

Goring Road, a 'properly laid-out street' in the north-western part of central Llanelli, formerly equipped with gas lighting, and a horse trough just around the corner, was named after Rees Goring Thomas, one of a local land-owning family, who may have built the Thomas Arms at the top end, around which are clustered the few remaining late Georgian houses in the town. Walking up this road from West End, just past a small door in a rendered wall on the left, and a little beyond the Methodist church on the opposite side, one will first encounter what looks like a row of three south-east-facing, three-storey, mid-late-Victorian terraced houses (originally never numbered, but individually named). These are likely to date from sometime in the 1870s, with bricks from local brickworks, large, half-paned sash windows, and 'penny-pointing' as an attractive detail to the observant eye in the finishing process...

**Wilton Villa**  
by *Anne Marsh  
Penton*



Siegfried Sassoon ~ Public domain ~ Wikimedia Commons

**Llanelli Community Heritage**  
**llanellich.org.uk**  
**Copyright 2020 Anne Marsh Penton**  
**LCH0364**

# Wilton Villa ~ by Anne Marsh Penton

---

*'Wilton Villa', Goring Road, Llanelli: house, home, and a connection to the war poets*

Goring Road, a 'properly laid-out street'<sup>1</sup> in the north-western part of central Llanelli, formerly equipped with gas lighting, and a horse trough just around the corner, was named after Rees Goring Thomas, one of a local land-owning family, who may have built the Thomas Arms at the top end, around which are clustered the few remaining late Georgian houses in the town. Walking up this road from West End, just past a small door in a rendered wall on the left, and a little beyond the Methodist church on the opposite side, one will first encounter what looks like a row of three south-east-facing, three-storey, mid-late-Victorian terraced houses (originally never numbered, but individually named). These are likely to date from sometime in the 1870s,<sup>2</sup> with bricks from local brickworks, large, half-paned sash windows, and 'penny-pointing' as an attractive detail to the observant eye in the finishing process.



*Goring Road Llanelli c.1912 ~ courtesy Brian Davies*

At one moment in its more recent history, this terrace, as a single entity, has been anything from a maternity hospital to the Llanelli Borough Architect's offices, where local architect John Hughes remembers that the Borough Architect, R.B. Mowbray, had his personal office on the first floor, with the typing pool and staff facilities on the ground floor. Working there in 1972, Richard Thomas, a former clerk to the Borough Council, recalls that the main entrance to the architect's offices was the front door of what would have been the first in the row. When the local authority ceased to occupy the building, it reverted to three properties. In recent times, these spacious, creeper-clad dwellings for the Victorian newly-prosperous have undergone internal modernisation in keeping with current practicalities, and are now a block of privately-owned apartments. The overall impression one gets when standing in front of them, however, is that little, if anything, of an exterior nature has changed over the decades: a passage affording access to yards and terraces behind still runs down the left-hand side, and they are not generally noticeably different-looking from the photograph opposite. As a unit, nowadays, they visually give little away as to their histories contained within.

---

<sup>1</sup> Vyvyan Rees (1976), p.47.

<sup>2</sup> An assessment of the Board of Health plans of 1853, where only the houses at the top of the road are shown, and the 1880 Ordnance Survey map where this terrace is very definitely now *in situ*, safely suggests a date of 1870.

A closer inspection of the gate-piers at the first property, though, will just reveal the words ‘Wilton Villa’ carved into the swiftly-weathering sandstone. Easy to miss, the English place-name in this quintessentially Welsh town is perhaps puzzling, and suggests incomers at some earlier point. All houses bear an historical



*Wilton Villa gate piers*

imprint, sometimes of sadness, sometimes of suffering, or even of some darker and more unsettling phenomenon. Wilton Villa has presumably seen one or more of these in the course of its existence; most usually, however, it is assumed to be largely benign and cheerful. Lyn John, who worked on the house in a professional capacity in the early 1970s - aside from having discovered a grim cache of metal-framed cages shaped in the form of human limbs and torsos in an under-stairs cupboard, presumably from its days as a hospital - remembers Wilton Villa as large, long and well-lit, with a ground floor, two upper storeys, two spacious landings, and fireplaces still present in the upstairs rooms. A sense of sunlight pervading throughout the day, even when overcast, it impressed (despite irregular discoveries) as ‘a very friendly building’.

