

December 2021



Dear Club Members,

Today we're looking at a bit of Welsh history, John Ystumlyn was the first well-recorded black person in North Wales, and was also one of the first Black British gardeners. Of course John Ystumlyn was not the name he was born with, it's not known exactly where he came from, it's likely he was a victim of the African Slave trade. However during his early life he was taken by the Wynn family to their Ystumlyn estate in Criccieth. He was then christened, and given the name by which he was known for the rest of his life.

The use of a placename as a surname was not uncommon at that time, and places are still often used in the area of Wales where I live, to help differentiate between individuals. There's a relatively small pool of very popular Welsh surnames, and historically a small set of traditional first names, so you need something to help communicate exactly which person you're talking about.

Once in Wales John learned English and Welsh and spent his life working in horticulture and land management in the area around the Wynn family's estates. He married a local woman, and had seven children. Five of whom survived, and their descendants still live in the area today. He died aged 48.

John's date of birth is recorded as being around 1738, and he died in 1786. This was the peak of the British participation in the Atlantic slave trade. The abolition of the slave trade wasn't passed by Parliament until 1807. Slavery was considered to be illegal in England (and therefore Wales) as of 1774, so John was technically the property of the Wynn family on his arrival in this country, but did live his life as a free man. On the Ystumlyn estate John seems to have been treated with kindness for the most part. Though arriving in a foreign country and having no way to communicate must have been terrifying. The family mustn't have regarded John as property, as he was allowed to leave his employment in the gardens of the estate to become a land steward upon his marriage to Margaret Gruffydd. In later life John returned to the employment of the Wynn family, working on the estate of Maesyneuadd, near Talsarnau. As John aged, in recognition of his service Ellis Wynn gave John the use of a house with its own garden, and after John's death his widow was allowed to continue living there for another 40 years. The couple's only son served as huntsman to the family, and in turn received a pension in his old age.

After a tragic start to his life it seems clear that John found happiness and purpose in his new home in North Wales. Accounts seem to indicate that he did face prejudice due to the colour of his skin, and was occasionally subjected to ignorant comments, but for the most part he seems to have been able to live a life where he was accepted as being part of the local community.

We have a portrait of John, aged 16, painted by an unknown artist, and you can still visit his grave at St Cynhaearn's Church, Ynyscynhaearn, now under the care of the Friends of Friendless Churches. On the headstone is inscribed

*Yn India gynna'm ganwyd a nghamrau
Yng Nghymru'm bedyddiwyd
Wele'r fan dan lechan lwyd
Du oeraidd ym daearwyd.*

Born in India, to Wales I came
To be baptised
See this spot, a grey slate marks
My cold resting place

The references to India suggest John may not have come to the UK directly from Africa, but instead had been transported across the Atlantic to the British West Indies and from there back to Britain.

In modern times, with a desire to recognise the long history of Black people in Wales and the UK as a whole, John's story has been told more widely. It's impossible to know how many Black people were living in Wales in much of the past. Parish records of births, marriages and deaths do not record skin colour. Some have been identified, particularly in South Wales, but John's story is unique in that we know so much about him. He was clearly a talented gardener, so it seems appropriate that this year a Rose was named after him. Plant breeders often use historical and current famous figures as names for the new plants. This rose is one of the few plants that is named after a black historical figure.

Do go and take a look at the further links below, particularly so you can hear how to say John's name. The local MP, Liz Saville-Roberts, told his story in British Parliament as part of Black History month.. I've also mentioned Friends of Friendless Churches in this months letter, if you do Twitter or Instagram their daily posts sharing the history of the churches in their care are fascinating.

Happy Spinning

Katie

Further Reading/ Watching-

We to Built Britain- campaigning group wise work led to the John Ystumlllyn rose.

Twitter thread bringing together lots of stories and information-

https://twitter.com/Zehra_Zaidi/status/1450937395063500805?s=20

Podcast discussing the rose-

<https://rhs.podigee.io/287-rose-legacy>

<https://www.hortweek.com/horticulture-week-podcast-rose-remember-18th-century-welsh-black-gardener-john-ystumlllyn/ornamentals/article/1731051>

News articles about the launch of the rose-

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-58983377>

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-wales-58988121>

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/oct/21/new-rose-named-after-one-of-britains-first-known-black-gardeners-john-ystumllyn>

<https://atlantablackstar.com/2021/11/02/18th-century-black-gardener-kidnapped-from-africa-as-a-child-honored-with-yellow-rose-for-lifes-work/>

General links about John Ystumlyn's life-

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Ystumlyn

<https://gwallter.com/books/john-ystumllyn-an-african-in-18th-century-eifionydd.html>

<https://www.black-boy-inn.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/blacklackHistoryEnglish.pdf>

St Cynhaearn's Church-

<https://friendsoffriendlesschurches.org.uk/church/st-cynhaearns-ynyscynhaearn-gwynedd/>

Podcast

Fibre Content- In case your parcel is missing the label

50% Superwash Merino

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