

VALE OF GLAMORGAN  
AMBASSADOR



LLYSGENNAD  
BRO MORGANNWG

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# *Vale of Glamorgan Mysteries*

## **'The Vale of Glamorgan & Glamorganshire'**

Not surprisingly, historical records about the Vale of Glamorgan, often refer to just 'Glamorgan' or Glamorganshire' and each will be mentioned in this account.

*Glamorgan* or, sometimes, *Glamorganshire* was one of the thirteen historic counties of Wales. It was originally an early medieval petty kingdom of varying boundaries known as Glywysing until taken over by the Normans as a lordship. In later years, Glamorganshire was represented by the three counties of Mid Glamorgan, South Glamorgan and West Glamorgan. The name now survives in Vale of Glamorgan, the most southerly county in Wales, neighbouring those of Cardiff, Bridgend and Rhondda Cynon Taff.



# Introduction

The relative tranquility, the gentle rolling landscapes and spectacular coastal scenery of the Vale of Glamorgan today belie sinister and mysterious aspects of this area’s history. It has been home to notorious murders, a haven for scurrilous pirates and continues to echo with the ghosts of battles and shipwrecked souls from times gone by. Read on to find out more.

WORDS OF <i>Mystery and Mayhem</i>		
ENGLISH	WELSH	PHONETICALLY
Spirit / Ghost	Ysbryd	Us-brid
Pirate	Mor leidr	Mohr-ley-der
Shipwreck	Llongddrylliad	Klong-thre-kliad
Battle	Brwydr	Broo-i-derr
Body	Corff	Corr-ph

# Battles

## THE BATTLE OF STALLING DOWN / BRYN OWEN

The jury is still out on whether the Battle of Stalling Down actually took place between the supporters of Owain Glyndwr and those of King Henry IV of England in 1403, near the village of St Hillary in the Vale, or whether in fact this battle is one of Iolo Morgannwg’s great fictions.


Stalling Down is an area of open land a few miles east of Cowbridge, now the common for the village of St Hillary. The battle was said to have taken place at a site known locally as Bryn Owen, meaning Owen’s Hill. A Roman road traverses the hill, and plausibly it would have been a convenient route for moving a large army from England into west Wales.

According to the Welsh antiquarian and renowned forger, Iolo Morgannwg, the Welsh army drawn from Morgannwg and the Rhondda Valleys region, under the leadership of the Lord of Glyn Rhondda, also included a French contingent. It has also been suggested that Owain Glyndwr was himself present at the battle. The battle of Stalling Down is recorded as having lasted 18 hours and resulted in an appalling defeat for King Henry’s army, the blood being ‘fetlock deep on the horses that survived the bloody battle.’ Iolo’s dramatic account tells that the English army retreated through Cardiff pursued by the Welsh in a terrible thunderstorm that caused widespread flooding.

Explorations in 1896 in nearby Llanbleddian church seemed to add credence to the battle site claim. During Victorian improvements to the church, an oak plank in the floor was discovered and prised up. It revealed a stone stairway descending into a crypt. In the darkness of the crypt, investigators found three hundred male skeletons piled on top of each other without coffins. These remains were re-interred in the churchyard. The clerk’s pew within the church bears an inscription stating that Llanbleddian Church – which is some three miles from the battle ground – was the burial place of the Sweeting family ‘before the war with Owen Glyndwr.’







It is a compelling story with some persuasive evidence, however, the problem stems from the fact that there are no mentions of the Battle of Stalling Down in any early accounts. The earliest recorded reference is late, and found only in the works of the 18th century antiquarian Iolo Morgannwg. Unfortunately, today we know that Iolo took many liberties with historic fact, changing facts and fabricating whole events in order to glorify Wales' standing in the world and in particular, his beloved Glamorgan. The 'ancient manuscript' on which he based his account of Stalling Down has never been traced.

Despite the uncertainty, it cannot be concluded that Stalling Down never occurred. There is a good deal of local tradition connected to it as well as place names, it is just that the academic jury is still out.