In its earliest decades the house was to become a much-loved family home, with unusual literary connections. At the time of its completion, as a domestic building Wilton Villa reflected Llanelli’s economic prosperity, which had been growing steadily throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the coming of the railway, coal mining and later the tinplate and iron ore smelting industries and the steelworks.

~§~

Thomas Collins (c.1835-1916) was one of those who as general merchants and independent business adventurers would capitalise on all that Llanelli had to offer at that time. Born in Llandeilo to Welsh-speaking Sarah Davies (1802-1870), and her husband James Collins (1808-1886), one of an Irish Roman Catholic family who had lived through poverty and persecution at every stage of their ‘early modern’ existence, Thomas would understandably keep uppermost in his mind the desire to maintain a stable family environment.

The story that passed down through generations of the Collins family suggested that they had chiefly originated in County Waterford.<sup>3</sup> After persecution by Oliver Cromwell and the English land-owning sector in the seventeenth century, as a family clan they gradually migrated north, to Newry, County Down. It is thought that after the 1798 Irish uprising, one or more of James Collins’s immediate forebears were executed for their part in the rebellion. James, together with his elder brother Peter (1805-1881), and possibly with other relatives, later emigrated to Wales to start a new, very different ‘Welsh’ life.

Buoyed up by the welcoming reception they had in South Wales, Peter and James settled well into their new surroundings. In her article on Irish migrant networks, Louise Miskell cites the two brothers as an example of how the immigrant Irish began to prosper in South Wales at that time, essentially suggesting that they were unafraid of hard labour and long hours.<sup>4</sup> Able to turn their hands to anything in order to carve out a living for themselves, Peter and James could then ensure that they ‘gave back’ to the communities which had offered them refuge at a time of personal displacement. Further, Peter took it upon himself to write to

<sup>3</sup> The late David Lloyd, great-grandson of Thomas Collins, in conversation with the author.

<sup>4</sup> Miskell (2005)

the Catholic priest with responsibility for the Swansea area, Father Charles Kavanagh,<sup>5</sup> with a request for Mass to be provided more frequently for the newly-arrived Irish Catholic community in Llanelli.<sup>6</sup>



*'R.A. and T. John's "Wedge" Pipe Support'*

For the Collinses, the 'beating heart' of the family was definitely to be found in the home environment, and the more relatives surrounding one, the better. In time, Peter, a 'marine store dealer', whose business was listed in the various trade directories of the time,<sup>7</sup> would marry Esther Gurr from Swansea. After a brief sojourn in Carmarthen, presumably trading his wares in that part of the county, he would be back in Llanelli (William Street, then Swansea Road). James, as a greengrocer - and, as the trade directories would suggest, as a purveyor of china and earthenware, too<sup>8</sup> - was to live for more than twenty years in Swansea Road, raising nine children. Eventually, as widowers, the two brothers shared the same house in Swansea Road, including with their various offspring. Inseparable to the end, both appear to have died at 47 William Street.<sup>9</sup>

The next generation of the Collins family was to literally 'forge' away at their livelihoods, in addition setting themselves up as blacksmiths and metal merchants, as well as continuing to operate the existing businesses. The 30th March 1851 Census shows Thomas Collins as living at home in Swansea Road with his parents, and apprenticed to (most likely) the Dafen Tin Plate Works. Thomas's older sister, Ann, for example, would marry into one of the Llanelli John families, who were notably smiths based in the now largely demolished William St. and Zion Rd. (now Zion Row). Here was fashioned functional, but well-designed



*Elizabeth Lane Davies and Ethelinda Thomas, née Collins  
~ Courtesy Robert Lane Davies*

metal-based furniture, some of which undoubtedly found its way to Wilton Villa, as well as industrial wares, and accessories such as the patented 'R.A. and T. John's "Wedge" Pipe Support',<sup>10</sup> still occasionally found on old buildings today.

Esther, one of Thomas Collins's younger sisters, would marry James Lane Davies, a joiner, whose talents extended to elaborate metal and wood creations for house and home, some of which have survived into the 21st century. The following photograph for instance shows Thomas Collins's daughter Ethelinda (right), and his nephew's wife Elizabeth Lane Davies sitting cosily on one of her father-in-law's creations at her home in Wiltshire in the early 1900s.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>5</sup> For further information on Fr Kavanagh see [gowerhiddenhistory.blogspot.com](http://gowerhiddenhistory.blogspot.com) and other sites.

<sup>6</sup> Delaney and MacRaild (2007), p.100

<sup>7</sup> See *Slater's Directory* for 1858-59

<sup>8</sup> The china and earthenware side of the business may have been run by James's son, James Collins.

