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From The Mumbles to Manhattan...

By Gareth Huw Davies, The Mail On Sunday, 12th November 2007



Dylan Thomas's favourite home, the Boat House in Laugharne

I'm on Sir John's Hill - one of the most famous heights in British verse - above the small town of Laugharne. A soft sea breeze wraps around me, as soothing as my favourite scarf.

For months West Wales has been alive to the whirring of movie cameras but for the moment all I can see is poetry. A silky tide steals up the Taf estuary. A heron launches lazily before the creeping waters. Lapwings, as crazy as dervishes, scatter from the burrows.

Cue the picture-postcard moment as a searchlight of sun stabs through the clouds and lights up this serene tangle of inlets west of Carmarthen. It deserves all the tourist brochure eulogies. But let's rewind 60 years to see why it became a location fit for Hollywood. It's 1937 and a two-person whirlwind sweeps into town. Dylan and Caitlin Thomas are in the first passions of a tempestuous, plate-throwing, jealousy-boiling-over marriage that would last until Dylan's drink-fuelled death in New York in 1953. Had they lived today, their media profile would surely have been bigger than the Beckhams.

I imagine them flitting between the various homes in Laugharne where they lived, loved and rowed. The last address - and best - is the Boat House, their 'seashaken house on a breakneck of rocks'. It was here that Dylan wrote Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night, and Over Sir John's Hill, the verse about the place where I'm sitting. Some say it was his finest work.

Now luscious landscape and combustible characters are coming together on the big screen for the first time. The Edge Of Love, with Sienna Miller and Matthew Rhys as Caitlin and Dylan, and Keira Knightley and Cillian Murphy as their friends the Killicks, will be released next autumn and as an addicted Dylan-watcher I can't wait.



Keira Knightley and Matthew Rhys star as Vera Killick and Dylan Thomas

Like him, I was born in Swansea. The platinum-tongued lothario chatted up my mother. My father bought all Dylan's poems and stories, inspired by the gentle fields, farms and villages of West Wales where he was 'green and carefree, famous among the barns'.

For my part, over the years I have tracked the couple through many of my favourite places, from Worm's Head on the Gower peninsula to San Francisco, from Oxford to Florence, from Cornwall to Prague. I followed Dylan's trail to London, where he first spotted the 'sea of golden hair and two blue eyes' of Caitlin Macnamara in 1936.

There, in quiet Rathbone Place, opposite the Post Office, is the Wheatsheaf pub. Exposed wooden frame and age-stained glass hinted at history within.

Did the bibulous scribe, already one of Britain's best young poets, quit a typically garrulous clinch with some assembled literati, stagger over to his goddess, collapse drunkenly in her lap and propose? Let's see what the film says.

The notoriously footloose couple provide a big choice of locations. London is bursting with Dylan and Caitlin connections, in bars and restaurants from Camden to Chelsea. But my next call was New Quay in Ceredigion for a plotline dear to Hollywood's heart, if improbable for

the famously pacifist Dylan - the shootout.

It was in the Black Lion pub in the cosy port town in 1945 that Dylan had been arguing with William Killick, husband of old flame Vera (Keira Knightley's character). Killick, a serving commando, stormed off home, collected his Army-issue gun, marched up to Dylan's house where the poet had since returned and fired a live round through the front door. He was later acquitted of attempted murder.

New Quay has been peaceful ever since. From the cliffs above the village I saw dolphins playing just off the coast. It's one of the few places in Britain where you can see the creatures from land. Perhaps Dylan never had the pleasure, however, because I'm sure he could have found them a place in a poem.

Next I went to one of the couple's secret retreats, the Aeron Valley, just north of New Quay. I drove there but cars feel wrong in this pastoral idyll. The best way to savour the tranquillity is on horseback, just as the pregnant Caitlin was when she told a local woman they would name the couple's daughter Aeronwy.