## PIRATES

Colyn Dolphin was a notorious Breton pirate of the mid 15th Century. He famously captured Sir Henry Stradling, his wife and heir and held them to ransom until the Stradling estate raised money from the sale of six manors in Glamorgan, Oxford and Monmouthshire.

Following his release, Sir Henry had the watchtower at St Donat's built to provide early warning of pirates. Colyn Dolphin was eventually caught on the Gower Peninsula. After a summary trial he was hanged from a tree in St Donat's park. A more fanciful account (probably borrowed from an earlier account of a local Lord's wife's execution) tells that Dolphin was buried up to his neck in sand in Tresilian Cove and left to drown.



## SMUGGLERS

Barry Island might have a benign appearance today, but it hides a chilling history. It was once, as its name suggests, a true island, and the private domain of smuggler Thomas Knight. He built fortifications around the shoreline, and ran a fleet of heavily-armed smuggling ships from the island, importing spirits and tobacco from the Channel Islands, and soap from Ireland. Knight probably arrived in Barry in 1783, on a 24 gun brig called the *John O'Combe*. At the height of his powers he was reputed to have a force of 60-70 men defending the island from uninvited interest.

Knight's influence grew rapidly, and within a year or so, the customs authorities had difficulty in recruiting members, since the local population had more respect for Barry's smuggling king than for the legitimate crown. Knight's crews did not hesitate to fire on preventive vessels, and the crews of the revenue cutters evidently went in fear of their lives.

Knight's reign was brief, and in 1785 a concerted effort by the authorities dislodged him — he retreated to Lundy. His position as king-pin on Barry Island was taken by another smuggler, named William Arthur. Arthur proved as tough a nut to crack as his predecessor, and the local collector of customs estimated that it would require the efforts of 60 dragoons to once more make the island safe.

## WRECKERS

During the 16th Century, the Vaughan Family lived in Dunraven Castle. The head of the family, Walter Vaughan, once an upstanding member of the community and a magistrate, wasted his entire fortune on fast living and a life of extravagance.

Two of his children drowned in an accident in the nearby sea, so Walter made plans to set up a sea rescue business. Sadly, he was refused permission by the governing body of the time. Walter was so annoyed at this, and possibly deep in grief from the loss of his two sons, that he turned to drink and gambling. One thing led to another, his wife sickened and died, reputedly from a broken heart, his remaining son, by then a young man left to make his fortune in trade on the sea, and his only daughter disowned her father. Vaughan gambled away his family's wealth.

In order to maintain his estate, he began to profit from wrecked ships and to co-operate with a well-known notorious pirate and wrecker called 'Mat of the Iron Hand' (due to his hooked hand). Matt organized a team of local wreckers who lured ships to their doom along the Glamorgan coast, and then plundered them for their treasure, leaving none alive as witnesses. One of the techniques used was to tie lamps on the tails of his sheep at night. As the sheep wandered along the cliff top, they inadvertently lured the ships to their doom.

His ill-gotten lifestyle allegedly came back to haunt him when his sole surviving son became one of the victims of his shipwrecks as he was on his way home from his travels. His body identified from the family seal set in a ring he wore on his finger.

### More fun!

Why not try the Wreckers Run Game out at home; see if you can outwit ship wrecker Walter Vaughn and his dastardly accomplice 'Mat of the Iron Hand'! Or download an family fun activity sheet [www.valeofglamorgan.gov.uk/familyfun](http://www.valeofglamorgan.gov.uk/familyfun)