<sup>9</sup> Information on Peter and James Collins taken from the Census returns of 1851-1891

<sup>10</sup> Patent registration number: 17544

<sup>11</sup> Photograph of a wooden and cast iron family garden bench (Courtesy of Robert Lane Davies)

~§~

At some point in the 1860s, Thomas Collins would meet, then marry Mary Ann Slow (1831-1918), eldest child of James and Hannah Slow, of Ditchampton, Wilton, near Salisbury, in Wiltshire. Mary Ann's early life had also been one of struggle and hardship, her parents James and Hannah Slow finding themselves forced to enter the Wilton Union Workhouse with their young family, where her father eventually died in the 1848 cholera epidemic.<sup>12</sup>

How Thomas and Mary Ann first coincided remains unclear, except that it is believed that, at that time, Mary Ann was in service, possibly as lady's maid or housekeeper, to Ethelinda Parry, *née* Lear (1827-1896), daughter of the late Dean of Salisbury, and second wife to the fresco painter and art collector Thomas Gambier Parry (1816-1888) of Highnam Court, Gloucestershire. On her marriage, Ethelinda had become stepmother to (amongst others) the infant Charles Hubert Hastings Parry (1848-1918), later to become an eminent composer and a baronet. At this stage, the position of nursemaid to all the Parry children was most probably handed (if she was indeed in the family's service) to Mary Ann Slow.

It is likely that Thomas Collins, residing for a time in Bristol in the 1860s,<sup>13</sup> and possibly in his capacity as metal merchant, travelled to Highnam to supply Thomas Gambier Parry in his work as a designer, whereupon it is thought that he encountered Mary Ann. At all events, they were married in the recently-built Highnam Church, amidst all its Victorian Gothic High Church splendour, in November 1864, and presented with a gold-inlaid, wooden triptych-icon from Thomas Gambier Parry's art collection by way of a marriage gift.

Upon marriage, Thomas Collins brought Mary Ann (who now appears to have begun to style herself Marianne) back to Llanelli, settling first at Bryncaerau Terrace, where Thomas continued his trade as a 'general dealer'. The young Rachel Thomas was employed as their housemaid,<sup>14</sup> a necessity occasioned by the arrival of their three children - James Thomas (1867-1946),<sup>15</sup> Ethelinda (1868-1954), and Sydney Herbert (1870-1935). The younger two were undoubtedly named respectively after Marianne's likely recent employer, Ethelinda Parry, and her son Sidney Gambier-Parry (b.1859), as well as possibly Ethelinda Parry's sister Isabel's son Sydney Hamilton, who was born shortly before Sydney Collins.

As was traditional in Wales at the time in 'upwardly mobile' families, James and Sydney Collins were brought up to be bilingual, but Ethelinda, who understood but did not converse in Welsh, was encouraged to ultimately present herself as an 'English' woman with a refined English accent. She was taught French, needlework, and the piano by a governess, and made ready for a 'suitable' marriage at the earliest opportunity.

~§~

Thomas Collins prospered as an iron merchant, later as a fruiterer in Hall Street.<sup>16</sup> By 1881 the young family had moved to the first of the trio of houses round the corner, at the lower end of Goring Road (Thomas and Marianne remained there until old age would see them move to Cwm Howell Farm, Llannon, to the inhabitants of which they may have been related).<sup>17</sup> This town house was a satisfying abode for the Collinses, not least because a sense of home, in the most comforting way, could now be properly envisaged - so longed-for by both Thomas, with his unsettled Irish 'refugee' history, and Marianne, trying not to dwell

---

<sup>12</sup> For further reading on the Slows of Wilton see Marsh Penton (2019)

<sup>13</sup> Census return for 1861

<sup>14</sup> Census return for 1871

<sup>15</sup> Prison chaplain, and grandfather of the present-day euthanasia pioneer, Dr Michael Irwin

<sup>16</sup> See *Kelly's Directory* for 1895. The address of the shop was 2, Hall Street.