Fifty miles south, I looked down on Dylan's friendly bay city, Swansea, from Mount Pleasant, where he attended school. The heart of the Swansea he knew was razed in the 1941 Blitz but old haunts survive, including his favourite pubs, such as the No Sign Wine Bar. Inside it is marvellously dim, rambling and original. In the soft slumber of mid afternoon we almost sensed his lingering aura.

Swansea's seaside setting is its glory. In the distance is the famous St Helens ground where Dylan watched cricket. Around the curve of the bay is Mumbles - he often rattled along there on the much-missed Mumbles Railway. And then the brief ecstatic heights of Gower, scene of many a Dylan outing.

Two US Presidents have spoken up for Thomas. Bill Clinton praised his works recently and Jimmy Carter came to Swansea in 1995 to open the Dylan Centre.

It was in the United States where Dylan found the star billing he never attracted at home. He delivered impeccable readings of his works to enthralled audiences while Caitlin looked on, often gripped by jealousy.



Dylan Thomas and Caitlin Thomas had a tempestuous marriage

You can chart Dylan and Caitlin's squabbling, hard-up transit of the USA but it is to Manhattan where the film will turn for the final part of the drama, with the distraught Caitlin in a straitjacket at St Vincent's Hospital as Dylan lays dying.

The blare and blast of 5th Avenue is as far as you can get from the simple peace of Sir John's Hill, although, curiously, peregrines nesting among the skyscrapers echo the swooping hawk Dylan put in that poem. I don't know if he wrote a poem to this mad city but he came to feel at home here.



The Edge of Love was filmed around New Quay in Ceredigion

On my visit I walked up from the foot of Manhattan Island, past Ground Zero and on to Greenwich Village to find the White Horse. This was Dylan's favourite New York bar and where he took his last drink, although the record-breaking 18 straight whiskies may have been another famous exaggeration. It doesn't matter any more. We've seen lesser talents behaving much worse. The many visitors here recognise that the world lost a flawed genius before his time.

Another cultural hero who died prematurely in Manhattan agreed. It was John Lennon who put Dylan

on the cover of music's most famous record cover, Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band.

Where they lived, loved and fought...

Dylan and Caitlin Thomas moved between many addresses in their 16-year marriage. Fortunately for anyone who wants to follow their trail, they chose some fabulously scenic spots, many of them now linked by well-signed footpaths. And they frequented some interesting pubs.

Dylan was born at 5 Cwmdonkin Drive, Swansea, in 1914 and lived there until he was 19. The house where he wrote *And Death Shall Have No Dominion* is unchanged. He also set *A Child's Christmas In Wales* here. Cwmdonkin Park, which features in his stories, is nearby.

The Dylan Thomas Centre (01792 463980, www.dylanthomas.com) displays many of the poet's works, photos and letters - I like the love letter to Caitlin written on a cheque stub. Thomas was a regular at the No Sign Wine Bar in

Wind Street, where he set his ghost story *The Followers*.

The couple stayed on Gower, after his parents moved to Bishopston. Dylan loved the peninsula and wrote that it was 'one of the loveliest sea coasts in Britain.'

Caitlin was born in Hammersmith, West London, in 1913 and spent some of her early life with her father in Co Clare, Ireland. The family home at Ennistymon, now the Falls Hotel (00353 65 707 1004 www.falls.ie) includes the Dylan bar.



Kiera Knightley and Sienna Miller in *The Edge of Love*

They married at Penzance register office in 1937 and spent their honeymoon at the Lobster Pot guesthouse in nearby Mousehole. They were regulars in Mousehole's Ship Inn, while other favourite places included Lamorna Cove, Newquay and Porthcurno.

In London, a blue plaque has been erected at Dylan's former home at 54 Delancey Street, Camden. They had another address in Manresa Road, Chelsea, just off the Kings Road.

Many of their favourite pubs survive, including the Wheatsheaf in Rathbone Place, where they first met.

They were also regulars at the French House, The Highlander and Pillars of Hercules in Soho, The George and The Stag's Head in Portland Place, and the Fitzroy in Fitzrovia.