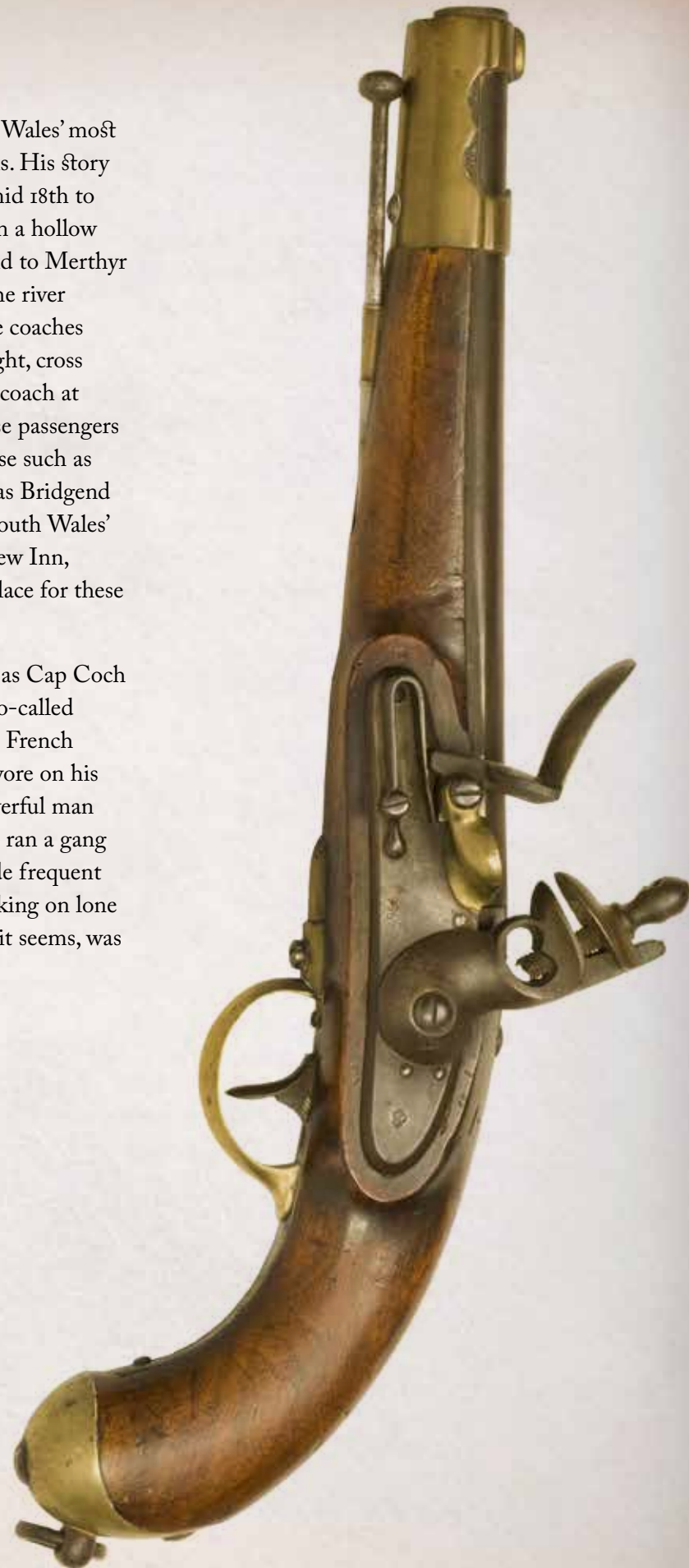




## MURDERERS

Cap Coch is possibly one of south Wales' most notorious and spine chilling villains. His story is set at The New Inn during the mid 18th to early 19th century. This inn stood in a hollow on the track that led from Bridgend to Merthyr Mawr. The main road stopped at the river Ogmore where passengers on stage coaches travelling from the west had to alight, cross over at the ford and catch another coach at Ewenny for London. Many of these passengers were packmen carrying merchandise such as flannel, wool, skins and stockings, as Bridgend at this time was the centre of the south Wales' wool and stocking industry. The New Inn, therefore, was a natural stopping place for these journeymen.

The licensee of the inn was known as Cap Coch for the red, stockingnet cap of the so-called freedom fighters involved with the French revolutionary movement, that he wore on his head. He was reputedly a very powerful man with red hair and a bland face who ran a gang of smugglers and outlaws that made frequent raids on the main road, usually picking on lone travellers, but their richest harvest it seems, was gleaned within the inn itself.



