

A personal selection of Wessex, British Isles and world history.

“Time passes. Listen. Time passes. Come closer now. Only you can hear the houses sleeping in the streets in the slow deep salt and silent black, bandaged night.”
Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood*

This month J&T 174 looks at some far-off lands. Namely Timbuktu, the state of Greek Youth and Cambria, or Cymru. Wales to you and me.

TIM & LEO¹

For those of us educated in the West, Timbuktu brings to mind Africa’s exotic and unknown from somewhere between the worlds of Wren’s *Beau Geste* and Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.

Situated in Sub-Saharan Africa, in the country of Mali, Timbuktu was once an important trading centre and also a concentration of scholars. This was greatly stimulated by Mali’s Mansa Musa who reigned from 1312 to 1337 and who was keen to establish a centre of learning.



Perhaps most famous among the accounts written about Timbuktu is that by Leo Africanus. He was born El Hasan ben Muhammed el-Wazzan-ez-Zayyati in Granada in 1485 so no wonder he changed his name. His family was among the thousands of Muslims expelled by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabel after their reconquest of Spain in 1492. We have often had cause to mention the Jewish diaspora from Spain, but the brain-drain also applied to the Muslims.

His parents settled in Morocco, and Leo studied in Fes before accompanying his uncle on diplomatic missions throughout North Africa. During these travels, he visited Timbuktu. As a young man he was captured by pirates and presented as an exceptionally learned slave to Pope Leo X, who freed him, baptised him and commissioned him to write a detailed survey of Africa. His accounts provided most of what Europeans then knew about the Africa and inspired explorers.

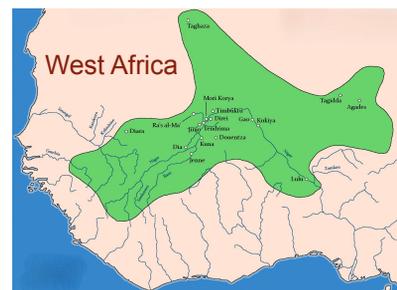
Describing Timbuktu when the Songhai Empire* was at its height:

The rich king of Tombuto hath many plates and sceptres of gold, some whereof weigh 1300 pounds. ... He hath always 3000 horsemen ... (and) a great store of doctors, judges, priests, and other learned men, that are bountifully maintained at the king’s cost and charges.

There were abundant supplies of locally produced grain, cattle, milk and butter, though there were neither gardens nor orchards surrounding the city.

The inhabitants are very rich, especially the strangers who have settled in the country But salt is in very short supply because it is carried here from Tegaza, some 500 miles from Timbuktu. I happened to be in this city at a time when a load of salt sold for eighty ducats. The king has a rich treasure of coins and gold ingots.

*The Songhai were a breakaway part of Mali that formed a major empire (including Timbuktu) based on the city of Gao in the 15th and 16th centuries.



Throughout the years he spent in the Roman Curia, Leo taught Arabic to many Christian scholars craving to know about Islam. He translated many documents into Arabic and wrote vocabulary in Spanish, Latin, Italian, Hebrew as well as his native Arabic.

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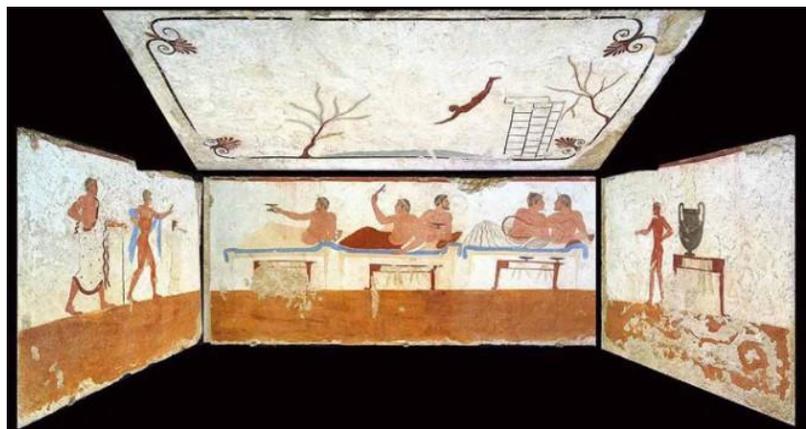
THE YOUTH OF YESTERDAY

On the Amalfi Coast south of Naples lies the small town of Roman Paestum, clinging to the cliffs. Above the town are the magnificent remnants of its temples. These predate the Romans, the town being originally Poseidonia and forming part of *Magna Graecia*.

