

These are extracts from a talk given by J. Mansel Thomas in the BBC Welsh Home Service in 1962

A few days after his 88th birthday Phil Tanner died suddenly in his sleep. It was just like him to do something unexpected. His whole cheerful life long he had sung to the people of Gower and had become something of a phenomenon.

The speech of Gower is a dialect of English and although he never left Wales in his life, old Phil had a repertoire of English folksongs and ballads that really seem inexhaustible. "I couldn't go to bed without a song, boy", he said to me once. And if you visited the quiet village of Llangennith, say before the war, you would be pretty certain to hear Phil's voice, singing as he was doing a bit of hedging and ditching, or leaning on a stile, or sitting with his pipe at the door of his tiny white-washed cottage perched between the wind-swept sand dunes and the bracken covered hill or, more often, singing in the bar of the pub and the bigger the audience the better.

He was a true folk singer. He learned his songs from his father and his grandfather and any journeyman weaver who would call at his father's mill. He never put a word or note down on paper. And he sang a song to tell a tale, not to display his talent.

Even as an old man he was an impressive sight, in his homespun suit turning green with age. He was erect and dignified, over six foot, handsome grey bearded, with contented cheeks, a straight nose and a forehead almost unlined.

If he was asked "to take a corner" he would begin a little ritual. He would look carefully round his audience, clear

his throat, hum the key, tilt his head back a little, then he was off, lost in the changing moods of the words.

He would sing through the perhaps 15 verses with quiet control and artistry. And excellent diction, even when he had lost every tooth in his head. Then, when he came to the end of the song, he would repeat the last few words. Or the title. This was an ancient habit of folksingers, so I found out later. It was a charm to stop anyone stealing their song.

Phil Tanner enriched life for his fellow parishioners, though he wouldn't always admit it. He refused to conform. He preferred singing to working.

But quite unexpectedly, when he was 86 years of age, Phil Tanner became famous. By then he was in an old people's home, with a ready-made audience and a matron to wash his beard. Through the "Gower Society" he was 'discovered' by the BBC. W.R.Owen could tell of the time he went down to Gower to supervise the recording of his songs. But both W.R. and his stock of discs were exhausted before old Phil had half finished.

This brief blaze of glory brought him in a few pounds and made him richer than he had ever been in his life. I'm putting this by for a decent burial', he used to say. But he needn't have bothered. I remember his funeral. He'd have chuckled if he had been there to see it. Ministers of religion, councillors, university scholars, admirers from as far away as London, had come to salute the passing of a unique character, the last link with the colourful self-reliant past of Gower. And fair play to them, his fellow parishioners turned out to a man. That was 12 years ago. But in this corner of Wales at least Phil Tanner, that twinkling old artist, will never be forgotten.

(A CD '*The Gower Nightingale*' is now available)

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