

The Rabbit Catcher by George Armfield, 1840-78

Evans of Niwbwrch

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SEE ALSO

The Williams family of Conway, Holyhead, Newborough and Liverpool
The Roberts family of Newborough

Treading the Path, the early family, by Alun Pritchard
(which is especially relevant to this Evans family)

The name

Welsh for "son of Evan". More information here. We also have the original "Evan": he was Evan Thomas, whose sons used Evan as a surname and (breaking patronymic tradition) passed it down as a surname.

The connection

Will's maternal 2x great grandmother was Ellen Evans 1837-1908.

The highlights

Ellen's grandfather Evan and three of his sons – Hugh, Owen, and Sion (John) – revived Newborough's ancient mat-making industry in the early 1800s. Life in village at the time would have been tough: the commons, a tract of land near the sea, had been enclosed in the early 1800s. Ordinary villagers lost not only the ability to graze their animals but also the right to harvest marram grass, used to make mats, ropes and nets to sell.

The mat-making trade was used by the poor at various stages in Newborough's history to fend off poverty. In 1833 the royal commissioners noted: "The state of the poor, since the loss of their right of common, is on all hands stated to be one of severe deprivation."

Hugh is also known to have regularly swum the Menai Strait from Abermenai to Fort Belan, some 400 metres. It is notorious for its dangerous currents.

Both Hugh and Owen had long records of largely petty crime. Read on for details.

For the purposes of this website Will Bramhill is generation one. Direct ancestors are shown in red.

The Evans line is the first example we found of patronymic surnames in the family. My thanks to Alun Pritchard who got in touch with me via the Newborough Through the Ages group on Facebook. It turns out we share Evan Thomas and Elizabeth Roberts, below, as our 4x great grandparents.

Generation eight

Going only on the occupancy of Rallt Gwta, Will's 5 x great grandfather is likely to have been Thomas Evans, and his father is likely to have had the first name Evan – he might even have been Evan Evans.

So taking generations nine, eight and seven we have Evan Evans, Thomas Evans (father's first name becomes surname), Evan Thomas and finally Hugh Evans. Confusing system, innit?

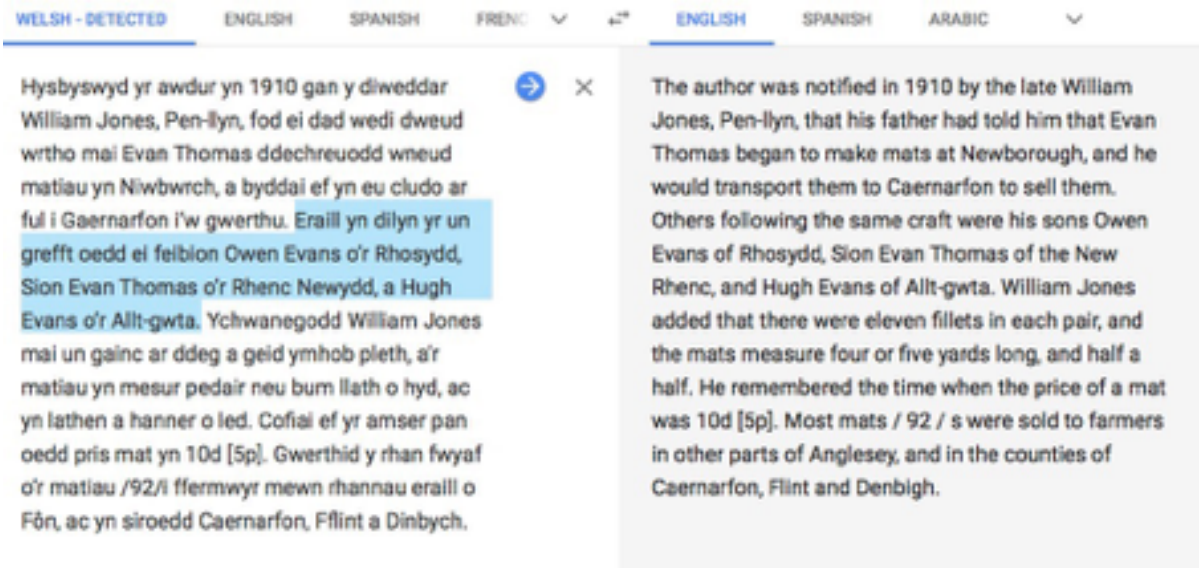
Generation seven

Evan Thomas (1769-1832) married Elizabeth Roberts. They had five sons and three daughters – Owen, Hugh, Sion, William, Thomas, Mary, Elizabeth and Jane. They lived in Llwyn Ysgaw.. This appears to have been a farm in Newborough now known as Ty Llawr, which is inland from the crossroads, at the end of Stad Hen Ysgol off Pendref Street.