<sup>17</sup> Census return for 1911

on her workhouse childhood. The pair set about their home-making with gusto: Oriental rugs were ordered from London, pictures and tapestries received as wedding gifts were hung on the walls, wares from the Llanelli pottery were put out on display, and leather-bound volumes placed in sturdy built-in shelving.<sup>18</sup> Elaborate pattern books were sent for, from which they could choose such luxuries as heavily embossed wallpaper, and floral chintz fabric for their newly acquired furniture. Time in service to Thomas Gambier Parry (if this was indeed so) would lead Marianne, especially, to favour brighter colours and patterns. Under such influence, chairs were upholstered in the boldest of designs featuring exotic fruit, flowers, and birds, their legacy surviving future generations. In addition, and in homage to Thomas Collins's Irish roots, silver cutlery from Dublin with the 'rat-tail' back was collected, stored in a special silverware cupboard, to be cleaned by the general maid and housekeeper. Now the only thing missing was a name for the house.

~§~



*Edward Slow ~ Courtesy of Nancy Morland*

Marianne's younger brother, the Wiltshire dialect poet Edward Slow (1841-1925),<sup>19</sup> was a frequent visitor to Llanelli from his sister's first days there, and is almost certainly the chief influence behind Wilton Villa being named as such. Close to Marianne from childhood, in the absence of their late father, it was Edward who gave her away at her aforementioned wedding. Literary-minded from birth, in his trade of wheelwright and carriage-builder Edward flourished, so much so that, undoubtedly influenced by Marianne's newly-found domestic surroundings, he would eventually take early retirement and build a light and spacious home for himself and his wife Agnes in Shaftesbury Road, Wilton, complete with glass-fronted casing for his collection of rare books and manuscripts.<sup>20</sup>

Edward's rising status as a businessman, mayor of Wilton, and correspondent with contemporary literary beacons such as Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Thomas Hardy, must have brought the Collinses some kudos amongst their Llanelli acquaintances. Encouraging each other in their homemaking endeavours, as siblings both Marianne and Edward were eager to dispense with any vestiges of poverty and destitution from their 'pauper-orphan' childhood. In leaving the past behind, the creation of a comfortable and inviting home was a first priority for both of them. In Edward's poem 'Gramfer Shaant Goo inta Wirkhouse',<sup>21</sup> for example, one can certainly sense the insecurity about their past childhoods that must

have followed the Slows, indeed the Collinses too, to some extent throughout their lives.

~§~

At her local church, All Saints, Goring Road, Ethelinda Collins was to meet, then marry the curate, the Welsh-speaking Reverend Evan Thomas (1860-1930) from New Quay, Ceredigion, son of master mariner Evan Thomas, who had been tragically lost at sea in October 1880, when in command of the 104-tonne schooner *Magdalen Esther*.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Presumed to have been made by Thomas's brother-in-law, James Davies.

<sup>19</sup> Photograph of Edward Slow, c.1890s (Courtesy of Nancy Morland).

<sup>20</sup> See Chandler (1982) for further information on the poetry of Edward Slow.

<sup>21</sup> Slow ([1903?]), p. 165-9.

<sup>22</sup> South Wales Daily News, 11th November 1880.

At the time of meeting Ethelinda, Evan was lodging with the widowed Mary Thomas (not thought to be any relation), at nearby 21 Coldstream Street. A short courtship ensued, with Evan and Ethelinda married<sup>23</sup> in All Saints' Church on the 10th of July, 1893, by her older brother, now the Reverend James Collins. This was a splendid occasion, the status of the house in Goring Road so elevated by now that the entry for the bride's residence on their marriage certificate appears solely as 'Wilton Villa'! In a newspaper report of the time, Ethelinda is firmly cited as 'niece of the Mayor of Wilton', denoting just how celebrated her uncle Edward was in the life of the Collins family at that time.<sup>24</sup> Edward acted as witness at the marriage, and no doubt read the lesson during the ceremony, as well as giving an impromptu address at the wedding breakfast - one assumes not in his favoured archaic Wiltshire dialect of his 'rhymes' (as he preferred to call them). The couple's honeymoon was spent at the Caswell Bay Hotel on the Gower Peninsula.

~§~



*The Reverend Evan and Ethelinda Thomas, c.1890s ~ Thomas family archive*

In due course, three children were born to the Thomases, who had now moved further into Carmarthenshire to the Vicarage at Llannon, and it is at this stage in the history of Wilton Villa that its unofficial connection with the soon-to-be poets of the Great War, Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves, arises. David Cuthbert (1895-1916), Nancie Ethel Monica (1898-1932), and Irene Mary Beatrice (1900-1989) Thomas were all born at home, and educated before boarding school by their governess, Marianne Curtis. Later, in 1913, upon Evan's preferment, the family moved to nearby Llanedi, the rectory there with its light and spacious rooms in some ways displaying the hallmark features of Wilton Villa. Thomas and Marianne moved with them, bringing a myriad of books, furniture and art objects which had originally graced the rooms at Goring Road.

