

# **JOHN YSTUMLLYN**

OR

# **“JACK BLACK,”**

THE HISTORY OF HIS LIFE AND  
TRADITIONS ABOUT HIM SINCE HIS  
CAPTURE IN THE WILDS OF AFRICA  
UNTIL HIS DEATH; HIS DESCENDANTS etc., etc.,  
TOGETHER WITH A PICTURE OF HIM  
IN THE YEAR 1754

BY **ALLTUD EIFION**

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## FOREWORD

To my fellow countrymen,

I undertook to collate the following, due to the fact that the subject of this biography is notable in terms of the way he was brought to this country (as one of the descendants of Ham), especially so at that period in time, namely about a hundred and fifty years ago, when there was no black man in this part of the country; and as all biographies are a commentary on the age in which the subject lived, for that reason efforts should be made to ensure all things notable in an area are not lost to memory.

This is mainly what encouraged me to gather together the following story of John Ystumllyn, hoping that it will be of interest to the reader and especially to the residents of Eifionydd, and a means of keeping the story alive for the generations to come.

Yours truly

ALLTUD EIFION

Tremadoc, January 1888

## CONTENTS

Short notes on the elders of Bronyfoel and Ystumlllyn

A short history of John Ystumlllyn (*Jack Black*)

The tradition about him, heard by former residents of the area who lived at the same time; his removal from Africa (or India, some say) to London and from there to Ystumlllyn.

John loses his place at Ystumlllyn for fleeing to Dolgellau to marry; where the maid of Ystumlllyn was in service, who was there at the same time as John, and in time became his wife.

Also, his descendants from the marriage, where he lived and the last Mansion he worked in.

The cause of his death, the differing date of his death, between the parish register, and the current tombstone that marks his grave.

His supposed age at the time of his death, namely 46 years.

The *englyn* (verse) carved on his tombstone, by Dafydd Shon James, Penrhyndeudraeth, who was the father of one of the same name, who lived in Tremadog, forty years ago, town crier and bell-ringer for the parish of Ynyscynhaiarn.

Also an accurate picture of him, taken from the original painting painted May 11, 1754, by kindness and permission of Owen Evans, Esq., Broom Hall.

## **THE HISTORY OF JOHN YSTUMLLYN OR “JACK BLACK”**

Around the year 1356, at Llys Bronyfoel y Gest, there lived a brave Soldier named Hywel ab Einion ab Gruffydd, who was surnamed Hywel the Axe, as he was reputed to have cut off the head of the King of France's horse during the battle of *Poitiers* under Edward the Black Prince, taking the King prisoner, for which feat he was entered into the Order of Knights on the battlefield. The King also gave him his Mills in Eifionydd and the rates of the Dyfrdwy Mills at Caerleon and the Custodianship of Criccieth Castle. The King also ordered that a Feast be held every year before the Axe, to be enjoyed by twelve men known as Yeomen; the tradition continued until the reign of Queen Elizabeth. Sir Hywel was a direct descendant of Collwyn ap Tangno, one of the Fifteen Tribes of Gwynedd (see “Y Brython”, 1860 edition, p.288). Sir John Wynn in his “History of the Gwydir Family” relates many disputes that existed in Eifionydd between two family branches, namely the Bronyfoel family and the Gesail Gyfarch family. There had been bad blood between them for some time. One day, a cousin of John ap Meredydd, namely Gruffydd ab John ab Goronwy of Gwynfryn (one of the forebears of H.J. Ellis-Nanney, Esquire) went with his servant to Ystumllyn Lake to do some fishing. The fish were taken from the servant and he was beaten up, on the orders of Hywel ab Rhys of Fronyfoel, the owner of the lake. Gruffydd ab John ab Goronwy was so angry that he challenged Hywel ab Rhys to a fight, which he refused; then Gruffydd ab John and his relatives attacked Bronyfoel in a way he had seen in the wars in France. He set the outhouses on fire, with the aim of burning the Hall. Then Hywel ab Rhys went to the window and shot Gruffydd ab John, killing him. He was taken prisoner to Caernarfon Castle, but at the trial it was judged that he had committed the offence in defence of his home and his life, but he never returned to Bronyfoel; the house gradually fell to rack and ruin. Bettws Treflys was their family chapel, and it is likely that the few surrounding farms were formed into a small parish, with the church dedicated to Michael the Archangel. But the family built Bala Ystumllyn, and they started building a family chapel at nearby ‘Ynys y Capel’; but instead of completing the chapel, they obtained part of the Chancel of Ynyscynhaiarn when that church was detached from Penmorfa, to join the parish of Criccieth.

