

## The Writing Shed

Dylan Thomas's writing shed began its life back in the 1920s, a Dr Cowan, who spent his holidays at the boathouse, bought the shed to house his Wolsey car. He paid £75 to erect the £5 shed on cast iron pillars on the cliffside at a time when the average house price was just £200. The shed was built by Billy Williams, a carpentry apprentice at Scourfields of Meidrim, building the shed in panels. It was brought down from Meidrim by horse and cart and erected on the platform on a cliff-ledge a hundred yards from the Boat House.

When Margaret Taylor secured the Boat House for the Thomases in May 1949, the empty garage became Dylan's 'work shed'; an old anthracite stove, a large bookcase, and two tables were installed as part of the 'extras' included in purchasing the House. Writing to thank Margaret Taylor for her generosity Dylan declared "All I write in this water and tree room on the cliff, every word will be a thanks to you."

Adapting quickly to their way of life at Laugharne, Dylan settled back into his familiar routine: pottering in the mornings, which included reading, perhaps writing the odd letter, and, almost every day a visit to his parents, (they had now been installed in part of a Georgian house on the main street called the Pelican), completing the crossword with his father. At midday he would drink at the Brown's Hotel to catch-up on the town's latest gossip, then return to the work shed from two until seven o'clock to write or think or sleep, drowsy with beer on warm summer afternoons: to Hecter MacIver, Dylan wrote, 'My study, atelier, or bard's bothy, roasts on a cliff-top.' Alone, in his 'water and tree room', above the tidal muds or estuary waters, changing weathers and skies, sheltered by the fig tree and willowy birches, he could sometimes be heard reciting a work, over and over, rescuing the words, counting the syllables, sounding rhymes. As Caitlin recalled: "When I think of that concentrated muttering and mumbling and intoning, the realms of discarded lists of rhyming words, the innumerable repetitions and revisions and how at the end of an intensive five hour stretch (from 2-7) prompt as clockwork, Dylan would come out very pleased with himself saying, he had done a good days work, and present me proudly with one or two or three perhaps fiercely belaboured lines".



*The Writing Shed soon after construction, with the Boathouse in the background*

In his, as Thomas told Princess Caetani in 1952, 'wordsplashed hut', the walls were pinned with photos, reproductions and magazine cuttings of Lord Byron, Walt Whitman, Louis MacNeice, W. H. Auden, William Blake, a painting by Modigliani, picaresque nudes, serial specials from Picture Post and similar magazines, rhyming lists and word lists of alliterations. On the main table there were many drafts of work in progress; for Thomas often wrote over a hundred versions of a poem in these last 'seathumbed leaves' of complex composition. Thomas was a prolific letter writer (over 1100 have been collected) and drafts and letters, with his ubiquitous notes and funny little drawings. Plus there would have been a large English dictionary and certainly Roget's Thesaurus, and undoubtedly something by Dickens, plus latest issues of literary magazines such as Keidrych Rhys' *Wales*, Cyril Connolly's *Horizon* and Princess Caetani's *Botteghe Oscure*. Thomas through the east window could see giant 'Jack' the ferryman working between Laugharne and the ferry path opposite, beside Black Scar, up on the hill beyond was Llanybri; across were the fields and farms of Pentowin. Looking through the other window, out over the estuary in the near distance is Wharley Point on the Llansteffan peninsular, and where on a fine and crystal day he would see Worm's Head, Rhosili on the Gower silhouetted in the far distance: the distant Gower reminding him of Vernon Watkins and Bert Trick and their discussions there in the 1930's on what was to become *Under Milk Wood*. Looking south from the side window, rose Sir John's Hill, behind the mudflats and tussocky foreshore of the lower town.