An alternative might have been Llwyn Ysgaw in Llangeinwen, Dwyran, which is the village immediately northeast of Newborough. The 1840 tithe map for that property shows that it was 1 acre, 1 rod, 8 poles and cost 3s 8d a year. It was owned by John Edwards and lived in by Ellen Jones. The plot is highlighted on this map from places.library.wales.



Evan is mentioned in *Hanes Plwyf Niwbwrch* (History of the Parish of Newborough) by Hugh Owen MA, a book written in 1910. It credits him with being the man who revived the ancient mat-making industry which used marram grass grown on the dunes . Mat-making created a much-needed income for the women of the village and Evan and his wife took the mats by donkey to sell in Caernarfon.



Three of the couple's sons also took part in the venture: Owen Evans of Rhosydd, Sion (John) Evan Thomas of New Rhenc and Hugh Evans of Rallt Gwta (note, Rhosydd, New Rhenc and Rallt Gwta are house names. They come in very handy when researching Welsh family history).

The book excerpt says: "There were 11 fillets in each pair and the mats measure four or five yards long and 'a yard and a half wide'." The prices fetched were 10d (5p) and the mats went to farmers in Anglesey, Caernarfon, Flint and Denbigh.

Note that Alun Pritchard and I independently traced our ancestry back to Evan Thomas and a connection has been confirmed via DNA testing..

Generation six

Hugh Evans (1802-April 1883) married Margaret Jones (1802-77) in Llanbedr on August 19 1825. **They had children Margaret (b1812); Ellin (1826-32); Ellen (1837-1908, Will's 2x great grandmother) who** was born in Ty Mawr, Newborough; **John (1829-32), and John II b1832.**

Generation five

Ellen married John Roberts In January 1858. Their story continues on the Roberts family page



Newborough Matmakers c1912. Audrey Jones of Llangefni kindly gave Will the women's names and the names of their homes. **Back row**: Ann Jane Jones (Pant), Margaret Humphries (Bryn Teg), Catherine Roberts (Tyn Lon Bach); **middle row**: Mary Roberts (Sein Fawr), Leisa Roberts (Plas Pydewa), Jane Parry (Twntl), Rebecca Lewis (Llain Pwll), Lowri Lewis (Tan y Ffynnon), Elin Edwards, (Ty Mawr); **front row**: Elin Jones (Sgubor Ddu), Margaret Jones (Plas Pydewa), Col Stapleton Cotton, Mrs Jenkins (wife of the vicar and secretary of the Newborough Matmakers' Association), Elin Jones (Institute), Margaret Owen (Tyn Llan).

Through the censuses

1841, Pen y Gamba, Newborough
Hugh 35
Margaret 45
John, 9
Ellen, 3

1861, Rallt Gwta, Newborough
Hugh 57, labourer and farmer with five acres, b Newborough
Margaret 58, b Newborough
Ellin Roberts 3, granddaughter, b Newborough

(Ellin's occupation, quaintly, is given as "mariner's daughter". It is not known if she reached adulthood.)

1871, Rallt Gwta, Newborough
Hugh, 67, labourer and warrener
Margaret, 73
He is a labourer and warrener and she is a matmaker. Their birthplaces are given as Newborough and Llanbadrig.

In 1881 Hugh was living alone in Rallt Gwta as a 76-year-old widower, a "rabbit catcher", born in Newborough.

Bumping into Alun on Facebook was serendipitous. He writes that at least with the mat-making the wayward brothers did contribute something positive to their community.

He also says: *"Just over a year ago [2022-23], the Evans clan lost a much valued member, Nellie Jones (nee Evans) Hafoty. Nellie's father, Robert John Evans (1899-1935) or Robin Rallt Gwta as he was known, was Hugh Rallt Gwta's x2 gt. Grandson – therefore Will's branch of the Evans family tree.*

"I spent many an afternoon in Nellie's company hearing tales of old. She told me that Huwcyn, as she referred to Hugh, had a rowing boat moored at Trwyn Abermenai and that he would ferry passengers across the gap to Fort Belan. Some passengers continued their journey to the Lleyn Peninsula and beyond, others went to harvest marram grass or to check rabbit traps set on the mainland.

"According to Nellie, it was said that Huwcyn and his younger brother, Evan, were known to be strong swimmers and that they would often swim across the gap, quite a feat considering the strength of the current.