The family of Hywel ab Rhys mixed with the Wynns of Penyberth and the Wynns of Rhwng-y-ddwryd; their lineage can be found quite fully in the ‘*History of the Gwydir Family*’ and in ‘Y Brython’, as mentioned earlier.

### **THE ADVENT OF THE BLACK BOY TO YSTUMLLYN**

It is uncertain which of the family brought the BLACK BOY to Ystumllyn\*. The tradition taken as being correct seventy years ago, which the author also heard from his mother who was brought up in Ystumllyn, and born around the same time as John Ystumllyn died, was that one of the family, who had a Yacht, caught the boy in a wood in Africa and brought him home to Ystumllyn.

\*Which of the Wynns brought Jack Black to Ystumllyn? It is possible it was Ellis Wynn the elder, as Major Wynn was born in 1757. It is said that Major Wynn was a superb swordsman; he could remove a shirt-button with his word, without the wearer's knowledge, and many other such antics and acts of valour.

They judged him to be about eight years old, and they took him to the Church in Criccieth, or Ynys, to be christened, and called him *John Ystumllyn*. When he first came there, he was very frightened, and afraid of all strangers; he had no language, only something akin to a howl, or screams.

Some of his descendants stated that a number of black boys arrived in London, and that Ellis Wynne of Ystumllyn's sister, who lived in London, sent him as a gift to her brother. But John himself said that he was on the banks of a stream amid woodland attempting to catch a moorhen when white men arrived and caught him and took him away with them to the ship. His mother, he said, could see them, and ran after them uttering frightful howls. Some say he was around 13 years old when he was captured, but as he had no language other than sounds similar to the howling of a dog, it was difficult to decide what age he was. Considering the date he arrived there and the date he died, it can be judged that he was around 16 years of age in 1754, namely the date when his portrait was sketched (a copy of which can be seen at the front of this book). The likelihood is that the first tradition (as related by my mother) is closest to the truth, that he was an *eight* year old boy. They had considerable difficulty for a long time in domesticating him, and he was not allowed to go out; but after some efforts by the ladies, he learnt both languages, and he learnt to write; then he was placed in the garden to learn horticulture, which he did more or less perfectly, as he was very ingenious. He could turn his hand to almost anything he saw someone else do, such as making small boats, wooden spoons, wicker baskets etc. He was also very fond of flowers and a good florist.

#### JOHN YSTUMLLYN AS A YOUNG MAN

He grew into a handsome and vigorous young man, and although he was black in colour, the young ladies of the area doted on him and there was much rivalry between them in order to get John as a suitor! When he was at work in the garden, John would get some bread, cheese and ale from the Plas, at a specific time of day, and the maid, namely Margaret (who later became his wife) would be sent to deliver the meal to the garden. But she was so afraid of the black man that she used to leave the food and drink in a corner of the garden, running away quickly. But it was she who, in time, became his wife! And as there is no accounting for young women's taste (fancy) in their menfolk, neither can it be guessed why the women of the area contended with each other for "John Ystumllyn".

#### JOHN YSTUMLLYN RUNNING AWAY TO MARRY

Margaret, the maid from Ystumllyn went to Ynysgain Bach, Criccieth, to serve a family that was related to her. In time, John went there to court her; the master of the house heard a noise in the kitchen, went there and to his utter shock saw something black in the form of a man; he had such a fright that he ran back and assured his wife he had seen the Black Devil in the kitchen!

Margaret Gruffydd (this was her maiden surname), daughter of Hendre Mur, Trawsfynydd, went to Dolgellau to serve the wife of a clergyman there, who was an aunt of hers. Whilst she was in Dolgellau, John of Ystumllyn came, having run away to get married. She ran away too, before breakfast, and they were married in

Dolgellau Church around the year 1768. His best man was Griffith Williams, Eisteddfa, the son of Rev. R. Griffith B.A., Vicar of Criccieth and Ynys, the great-grandfather of Humphrey Gruffydd, Cae Canol, Penmorfa.

John lost his place in Ystumllyn due to running away to get married; after getting married they lived for a while at Ynysgain Fawr, acting as Land Stewards.\* They had seven children, - Robert, who died as a baby, Lowri who died as a baby, Lowri the second, born in 1774; Gwen and Margaret, who did not marry. Ann who married in Liverpool and who died and was buried there. Lowri married Robert Jones, Butler, in Madryn, Lleyn (where both were in service), the son of Ellis Jones of Chester, Shopkeeper (formerly of Ruthin), from the family of Mr R. Lloyd, *Agent* to Sir Joseph Huddart, Brynkir. She had a daughter named Anne, who now lives in Porthmadog. Lowri's second husband was John Mcnamare, *foreigner*.