Moving West, the couple later lived in the grounds of Magdalen College, Oxford. Dylan drank in the Randolph Hotel and the pair were often seen shopping in the Cornmarket.

Next stop was the Manor House, South Leigh, near Witney, for one of their most settled periods. They also stayed in The Malting House at Marshfield in Gloucestershire.

In New Quay, the Dylan Thomas Trail (www.newquay-westwales.co.uk) links some of the sites featured in *The Edge Of Love*, including their home called Majoda, the Black Lion pub (The Dylan Restaurant has a large collection of memorabilia) and the Dolau Inn, a favourite of Caitlin's. Their beloved Aeron valley is a few miles north.

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In Laugharne, near Carmarthen, they lived at Eros in Gosport Street, before moving to Sea View, just behind the 13th Century castle.

Their favourite home, the Boat House, is restored and open all year round (www.dylanthomasboathouse.com).

The couple are buried at St Martin's Churchyard, Laugharne. Caitlin outlived Dylan by 41 years.

In New York the White Horse Tavern (567 Hudson Street - W. 11th St, 001 212 989 3956) was Dylan's 'local', where he took his last drink.

His favourite hotel was the nearby Hotel Chelsea (222 W. 23rd St, www.hotelchelsea.com).

Thomas gave one of his first performances of Under Milk Wood at the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University, Massachusetts, completing it less than an hour before curtain up. It was so well received, he took 14 curtain calls and secured his place in modern literary history.

The Word Travels (0845 652 1432 (www.thewordtravels.com)) organises trips on the trail of Dylan and Caitlin.

The day Keira filmed at the bottom of my garden

Roger Bryan had a front-row seat this summer when the Dylan Thomas film circus came to town...

It's not every day that you get Hollywood A-listers making a film at the bottom of your garden - and certainly not one starring Keira Knightley and Sienna Miller, two of the most beautiful women in the world.



A life-size bronze statue of Dylan Thomas in Swansea

But that was what happened when The Edge Of Love was being filmed in May around New Quay in Ceredigion (Cardiganshire in old money).

We have a holiday cottage which the locations manager spotted, and so it was here that the film's director, John Maybury, and his delightful assistant Jess stayed for four weeks while they were filming in the area. The crew built a massive set in the field next to our garden with its fabulous views back to New Quay, Thomas's 'cliff-perched town at the far end of Wales' - surely the topographical inspiration at least for Llareggub in Under Milk Wood.

This was the main site for the film and quickly became a tourist attraction in its own right, with the props people building two local houses as they would have looked in 1945.

The first day of filming was on Llanina beach at the bottom of our garden. It was bitterly cold with an icy wind and Sienna and Keira had to run into the sea: once would have been enough but they did it take after take. We were freezing just watching them. The pictures of the drenched stars, dressed in their Forties chunky woollen cardigans, floral dresses and wellies, duly made the following day's national newspapers.

Locally, it was a big story too - it was the main front-page story of the Cambrian News for three weeks on the trot. Rooms in hotels and pubs were block-booked for four weeks, while holiday cottages were also very busy. Everybody, it seemed, wanted a bit of the action.

Caradog, our excellent local butcher, couldn't believe his luck. When filming started properly, there were up to 100 people on set and Caradog was getting orders from the film caterers for ten legs of lamb, 30lb of mince and 40 steaks.

Locals clambered over one another to audition as extras. And the film team even found a baby - they phoned the local maternity unit and eventually used two newborn cousins, one nine weeks old and one six weeks old, for the part as Dylan and Caitlin's baby.

One of the mothers said: 'Keira and Sienna came up and introduced themselves. They were really normal. I think they were excited just to have a cuddle of the babies.'

The stars mainly kept themselves to themselves but Sienna and Matthew Rhys, who plays Dylan, were ever willing to say hello and have their photos taken with local children.

Other location filming took place in Cardigan and Lampeter: students of irony should note that the weather was so good the film crew had to resort to using a mrain machine.

• For further information visit www.westwalescottages.com/mulberry.htm

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