In time, Nancie was to marry the Reverend David Herbert Lloyd (also from New Quay, and later Archdeacon of St Davids, Pembrokeshire), produce a family herself, then tragically die at the early age of thirty-two. Irene, having trained as a nurse at the end of the First World War, would work as a Ward Sister in the now-demolished Greenbank Hospital in Plymouth, and marry the Reverend Herbert Edward Bennett, much later living out a long

widowhood in partial seclusion on the edge of Dartmoor.

~§~

Evan and Ethelinda's son David was sent to Christ College, Brecon, where he won a place in Hostel, a boarding house reserved for sons of the clergy who normally would not be able to afford the luxury of school fees. At Christ College, David proved himself academically, enjoying literature and the classics, as well as rugby and cricket. In particular, he won school colours for the former, and, as a 'Gentleman of Glamorgan', notably played the latter at county level against the 'Gentlemen of Carmarthen', at St Helens in Swansea, in the summer of 1914.<sup>25</sup>

Encouraged to be close to his great-uncle Edward Slow by his grandmother Marianne, from a young age David would also develop a keen interest in writing poetry, spending long hours as a child roaming the then

<sup>23</sup> Photograph of Evan and Ethelinda Thomas, c. 1890s (Thomas family archive).

<sup>24</sup> In the *Evening Express* newspaper comment on the wedding (11th July 1893, pink edition), the location of Wilton Villa is barely enlarged upon, citing just 'Llanelli'.

<sup>25</sup> See Andrew Hignell (2017), 'Tommy's Tale', p. 46-48

remote, but idyllic Carmarthenshire surroundings of his father's two livings, and writing his thoughts down into a series of notebooks, now lost.

Intended for Oxford, and thereafter a life in Holy Orders,<sup>26</sup> David saw his interest in writing develop apace at school, landing him the position of editor of his school magazine, *The Breconian*. In this, he is thought to have published some of his poems, albeit anonymously, as well as articles. A quiet and literary life planned in his father's footsteps, however, was not to be. One week after what would have been his final school speech day (which he missed due to the county cricket match at St Helens), and buoyed up by family anecdotes of his ancestor David Slow's escapades at the Battle of Waterloo,<sup>27</sup> David Thomas took the call to arms.

~§~



David Cuthbert Thomas, 1915 ~  
Courtesy of Robert Lane Davies

In September 1914, he enlisted with the Oxford University Officer Training Corps, commissioned directly into the Territorial Force the following November, before moving to officer training at Litherland army training camp, near Liverpool, in May 1915. This was to be a time of great personal development for David, who, although peaceable-natured, with his ingrained and familial sense of duty threw himself into his new military status with gusto. His meeting with the poet and chronicler of the First World War, Siegfried Loraine Sassoon (1886-1967), was also to be the beginning of what would become a remarkable friendship, possibly one of the most important in the context of Great War literature, and which would, as Sarah Cole has suggested,<sup>28</sup> indirectly alter the course of the First World War through Sassoon's 'A Soldier's Declaration' of 1917.

Sassoon was to fall 'deeply and idealistically'<sup>29</sup> in love with (the allegedly heterosexual) David Thomas, recording their time spent together both at Litherland and later that summer at Pembroke College, Cambridge,<sup>30</sup> as well as both before embarkation for the Front and after they arrived there, in his prose and poetry. Writing his war memoirs ten years after the armistice, Sassoon would recall

their first encounter in elegiac words and phrases traditionally associated with the Romantic poets such as Keats and Shelley. Appearing as 'George Sherston' in his semi-autobiographical *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* (1928), Sassoon gives Thomas the pseudonym 'Dick Tiltwood', and makes him into an almost Christ-like example of 'beautiful male youth mutilated and annihilated by the political passions of the time'.<sup>31</sup>

Following their training, Siegfried Sassoon and David Thomas would be commissioned as officers in the 3rd Battalion of the Royal Welsh (for most of their history, and since 1920, *Welch*) Fusiliers; they were later posted to the 1st Battalion in France in November 1915, arriving on the 18th at base camp at Étaples in the Pas-de-Calais.<sup>32</sup> Here, it is likely that they encountered for the first time the writer Bernard Adams, who

<sup>26</sup> *The Cambria Daily Leader*, 15th April, 1916.