John Ystumllyn and Margaret Gruffydd's son, namely Richard Jones was very keen on hunting, and followed the gentry of the area at the *Hunts*, as was usual in this part of the country at that time; and when he grew up, became *Huntsman* to the Honourable Lord Newborough of Glynllifon, and served him for a lengthy 58 year period. He lived in a place called Cae'r-geifr, Llandwrog. He was a tall, calm man, who wore a Top Hat, Velvet Coat with a high white collar around his throat. After he was overcome by old age, he gave up his job and Lord Newborough gave him a pension as long as he lived; he has family remaining in Llandwrog. He was a quiet, gentle man who had no malice in him; he died aged 92 in the year 1862 and was buried in Llandwrog cemetery, although his great desire was to be buried in his father's grave at Ynyscynhaiarn.

Ann, daughter of John Ystumllyn, married one James Martin, in Liverpool, Musical Instrument Vendor. He was seen once visiting Criccieth, and could play every musical instrument excellently.

Returning to the history of "John Ystumllyn" and his wife Margaret. It appears that he got his place back at Ystumllyn, but for how long he remained at Ynysgain Fawr is not known for sure.

At the end of his life he went to live in a place called Y NHYRA ISA\*\*, a small thatched cottage in a valley between Cefn-y-meysydd Uchaf and Tyddyniolyn,

\*It was around this time that Ellis Jones left and went to Llanymafon isaf, he being the father of Evan Ellis, Brongadair Bach, and grandfather of Robert Evans, Pentrefelin.

\*\* 'Nanhyran' is the spelling in the parish register. Ellis Owen, Cefnmeusydd thought its meaning was 'Nant Harri Ddu'. It is certain that it was an ancient place, judging from the ruined walls and foundations around, many cleared away a long time ago. Old querns were found here. A coin dating from Queen Elizabeth's reign was found in a field 40 years ago. The name of Cyhuran ab Cïan, the mighty warrior, appears in the Gododdin of Aneurin Gwawdrudd. There are many ancient names close by – Gallt Rhodri; Tyddyn Iolo or Iolyn; Llwynymafon, or Mabon perhaps; Caegwenllian, Lldiart dunawd; Ffynon dunawd; Cae'r dunawd; where an urn was found in the ground; also Mur Gwgan; y Garnedd Hir; Gesail Gyfarch, where an ancient tombstone was found which defied the greatest linguists of the land, who failed to decipher it. Also some distance to the West there is an old cemetery on the land of Llwynymafon Isaf, where many urns were found. Perhaps Nant Cyhuran was the original name.

surrounded by a large garden, which was given to John together with a small field in front of the house. Ellis Wynne, Esq., gave him possession as recognition for his service.

It is not known for certain when John left the old family of Ystumlllyn, but that it was in Maesyneuoedd, with a branch of the family, that John was serving at the end of his life. He died after a lengthy illness, suffering from Jaundice at the age of 46 it is thought, at his home in July of 1786 according to the register, even though it is the same month in the year 1791 that appears on his tombstone; how this can be reconciled we do not know, unless we can trust the tradition I heard from his grand-daughter, namely that the first tombstone was somehow damaged, and that the present one is a second tombstone erected by Owen Ellis, father of the late Ellis Owen. It is said that he was buried on a Sunday, and it is not known why; whether it was impossible to leave him unburied any longer, or some other insurmountable circumstances. The following verse ('englyn') appears on his tombstone in Ynyscynhaiarn cemetery, composed by Dafydd Shon James, Penrhyndeudraeth, father of Dafydd Shon James, Tremadog, the *town crier* and parish bellringer.

(English paraphrase): I was born in India – and then  
In Wales I was christened;  
Here in this dark, cold place  
I lie under a grey slate.”

It is evident that there is a small error in it (the Welsh original), but it is quite descriptive; also, it is obvious from his picture that he was not a native of India. Many people would visit his grave in years gone by, as no black man had ever been buried in that cemetery before, as far as anyone knew.

Margaret, his wife, outlived him by many years. She was a quiet and cheerful old lady; she died in Nhyra\* at a fair age, namely 81 years, in the year 1828. She never wore spectacles, and she could see to sew and knit up until a few months before her death, and she outlived John, her husband by over 40 years.

#### A FEW OBSERVATIONS ABOUT JOHN YSTUMLLYN, ETC.

At that time, people in the area had strange ideas about the BLACK MAN, because he was so unusual. Once, two maids spoke about him, and he was somewhere nearby and could hear them - “Do you think” one said to the other “that man’s blood is red like the blood of white men?”. Her friend had no chance to answer, because John answered her, saying: "Silly fool, you kill a black hen and a white hen, and you’ll see the blood of both is red.”