Dylan was very affected by what he saw and on his very first visit to Laugharne in May of 1934 with the poet Glyn Jones, on a "fallen angel of a day" when "in the very far distance, near the line of the sky, three women and a man are gathering cockles. The oyster-catchers are protesting in hundreds around them." Back in Laugharne again, he now had a birds-nest view from his writing shed, and began writing new poems: completing 'Over Sir John's Hill':

"Over Sir John's Hill / The Haw on the fire hangs still; / In a hoisted cloud, at drop of dusk, he pulls his claws / And gallows, up the rays of his eyes the small birds of the bay / And the shrill child's play / Wars / Of the sparrows and such who swansing, dusk, in wrangling hedges / and blithely they squawk / To fiery tyburn over the wrestle of elms until / The flash the noosed hawk / Crashes, and slowly the fishing holy stalking heron / In the river Towy below bows his tilted headstone."

Though Dylan's optimism was short-lived, for shortly thereafter, his circumstances were to change and times became precarious financially and emotionally tumultuous – yet he accomplished numerous broadcasts, wrote some of his most acclaimed poems for *In Country Sleep* published in the USA in 1952, all containing motifs of writing from the writing shed, and includes: *Over Sir John's Hill*, *Poem on his Birthday*, *Lament*, *In the White Giant's Thigh*, and probably his most famous poem of all *Do not go gentle into that good night*, secretly written for his father dying of cancer. This moving villanelle is regularly read at funerals, such as Seamus Heaney's reading of the poem for Ted Hughes' funeral in 1997. From 1952 until Thomas left in the sunny October of 1953, time at the writing shed disappeared into the four American Tours and on the short visits back it became a retreat from a jealous Caitlin and a dreaming scheming 'stilted-house' to write his secret love letters, his long letters, his begging letters... ..or Organ Morgan's 'finger, not his own, in his mouth' or Gossamer Beynon's 'my foxy darling' dreamy thoughts...

## Recent News:



The Writing Shed before the 2003 restoration work

Townfolk of Laugharne had often pictured Dylan Thomas' crumbling writing shed drifting out to sea after falling off the clifftop it was so perilously perched on. After more than 80 years of battling against typically wet West Wales weather, the legendary building was starting to fall apart. Time has not been kind to the shed where the world famous poet penned some of his most famous works. Standing on the clifftop exposed to the wettest weathers of west Wales most of its original structure had become rotten. Fears that the massive tourist attraction would collapse into the sea meant that urgent renovations were required. In October 2002 the shed that originally cost just £5 to buy, the building was carefully disassembled piece by piece and taken away to be restored to its former glory for a £20,000 restoration by local contractor David Siggery of Llangain.

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The refurbishment of the shed was part of the 2003, £100,000 programme carried out at the poet's former home. The authority, CADW and the Welsh Tourist Board are funding the restoration work.

His shed or 'house on stilts high among the beaks and palavers of birds' was where he wrote *Poem on his Birthday* at the age of 35 in 1949.

A news report claiming, "after Dylan's untimely death in New York in November 1953, the contents of his shed were burnt." Is in fact in-correct, on the day of the funeral, a number of people raided the writing shed and it is even said the Boathouse and absconded with many scraps, later sold for a fair fortune to collectors, libraries and dealers. Dylan's mother resided at the boathouse for five years after his death. But when she departed, it remained empty for thirty years until Carmarthenshire Council stepped in. The authority bought the boathouse and forked out £250,000 to stabilise the cliff after part of it collapsed.

The boathouse and writing shed have now acquired a cult status with fans of Dylan's work travelling from across the globe. Each year 20,000 people and 5,000 schoolchildren flock to the seaside town to catch a glimpse of the world-renowned poet's home.

The restored shed, with period restoration of wood and tongue and groove, was returned in February 2003, and has been conserved to how it would have originally been in the 1950's. All the original furniture has been restored and a new display will be created inside, including the long overseen aspect that the writing shed had two tables (as can be seen in Rollie Makenna's photo of Dylan sitting in the boathouse). Two of the steel pillars that support the shed were completely re-cast and the other two refurbished.

And in Dylan's words his 'long tongued water and tree room on the cliff' has once again been made a 'timeless mile beguiling island', once again.