<sup>27</sup> See Glover (2014), p. 37-8. David Slow (c.1769-1829), army surgeon at the Battle of Waterloo. David Thomas may well have been named after David Slow.

<sup>28</sup> See also Cole (2013), p.95. Sassoon's 'A Soldier's Declaration', written in the first instance to his commanding officer, was read out in the House of Commons by Hastings Lees-Smith MP on 30th July, 1917.

<sup>29</sup> Kathleen Cann, of Cambridge University Library, unpublished letter to Thomas's nephew David Lloyd, 13 November 1998.

<sup>30</sup> Marsh Penton (September 2018)

<sup>31</sup> Marsh Penton (August 2016)

<sup>32</sup> According to David's medal rolls (British Army WWI Medal Rolls Index Cards, 1914-1918), his arrival in France was probably a few days later than Sassoon's.

was also to comment on David, albeit in a more objective way, in his seminal memoir of the war, *Nothing of Importance*.<sup>33</sup> A week later, at Festubert near Béthune, fortuitously given their ever-increasing interests in poetry and literature, David Thomas and Siegfried Sassoon were to meet the more senior-ranking Captain Robert Graves (1895-1985). He too was to record their three-way camaraderie in his biographical account of the war, *Good-Bye to All That* (1929), as well as in a poem collection he created specially in memory of Thomas, *Goliath and David* (1916). Inseparable now, the trio spent hours (when battle-orders permitted) discussing literature and sharing poems, Thomas offering them ideas for possible improvement gleaned from his great-uncle Edward Slow's correspondence and family visits to Wilton Villa.

~§~

It was Graves who was to record in *Good-Bye to All That* the fateful night of David Thomas's death near Fricourt, in the Somme, on the 18th March, 1916, shot in the throat by a sniper about 10.30 pm, whilst out leading a party renewing the barbed wire along the front line, at the Bois Français. By the light of the almost full moon, in great pain and bleeding profusely, he walked alone (in order not to risk the lives of stretcher-bearers) about a mile down a rough track to the dressing station. As the tissues swelled in his neck, he was given a tracheotomy. After surgery, Graves reports that Thomas, against medical advice, sat up to ask a nurse to post a letter to 'a girl in Glamorgan' (thought to have been his fiancée), an action which would fatally choke him.<sup>34</sup>

It was also Graves who had David Thomas's effects sent back to Llanedi after the death.

Sassoon, elsewhere in the Fricourt area that evening, learnt of Thomas's death two days later. He was so distraught that he took himself off to the woods above Saily-Laurette a few miles away, where he made a 'rough garland of ivy there, and a yellow primrose for [Thomas's] yellow hair'.<sup>35</sup> (A version of this garland is still laid by David's family on his Commonwealth war grave, and occasionally on other memorials and graves that he or Siegfried Sassoon are associated with.)



*Llanedi Rectory nestled in the trees ~ Lloyd family archive*

A month after David's grim night-time funeral, and about the time of his memorial service in St Edith's, Llanedi,<sup>36</sup> Sassoon, on a short course at the Fourth Army School in Flixecourt, near Amiens, and still grieving, was to write one of his longest poems, 'The Last Meeting'.<sup>37</sup> Essentially Sassoon's elegy to his 'killed friend' David Thomas, this poem sees Sassoon visit the shell of the semi-completed rebuild of the château at Ville-le-Marcelet, now an extension of Flixecourt.<sup>38</sup> Attempting to position David's ghost in a final context of a house, albeit a large and empty one, suggests Sassoon's overriding view of his beloved companion was one of homeliness and comfort, despite the poet's own highly conflicted feelings toward these things. Whatever Wilton Villa

had been to David's family, its essence would somehow have seeped through into his conversations with Sassoon in the trenches in France.

<sup>33</sup> Adams (1917)

<sup>34</sup> Graves (1929), p. 250

<sup>35</sup> Sassoon (1983), p. 45

<sup>36</sup> *The Cambria Daily Leader*, 15th April, 1916

<sup>37</sup> Sassoon (1984, 2002), p. 32-6

<sup>38</sup> See Penton (2018)

The suggestion of ‘house and home’ as something connected to David Thomas was also to be interpreted by Graves, equally distraught at Thomas’s death, in his homoerotic poem for the late David, ‘Not Dead’.<sup>39</sup> Here, Graves goes searching for his dead friend’s spirit, and finds him in a wood, at the same time coming across a homely cottage, where he knows David will be safely back in the bosom of his loving family.