"With Nellie's death and the demise of other elders of the community such anecdotes are in danger of being lost to future generations."

Alun adds that his Owen Evans (1798-1879) was born at Llwyn Yscaw (later Ty Lawr). He was one of five brothers and three sisters. He married Jane Davies on April 15 1816 at St Peter's Church and they set up home at Rhosydd, a smallholding on the edge of the warren, beyond Gwiningaer.

Their daughter Catherine (Cadi Rhosydd, 1828-1910) married Hugh Williams, a farm labourer at nearby Gallt y Rhedyn and they had three children: Ellen, Owen and Jane. Ellen became Elin Pritchard, Ty'n Rallt (1847-1940) and had 12 children,

including Jane Parry, Twnti (seen in the photo at the bottom of this page of the mat makers outside Newborough Institute), Edward Pritchard, Ty'n Pant of buses fame and my grandfather, Owen (1879-1915).

Alun's father, another Owen (Owen, Ty'n Rallt) was born in 1903.

A lifetime of petty crime

Alun and I take comfort in the fact that Evan and his sons revived the mat-making industry, helping their community.

But Owen and Hugh had a dark side. For 40 years or more of their adult lives the men featured strongly in the Anglesey court records for misdemeanours which took place across the southern quadrant of the island from Llangefni to Menai Bridge.

Their offences included theft, drunkenness and fighting but Owen (Alun's 3x great grandfather) was also found guilty in 1833 of riotous assembly after being prosecuted by the landlord of the White Lion. The other names on the charge sheet were Thomas Evans, John Evans and Owen Roberts, possibly brothers and cousins. Separately Hugh was also convicted for hitting a woman.

There is no doubt that this is our Hugh – his home address was given as Rallt Gwta or Allt Gwta. His first brush with the law came in November 1820 when he was 16 and there were two "memoranda of recognizance" involving fighting.

His last case was in 1877 for "being drunk on the highway". In 1860 he was fined five shillings or told to spend six hours in the stocks in Aberffraw – there is no record of his choice. On various occasions he was sentenced to be fined or spend up to a month in Beaumaris House of Correction, sometimes with hard labour.

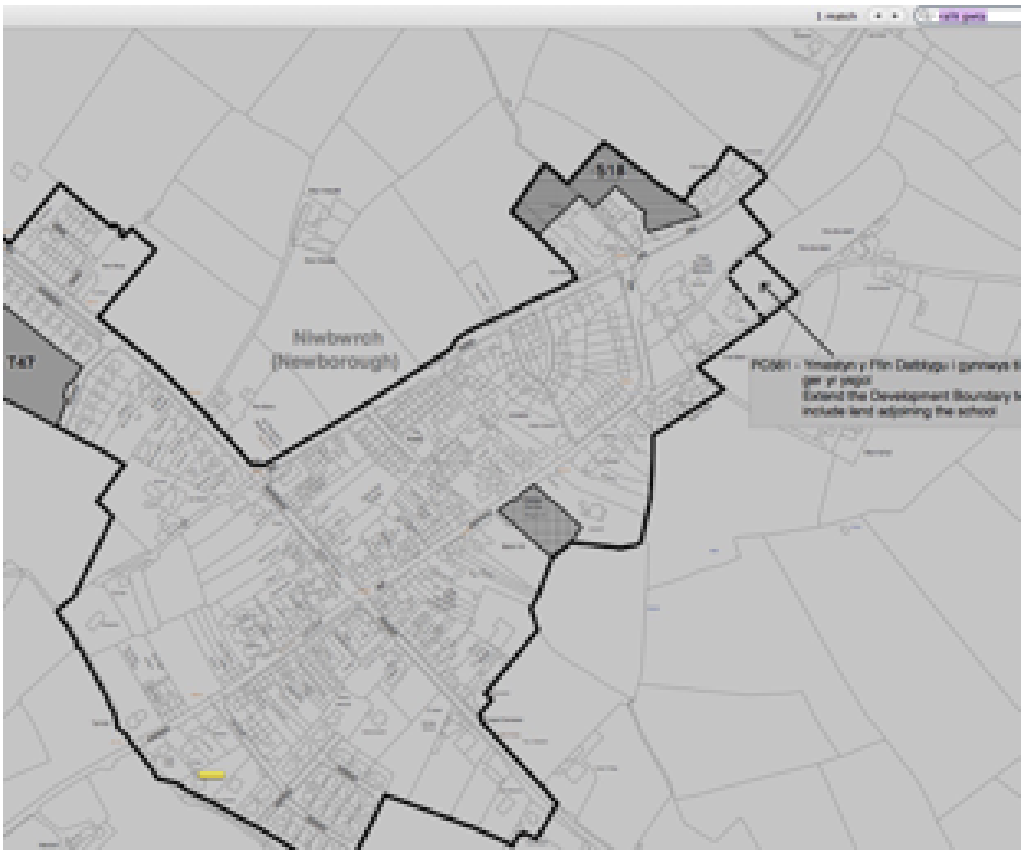
As a young man Will visited Beaumaris courthouse and stood in the dock, little realising his 3x great grandfather had been there for real.