\*It is said that the family of Ystumlllyn transferred Y NHYRA ISA, and the Garden and part of the field in front of the house to the ownership of John Ystumlllyn and his descendants. After Ellis Wynne, Ystumlllyn, died, his widow married in 1767, with Ambros Lewis of Anglesey, who died in 1792 and Mrs Wynne Lewis died in 1799. After her, the inheritance passed to Humphrey Jones, Solicitor, Machynlleth, pawnbroker. It is said that he went to see Margaret Jones, y Nhyra, widow of John Ystumlllyn, and persuaded her to yield the Document, that she would get it for her lifetime, and the family for 6p per year; but they were forced to pay a pound a year, and the field was taken from them, as seen today. The Ystumlllyn Inheritance now belongs to Mr Owen Lloyd-Evans, Broom Hall.

The children of the area were very much afraid of him, because they had not seen a black man before. John was a very honest man, with no malice, and was respected by the gentry and the common people alike.

He was considered by the old folk as a very moral man; he told a neighbour of his when he was on his deathbed that his main regret was that he played the *crwth* (fiddle) on Sundays at Ystumlllyn and Masyneuoedd. The colour of his skin drew a lot of attention in those days, and his position with the most important gentry of the area, drew more of the attention of the common people, than anyone else.

We will mention here one or two circumstances we deem worthy of record. Once, by mistake, the door of the garden at Ystumlllyn was left open, a sow entered the garden in John's absence, causing great damage there. He came there after her, and during the course of moving the obstinate trespasser from the garden, he broke its leg, and he then consulted the clergymen how to inform the Family of the damage caused by the sow and how it came to break its leg. Some tried to get him to say that the misfortune took place as it was going over the wall, - "No, no", said John "I'll not sell my soul to the devil in order to try to save myself"; so when the inquiry came, the mistress asked John "Who broke the sow's leg?" "I did" said John "and I'll break the leg of anyone who comes into the garden again to destroy my work". Upon this, the enquiry stopped.

The Cwm Bach farm (now near Tremadog) belonged to the family, and John would occasionally be ordered to seek butter and cheese etc. from there, as the gentry let out the land of Ystumlllyn at that time; and when they needed provisions, it was John that they sent. The name of the tenant of Cwm Bach at that time (1773) was Edward Jones, son of Shon Gruffydd, Ymwllch, and it appears it was his widow Betty Parry (one of the Penychain family) who was there during the incident now being mentioned. Betty Parry was a very frugal old lady, but when *Jack Black* went there, she welcomed him warmly, and provided a good feast every time for *Mr Thiack*, as she called him (she was his wife's cousin). There was a sly and deceitful young servant in Cwm Bach, who knew of the welcome *Jack Black* got when he came there, and so he blacked himself with soot to look as much like Jack as he could, and he called with Betty Parry in the late evening, giving the usual orders from Ystumlllyn, and got a good feast from her. The goods were sent to Ystumlllyn: as no-one knew about the orders, the messenger was asked who ordered them, he said that John had been there at a particular time. When John, the messenger and the mistress were brought together, face to face, John stated unequivocally that he had not been there at the stated time. Betty Parry came there and swore blind that "their black man had been there, there was no other black man in the country except John". In time, the real story reached Ystumlllyn, that the old lady had been duped by her servant, then everything continued without any fuss. It is said that the wag who carried out the joke was one of the sons of Castell near Penmorfa.

Another time when a similar joke was carried out with John was when he was in the service of the Wynn family of Maesneuoedd. Some rogues ordered Garden Seeds



in his name, impersonating him; this greatly affected him, when he found out, and it is said that this was one of the causes of the Jaundice he developed, which ultimately claimed his life. The doctor who treated him was Doctor Robert Isaac Roberts, the author's grandfather.

The late Ellis Owen, Cefnmeusydd, use to relate an interesting story about Margaret Jones, y Nhyra, at Penmorfa Fair when Richard her son (Richard Jones, *Huntsman*, Glynllifon, later) was around 2 years old, and she took him on her arm on the afternoon of the Mayday Fair, as was the practice in those days, and John Ystumlyn went to the Fair in the evening. The child saw his father a distance away and shouted 'Dada, Dada'; then his mother said to her friends "have you seen such a smart child as this one, recognising his father among so many people," without considering that his father was black as soot in the midst of white people; as the old adage says – "The crow sees its chick as white" ("Gwyn y gwêl y fran ei chyw")

Picture of Jack Black 1754

Taken from the original painting of the above date

The following *englyn* (verse) by Dafydd Shon James, Penrhyndeudraeth can be seen on his tombstone:

(English paraphrase): I was born in India – and then  
In Wales I was christened;  
Here in this dark, cold place  
I lie under a grey slate.”