*Llanedi war memorial ~ Lloyd family archive*

David Cuthbert Thomas, together with many others from his local area, is commemorated on two war memorials, at Llanedi and Pontarddulais, and their short lives sensitively recorded by the writer Steven John.<sup>40</sup> Though nobody is any longer alive who can remember even a tiny detail of these brave young men who unconditionally gave up their lives for a better Wales, a better world even, in present times their proud families continue to honour their names at Armistice services each November. Walking down to the remote churchyard of Llanedi - or even through Llannon, or up Goring Road - today, it is still possible to imagine the shocking ‘silence’ that must have trailed people’s lives for years after the war. Life, as enjoyed by the Collins family of Wilton Villa, could never be done in the same way again. Sadly, as their relatives gradually passed away, poverty and uncertainty would, for a time, again envelop those who were left behind to face another world war.

This feeling of national unsettled-ness, wistfulness even, underlies some of Graves’s early work, and much of Sassoon’s immediate postwar writing. With the exception of Graves tellingly naming his eldest son after David Thomas,<sup>41</sup> both veterans preferred to keep their love for the man they affectionately called ‘Tommy’ private from their families and acquaintances, as did David’s immediate

family too.

In April 1921, however, Sassoon first felt it necessary to visit the places in Wales that David Thomas, as well as other Welsh war-time companions, had been associated with, finding the excuse to do so as correspondent for the *Nation*.<sup>42</sup> (He was to return to Wales in better spirits in 1924, visiting Brecon - the town of David’s school - amongst other places.<sup>43</sup>) If he had originally intended to come ‘looking’ for a memory of David in Llanelli, then, depressed at war’s end, he had come at the wrong time of his life, since as far as is known his fleeting visit did not inspire him to return. Had he chosen to walk up to Goring Road, on what apparently was a beautiful afternoon, and stand outside Wilton Villa, he could have traced his finger over the words on the stones in the gateway, recognising the origin of its name. In gaining reassurance to equip him for post-war life from the knowledge of the stories of those nineteenth-century artisans who, against difficult personal odds, had made it their home, Sassoon might have felt his load lighten just a little.

His diary,<sup>44</sup> however, suggests that instead of getting out of the train he carried on to Carmarthen, where he bought two large bananas, and went for a long walk out of town in painful shoes...

<sup>39</sup> Graves, (2014), p. 6-7. See also Marsh Penton (Gravesiana, 2018)

<sup>40</sup> John, *West Wales War Memorial Project website*

<sup>41</sup> David Nicholson Graves. See McPhail and Guest (2001), p. 14

<sup>42</sup> For further comment see Fisher (2014), p. 16-17

<sup>43</sup> See Sassoon (1985), p. 190

<sup>44</sup> Sassoon (1981), p. 59

## AFTERWORD

Ten days after David Thomas was killed in France, Thomas Collins died, and an offertory plate was later given in his memory by his family to St Edith's church, Llanedi.

Mary Ann (Marianne) died in 1918, and is buried with her husband Thomas Collins in St Edith's churchyard, next to the grave of her son-in-law and her daughter, Evan and Ethelinda Thomas, who died in 1930 and 1954 respectively.

David Cuthbert Thomas is buried at Point 110 New Military Cemetery, Fricourt, Somme, France, and commemorated on the war memorials in Pontarddulais and Llanedi. (See photographs, in which the family's 'ivy garland' in memory of Siegfried Sassoon's friendship with David Thomas has been placed.)



*Collins and Thomas family graves in Llanedi churchyard; David Thomas's grave at Point 110 New Military Cemetery, Fricourt - Lloyd family archive*

---

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am greatly indebted to Robert Ephgrave, Lyn John, and Caroline Streek (LCH), who have given kindly and generously of their time in the preparation of this article, as well as to Jeffrey Collins, Robert and Barbara Lane Davies, Julia Morgan, and Bernice Walters for all their invaluable insights into the John and Collins families of Llanelli.

The following have also given freely of their time, knowledge, and expertise: Robert Allsop; John Hughes (LCH); Felix Jackson; Robin James (Cambridge University Library); Adrian Mather; Jon Miller; Anthony Morton (Sandhurst Collection); Tim Penton; Susanna Stewart (Highnam Heritage); Gill Thomas; Raymund Thomas (St Edith's, Llanedi); Richard Thomas; Ulster Historical Foundation.