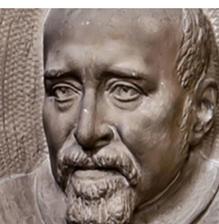


In 1968 Mario Napoli and his team of archaeologists, uncovered a 480 BCE tomb made of slabs of Travertine limestone covered in frescoes. Basically two scenes are shown. Firstly a symposium with a game of kottabos in progress. We have discussed this before but, put simply, rather inebriated aristocratic young men, reclining on couches (klinai) are flicking their wine dishes (kylix) in order to try and aim the dregs at a target. The tomb's ceiling depicts a youth (ephebos) diving from a height into water. Napoli thought that this represented the dead leaving this world towards the afterlife, purifying his soul through water. However, other scholars feel that it could be a *petauristarius*, an aerial acrobat that entertained at symposia. The all-male protagonists lead another scholar to quote from the poet Anacreon, *Burning and drunk with love, I dive into the grey sea from the white rock*.

Philippa Joseph in *History Today* discusses *The Diver of Paestum: Youth, Eros and the Sea in Ancient Greece* by Tonio Hölscher, translated by Robert Savage and published by Polity (available from bookshop.org). Tonio explains that Greek life was highly structured with a child (pais) brought up in the home in the social order of the city (polis). As an adolescent he would have spent his time in the gymnasia or doing military training. This included hunting with a spear (dory) or sword (xiphos). Part of this experience would include swimming in the sea, as well as diving off cliffs or structures built for sighting shoals of tuna. Tonio points out that such scenes are used to decorate pottery. So perhaps the diver simply captures the *suspended instant of descent....pure surrender to the senses*. He concludes that the diver and the symposium capture the zest for life which the unfortunate entombed adolescent was missing.



HANES CYMRU



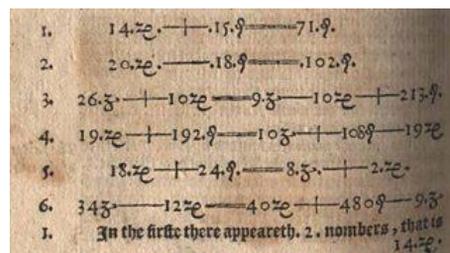
Looking at past J&Ts it occurred to us that we had not featured much of Welsh history (hanes Cymru). So here is a bit of a catch-up.

Unequaled record²: Robert Recorde born around 1510 was the second and last son of Thomas and Rose Recorde of Tenby, Pembrokeshire. Recorde entered the University of Oxford in about 1525, and was elected a Fellow of All Souls College there in 1531, a position that indicates recognition as a distinguished authority in a particular field. In Robert's case, it was medicine and



he went to the University of Cambridge to take the degree of M.D. in 1545. He afterwards returned to Oxford, where he publicly taught mathematics, as he had done prior to going to Cambridge. He invented the “equals” sign, which consists of two horizontal parallel lines, stating that no two things can be more equal. His first book was *The Grounde of Artes*. Published in 1543, this book of simple arithmetic was so popular that it continued to be published for 150 years after his death. Shown below-right, is his *The Whetstone of Witte* (1557 Image provided by Tenby Museum and Art Gallery).

It appears that he later went to London, and acted as physician to King Edward VI and to Queen Mary, to whom some of his books are dedicated. He was made controller of the Royal Mint and Comptroller of Mines and Monies in Ireland. After being sued for defamation by a political enemy, he was arrested for debt and died in the King’s Bench Prison, Southwark, by the middle of June 1558.



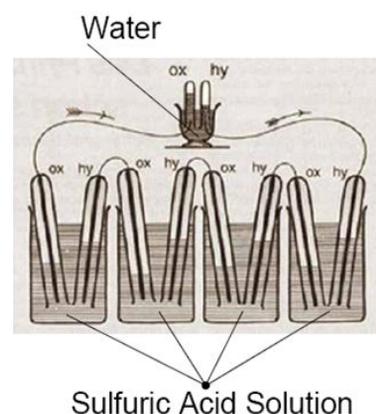
Power to the people³: A fuel cell is an electrochemical cell that converts the chemical energy of a fuel (often hydrogen) and an oxidizing agent (often oxygen) into electricity through a pair of redox (loss and gain of electrons) reactions. Sir William Robert Grove, FRS FRSE (1811 – 1896) was a Welsh judge and physical scientist.



In 1839, Grove developed a novel form of electric cell which used zinc and platinum electrodes exposed to two acids and separated by a porous ceramic pot. Grove announced the latter development to the Académie des Sciences in Paris in 1839. In 1840 Grove invented one of the first incandescent electric lights, which was later perfected by Thomas Edison’s Electric Light Company. Later that year, he gave another account of his development at the British Association for the Advancement of Science meeting in Birmingham, where it aroused the interest of Michael Faraday. On Faraday’s invitation Grove presented his discoveries at the prestigious Royal Institution Friday Discourse on 13 March 1840.