The Rallt Gwta (or Allt Gwta) story

My Evans and later Roberts relatives lived for many years at a house called Rallt Gwta, which means "small rise". For the first few years of my family research I

thought it had been situated in Newborough Warren, and speaking to old-timers in the village they recalled playing on the ruins of a house just after the Second World War.

Old maps came to the rescue, however, and Rallt Gwta is the yellow splodge added (bottom left) to this modern-day map, overlooking the "elephant's back" of Snowdonia. There is a modern bungalow on the plot, still called Rallt Gwta.



The property appears to have been a "church house" that was rented to the poorer classes for a small fee, which went into the parish fund. It is one of two parcels of land set aside by an act of 1815 to help those in poverty.

Rallt Gwta seems to have been central to smuggling in Newborough. In the late 1700s a William Prichard ran "salt and other prohibited items" from the property. He and his comrades are said to have hidden from the excise by "staying in the dunes" near the boundary of the parish of Llanddwyn. We cannot yet place William Prichard in the family.

Thomas Evans held the property in 1845 but it is unclear whether he is a relative. He might well have been Evan Thomas's father.

The smallholding looks to have been rented by Hugh Evans, Will's 3x great grandfather, between the 1841 and 1861 censuses, though it could have been in the family for some time before that. One of the first mentions of Hugh at Rallt Gwta comes in *Hanes Plwyf Niwbwrch*, which says that he, his father and brothers revived the mat-making trade in the village.

In the 1861 census, Hugh was a farmer/labourer, in 1871 he was a labourer/warrener and by 1881 he was a 76-year-old widower and a plain "rabbit catcher – no doubt something he had done since boyhood to keep his and his family's bellies full. Hugh's various court cases mention Rallt Gwta as being searched by local law officials looking for stolen wheat, potatoes or rabbit snares.



Rallt Gwta is recorded as Allt Gwta in a 1910 village history, and the different search enabled Will to find Hugh's father, Evan Thomas – a relationship blurred by patronymic surnames.

AN ANGLESEY LAND DISPUTE

DAMAGES CLAIMED FOR ALLEGED TRESPASS.

At Holyhead County Court, on Tuesday week, his Honour Judge Moss gave judgment in a case in which Mr W. P. Williams, Caeronnen, Bangor, and Mr John Hughes, Hendrefawr, Newborough, claimed damages for alleged trespass against Mr Hugh Roberts, Treherbert.

Mr Harold Evans (Bangor), for plaintiffs, said Mr Williams was the owner of a tenement at Newborough called 'Rallt Gwta, which had been in his family for many generations, and Mr Hughes was his tenant. The defendant's family had been tenants of the place for a great many years, and in the time of defendant's grandfather an encroachment was made on the adjoining waste land, and the piece of land enclosed had been occupied with 'Rallt Gwta ever since. In June last the defendant pulled down some wire fencing, alleging that the enclosed plot never had formed part of 'Rallt Gwta, and had been devised to his sister, Mrs Jane Jones, by the will of her mother.

Mr Richard Roberts, for the defendant, submitted that the land in question had been parish land, and had been enclosed by a person unconnected with either the plaintiff's or defendant's family, and that he had let it to defendant's grandfather. The latter had not paid rent for it for a great many years, and had thus become the owner of it.

His Honour held that there had been an enclosure by defendant's grandfather, who was at the time tenant of 'Rallt Gwta, and that where a tenant encloses on the adjoining waste the enclosure ultimately becomes the property of the landlord. Judgment was given for the plaintiffs for £2 and costs.

Further searches for the house proved worthwhile when the newspaper cutting, above, popped up. Hugh Roberts of Treherbert is the brother of Will's great grandmother Margaret Roberts, and was one of the brothers who moved to South Wales to find a job in the coal mines. The Jane Jones, mentioned, had emigrated to the US. Her daughter Ginnie stayed in the village. NB, "waste" in this context has a strict legal definition. Will has looked for his 2x great grandmother's will but it does not look like a copy exists.
