.”

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Scourfield says there's a ghostly presence in the Boat House, the third and last Laugharne home for Dylan and his Irish wife Caitlin, now run by Carmarthen County Council. "We reckon it's not Dylan, but Dylan's mother, Florence, who died in 1958," says Scourfield. "She was the last person to live here permanently."

Back along the cliff-top path, renamed Dylan's Walk, there are other places of interest to Dylan enthusiasts in the town proper: His former home Sea View, referred to as his "doll's house" by painter friend Augustus John; his favoured bay window seat in the public bar at Brown's Hotel, his home from home; and the castle grounds once rented by Richard Hughes, author of both *A High Wind In Jamaica* and the world's first ever radio drama.

Hughes, a friend of Dylan's, lent him the castle's sea-view gazebo, the "romantic dirty summerhouse", in which he wrote *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*. The castle tower offers fine views of the estuary, the streets below and the Town Hall clock which, according to Dylan, told time backwards.

St Martin's Church, on the outskirts of the town, is the final resting place of Dylan and Caitlin, who died in 1994. Stand at the sloping grave, marked with a simple white cross, listening to a tape of Dylan's crackly voice reciting *Quite Early One Morning*, the forerunner of *Under Milk Wood*, and you are, quite literally, listening to a voice from the grave.

Christopher Monger, a Welsh-born Los Angeles-based film director, was in Laugharne a few days after my visit, researching a script about Dylan based on a book by George Tremlett, who runs the town's antiquated Corran Books.

"Speak to any man in Laugharne and he will tell you he was a bearer at Dylan's funeral," laughs Monger. "He must have had a hundred bearers! You imagine the coffin being passed from pub to pub."

"A lot of Laugharne is pretty much unchanged from Dylan's day, though parts have been spoilt by chalets."

For George Tremlett, author of *Dylan* and co-writer, with Caitlin, of *Caitlin*, the town is special not just for its links with one of Wales' greatest writers, but for its proximity to nature.

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“There are some stunning walks on the hills around,” says Tremlett, who moved to Laugharne from London in 1982. “Laugharne is a tiny township with hills right on the edge and a freshwater river and tidal river side by side. I can’t think of any other town centre where you can look up and see a herring gull and a buzzard in the sky.”

But despite the town’s rural charm, Tremlett admits Dylan is the biggest draw for visitors. “We get people coming into our shop who have never heard of Cardiff or Swansea, but they have heard of Dylan’s Laugharne,” he says, as the sinning dusk brings to an end a relaxing day in the town Dylan once described as timeless, beautiful and barmy, “the strangest town in Wales” – as darkness falls over, in and under Milk Wood.

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