For further information about Siegfried Sassoon, see the Siegfried Sassoon Fellowship's website.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adams, Bernard, *Nothing of Importance: A Record of Eight Months at the Front with a Welsh Battalion, October 1915 to June 1916* (London: Methuen, 1917)

British Army WWI Medal Rolls Index Cards, 1914-1918

‘Celebrating 50 Years at Sophia Gardens, 1967-2017’, *Glamorgan Yearbook* (2017)

Cole, Sarah, ‘Siegfried Sassoon’, *The Cambridge Companion to the Poetry of the First World War*, edited by Santanu Das (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013)

Edwards, John, [*Llanelli: Hanes Tref*] *Llanelli: Story of a Town* ([Llanelli]: Llanelli Star; Derby: Breedon Books Publishing, updated 2007)

Fisher, Deb, ‘Sassoon’s Welsh Connections’, *Siegfried’s Journal*, 25 (Spring 2014)

[gowerhiddenhistory.blogspot.com](http://gowerhiddenhistory.blogspot.com)

Graves, Robert, *Selected Poems*, edited by Michael Longley (London: Faber & Faber, [new] edition 2014)

Graves, Robert, *Good-Bye to All That* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1929)

*Irish Migration, Networks and Ethnic Identities since 1750*, edited by Enda Delaney and Donald M. MacRaild (Abingdon/New York: Routledge, 2007)

John, Steven, *West Wales War Memorial Project website* ([www.wmp.co.uk](http://www.wmp.co.uk)): Llanedi War Memorial: David Cuthbert Thomas

McPhail, Helen, and Guest, Philip, *On the Trail of the Poets of the Great War: Robert Graves & Siegfried Sassoon* (Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 2001)

Marsh Penton, Anne, ‘Little Tommy’, *Siegfried’s Journal*, 30 (August 2016)

Marsh Penton, Anne, ‘Over the Whole Wood: Robert Graves and the Significance of David Thomas’, *Gravesiana: The Journal of the Robert Graves Society*, Volume 4 Number 3 (2018)

Marsh Penton, Anne, “‘Tommy’ and ‘Sassons’ at Pembroke: the Legacy of ‘Paradise’”, *Pembroke College Cambridge Society Annual Gazette*, 92 (September 2018)

Marsh Penton, Anne, ‘Wilton to War Poets: Edward Slow’s Unlikely Legacy’, *Sarum Chronicle: Recent Historical Research on Salisbury & District*, 19 (2019)

Miskell, Louise, “‘Operating in the Ethnic Sphere’: Irish Migrant Networks and the Question of Respectability in Nineteenth-Century South Wales”, *Immigrants & Minorities: Historical Studies in Ethnicity, Migration and Diaspora*, 23/2-3 (2005)

Penton, Tim, ‘Flixecourt and “The Last Meeting”’, *Siegfried’s Journal*, 34 (Summer 2018); a correction, *Siegfried’s Journal*, 35 (Winter 2019)

Rees, Vyvyan, *South-West Wales: Part of Dyfed, the Old Counties of Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire (A Shell Guide)* (London: Faber & Faber, new edition 1976)

- Sassoon, Siegfried, *Collected Poems 1908-1956* (London: Faber and Faber, [new] edition 1984, reset 2002)
- Sassoon, Siegfried, *Diaries, 1915-1918*, edited and introduced by Rupert Hart-Davies (London: Book Club Associates, 1983)
- Sassoon, Siegfried, *Diaries, 1920-1922*, edited and introduced by Rupert Hart-Davies (London: Faber and Faber, 1981)
- Sassoon, Siegfried, *Diaries, 1923-1925*, edited and introduced by Rupert Hart-Davies (London: Faber and Faber, 1985)
- Sassoon, Siegfried, *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* (London: Faber & Gwyer, 1928)
- Sassoon, Siegfried, *The Old Huntsman* (London: Heinemann, 1917)
- Slow, Edward, *Figgety Pooden: the Dialect Verse of Edward Slow*, selected and edited by John Chandler (Trowbridge: Wiltshire Library & Museum Service, 1982)
- Slow, Edward, *Wiltshire Rhymes for the West Countrie. Part 1* (Salisbury: R.R. Edwards, [1903?])
- The Waterloo Archive: Previously Unpublished or Rare Journals and Letters regarding the Waterloo Campaign and the Subsequent Occupation of France, Vol. VI, British Sources*, edited by Gareth Glover (London: Frontline Books, 2014)