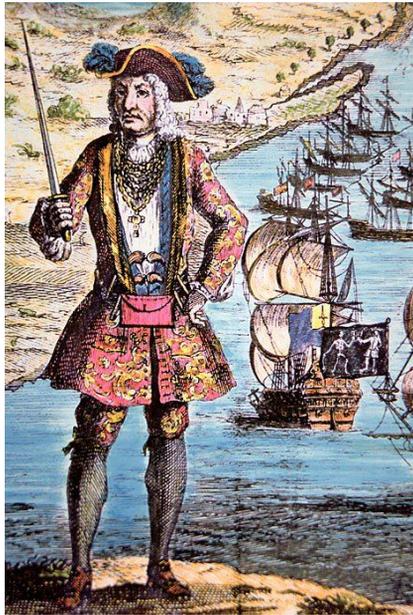
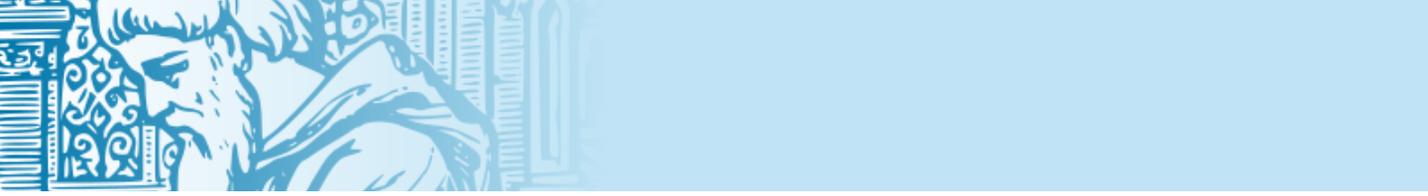
Grove’s presentation made his reputation, and he was soon proposed for Fellowship of the Royal Society. Grove also attracted the attention of John Peter Gassiot, a relationship that resulted in Grove becoming the first professor of experimental philosophy at the London Institution in 1841. Grove’s inaugural lecture in 1842 was the first announcement of what Grove called the correlation of physical forces, in modern terms, the conservation of energy.

In 1842, Grove developed the first fuel cell, which produced electrical energy by combining hydrogen and oxygen. In developing the cell and showing that steam could be disassociated into oxygen and hydrogen, and the process reversed, he was the first person to demonstrate the thermal dissociation of molecules into their constituent atoms. The first demonstration of this effect, he gave privately to Faraday, Gassiot and Edward William Brayley, his scientific editor.



Shiver me timbers⁴: Bartholomew Roberts (1682 – 1722), born John Roberts, was a Welsh pirate who was the most successful pirate of the Golden Age of Piracy. During his piratical career, he took over 400 prizes (ships). Roberts raided off the Americas and the West African coast between 1719 and 1722; he is also noted for creating his own pirate code, and adopting an early variant of the Skull and Crossbones flag.

In 1719, Roberts was second mate on the slave ship *Princess* under Captain Abraham Plumb. In early June that year, the *Princess* was anchored at Anomabu which is situated along the Gold Coast of West Africa, when she was captured by pirates. The pirates were in two vessels, *Royal Rover* and *Royal James*, and were led by captain Howell Davis. Davis, like Roberts, was a Welshman, originally from Milford Haven in Pembrokeshire. Roberts and several others of the crew of the *Princess* were forced to join the pirates.



Davis quickly discovered Roberts' abilities as a navigator and took to consulting him. He was also able to confide information to Roberts in the Welsh language, thereby keeping it hidden from the English and international crewmen. Roberts is said to have been reluctant to become a pirate at first, but quickly came to see the advantages of this new lifestyle and saw it as a great opportunity for him. A few weeks after Roberts' capture, Royal James had to be abandoned because of worm damage. Royal Rover headed for the island of Príncipe. Davis hoisted the flags of a British man-of-war and was allowed to enter the harbour. After a few days, Davis invited the governor to lunch on board his ship, intending to hold him hostage for a ransom. Davis had to send boats to collect the governor, and he was invited to call at the fort for a glass of wine first. The Portuguese had discovered that their visitors were pirates. They ambushed Davis' party on its way to the fort, shooting Davis dead.

A new captain had to be elected. Davis' crew was divided into "Lords" and "Commons", and it was the "Lords" who had the right to propose a name to the remainder of the crew. Within six weeks of his capture, Roberts was elected captain. This was unusual, especially as he had objected to serving on

the vessel. Historians believe he was elected for his navigational abilities and his personality, which history reflects was outspoken and opinionated.