Suspicion first fell on the inn when bodies were discovered at the mouth of the river Ogmore - the discovery of bodies always coincided with the disappearance of travellers in the vicinity. There was no police force during this time, therefore there was no proper investigation, just suspicion and rumor. These mysterious disappearances went on for many years. Cap Coch and his associates became richer and richer, the goods of the murdered travellers found a ready market with the people of the local town.

Cap Coch reputedly died peacefully in 1820 at the age of 90. However, the historic record suggests that he was hanged on Stalling Down near Cowbridge on the charge of stealing a sheep. Another twist in this mystery.

An ancient bridge still crosses the river near to where the inn was situated; this is known as the Merthyr Mawr Dipping Bridge. At the beginning of the 20th century the dilapidated remains of the inn were demolished and the truth came to light.

A cave was found near the kitchen and in it were the remains of some of the booty Cap Coch and his murderous associates had gained. The garden was dug up revealing bodies of murdered victims in rows of twos and threes in every conceivable spot. In one grave several skeletons were unearthed. The search continued beyond the confines of the house to reveal many more corpses, even in the fields some distance away.



# Ghosts

## MALLT Y NOS

St Donat's Castle is reputed to be one of the most haunted places in Wales and has numerous tales of ghosts, which include a perplexing lady named Mallt-y-Nos (Matilda of the Night). She is regularly seen, and always described as wearing a hooded gown of 'dull green'.

In the broader 'supernatural' traditions of Wales, Mallt y Nos or Night Maud, is a crone who rides with Arawn and *Cwn Annwfn*, the otherworldly white hounds of the wild hunt who chase sorrowful, lost souls to Annwfn, the Celtic otherworld. Mallt-y-Nos drives the hounds onward with shrieks and wails, which some say are evil and malicious.

Others say that she was once a beautiful but impious Norman noblewoman who loved hunting so much that she said, "If there is no hunting in heaven, I would rather not go!" They say that she may regret making this wish, as she now cries out in misery rather than joy as she hunts forever under the night sky.



## BLUE LADY OF DUNRAVEN

When Dunraven manor was used as a convalescent hospital during the first World War, the ghost of a young woman, known locally as the Blue Lady, was seen many times by the staff. They claimed they could tell when she had appeared, as she left a prominent perfume behind her, which resembled the yellow mimosa flower. The Blue Lady is also said to walk in the walled gardens.

Some have suggested that she is Lady Vaughan, the tragic wife of Walter Vaughan who reputedly died of a broken heart after the death of two of her children and her husband's increasingly reckless ways.





## WHITE LADY OF LLANMIHANGEL

An old fishpond near the lovely Church of Llanmihangel near Cowbridge is said to be haunted by a White Lady that has “a pale and careworn face and having an expression of intense pain”. She rises out of the pool where she allegedly drowned. In life, it is said her name was Eleanor Dee (or Eleanor *Ddu* in Welsh, meaning black). She was said to have possessed magical powers and to have been a 15th century heiress of Plas Llanmihangel, the local manor. Some considered her a witch, others thought her a lunatic. During this time of persecution, she was made to wear a heavy iron ring around one of her wrists, and during moments of frenzy she was tethered by this ring. Local folklore holds that to see her spirit foretells a death in the village.



## GHOST OF OGMORE CASTLE

Another ghostly White Lady haunts Ogmore Castle. She is said to have killed a greedy treasure seeker who came to plunder the castle ruins. On his first visit he'd encountered the ghost and tried to speak to her for which he was rewarded a few coins from the treasure she guards.

Encouraged, he returned a little while later to relieve her of the burden of looking after so much treasure, but was caught by the White Lady who scratched him. This scratch was blamed for the man wasting away and shortly afterwards he died.

Another little folk tale associated with this part is attached to the stepping stones across the river. Legend has it that they were built to assist a girl who was living in the castle and deeply in love with a man in Merthyr Mawr because the rivers were too dangerous to cross.





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[www.angharadwynne.com](http://www.angharadwynne.com)

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