He accepted the Honour, saying, that since he had *dipp'd his Hands in Muddy Water, and must be a Pyrate, it was better being a Commander than a common Man.*

In 1722 his luck ran out when HMS Swallow caught the pirates drunk after capturing yet another ship. *Roberts himself made a gallant figure, at the time of the engagement, being dressed in a rich crimson damask waistcoat and breeches, a red feather in his hat, a gold chain round his neck, with a diamond cross hanging to it, a sword in his hand, and two pairs of pistols slung over his shoulders.* Captain Roberts was killed by grapeshot, which struck him in the throat while he stood on the deck. Before his body could be captured by the Swallow, Roberts's wish to be buried at sea with all his arms and ornaments on (a request he had repeated in life) was fulfilled by his crew, who weighed his body down and threw it overboard after wrapping it in his ship's sail. It was never found.



THE DESTRUCTION OF THE JEWS⁵

I am often told that 'religion has a lot to answer for' but of course it is mankind that has a lot to answer for and religion is just given as the excuse to be nasty, even though the actions may be completely the opposite to the tenets of the faith as we see it today.

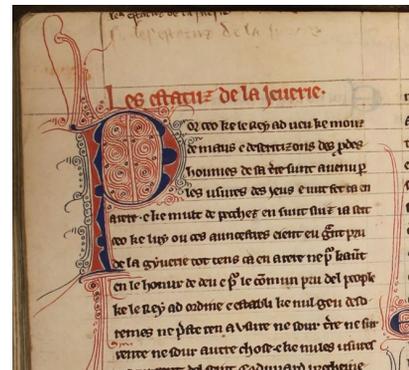
In medieval England, the Monarchy saw the Jewish community as their personal property, to both protect and to exploit. William the Conqueror brought over Jewish people from Normandy to act as his financiers and money-lenders. Christians were not allowed to lend money at interest (usury) and so the tightly-controlled Jewish community filled that roll. Although their lives were circumscribed they were at least under the king's protection. This was necessary as the public in general were suspicious of those who did not only not conform but were even supposed to be 'responsible for the death of Jesus'. One persistent rumour told that Jews regularly used the blood of Christians in their passover rituals (Blood libel). These attitudes were exacerbated by Christian preaching, and in 1190 one of the worst anti-Semitic massacres of the Middle Ages took place in York where the entire Jewish population of the city (around 150 people) were killed.



Jewish fortunes deteriorated dramatically under the reign of King John who was always short of money and the Jews were an easy target for extra *tallages*, specific sums of money that did not require new laws or consent. These tallages were calculated in marks (two-thirds of a pound). It was normal to give it to the whole community who then had to work out who should pay what according to their wealth. The richest Jew in 1241 was Aaron of York whose estate was worth some £20,000; by 1255 he was unable to pay anything. Henry III carried on his father's exploitation of the community, a situation then inherited by Edward I. Edward increased the tallages but also sent out officers to collect any unpaid debts from his father's reign. If anyone could not pay, they had three days to leave the kingdom via Dover along with their wives and children.



In 1275 Parliament passed the Statute of Jewry (right) which prohibited usury and forced many money-lenders to speculate in commodities. Now Jews were informed that they could only reside in towns and cities where there were arches. These were chests, established in 1194, that held the records of Jewish business transaction. There were three keys to each chest which were managed by two Jews, two Christians and two scribes. All Jews over the age of seven had to wear a badge and Jews over the age of 12 had to pay a poll tax of 3d each Easter. Bear in mind that we are talking of victimising a community of around 3,000 compared with a total population of 2.5 million. Jews were allowed to buy farms but only for a period of ten years or less making the gesture worthless.



This situation continued over the next 15 years. Harassment included false accusations of coin-clipping which saw many Jews imprisoned and 269 executed. It all came to a head in 1290 when in order to agree Parliamentary grants, Edward ordered the expulsion of all Jews. They were not to return until allowed by Oliver Cromwell in the seventeenth century.

1. With help from Wikipedia. Photo courtesy of Ellen Ebenau, World Atlas. Map courtesy of HetmanTheResearcher under Creative Commons.
2. With the help of Wikipedia. Robert Recorde portrait courtesy of Mental Floss: David Nicholls via Flickr // CC BY-NC 2.0 | David Nicholls via Flickr // CC BY-NC 2.0. The Whetstone of Witte (1557). Image provided by Tenby Museum and Art Gallery.
3. William Robert Grove: Lock & Whitfield (active 1856-1894) in the Public Domain. Diagram from United States Department of Energy.
4. Bartholomew Roberts from Famouspeople. Wales. Flag courtesy of Orem (author of this SVG version), GNU Free Documentation License.
5. I am grateful to Dean A Irwin, Visiting Fellow at the University of Lincoln writing in History Today. The picture is a marginal illustration from the Rochester Chronicle of 1355 created by the monk Edmund of Haddenham, courtesy of the British Library. The beginning of the Statute of Jewry is courtesy of the national Archives.