

# TOM PRICHARD

# THE MYTH AND THE MAN

# TWM SIÔN CATTI

...an investigation into the life and work of TJ Llewelyn Prichard

Produced by Rebecca Ray, Community Arts Manager, Wyeseide Arts Centre  
in partnership with Builth Wells High School



## Tom a Twm: The Myth and the Man

The first published Welsh novel, *The Adventures and Vagaries of Twm Siôn Catti*, immortalised the mythic figure of Twm, inextricably intertwining fact and fiction. The novel's author was a man no less fascinating. The life-story of the Builth Wells poet TJ Llewelyn Prichard and the enduring character he set in our national consciousness tell two very different sides of the same tale.

In June 2015 Wyeside Arts Centre and Builth Wells High School began an investigation into the life and work of this seminal local author.

The partnership project brought together learners and creators of all ages, combining arts and heritage in a historically rich, thought provoking examination of themes that remain relevant today.

Working with leading UK scholars, local and regional heritage societies, actors, teachers and young people, the project's initial phase focused on discovery. Encompassing a series of visits, events and workshops, it aimed to build an understanding of the myth of Twm Siôn Catti, and of the writer who dedicated his life to its preservation.

The project's second phase offered the students an opportunity to retell these stories themselves. Led by highly experienced youth theatre creators, Builth Wells High School joined with Wyeside in devising, producing and performing Tom a Twm, an original play exploring the intertwined lives of TJ Llewelyn Prichard and Twm Siôn Catti.

Tom a Twm premiered at Wyeside's Inside Out festival, from 22nd to the 24th April 2016 then toured to the Willow Globe at Llanwrthwl and CARAD at Rhayader.

Wyeside is grateful to the Arts Council of Wales, Heritage Lottery Fund for their generous support of Tom a Twm.



# 1. The roots of legend: Thomas Jones of Tregaron

The first event took the students of 7C BUILT Wells High School to Tregaron, birthplace of the real life Twm, Thomas Jones. Led by Dafydd Wyn Morgan of the Twm Siôn Catti Society and local historian Dai Hawkins, the students learned about the historical fact that underpins the legend.

Thomas Jones (c.1530–1609) was born at Tregaron, Cardiganshire, in west Wales. His mother was Catherine (or Cati) Jones, and while some claim that he was the illegitimate son of the local squire, it is more likely that his father was John (Welsh form Siôn), son of David ap Madog ap Howel Motheu.

Twm Siôn Catti earned a reputation as a sort of Welsh Robin Hood. Starting out as a common thief and highwayman, he became a cunning trickster, roaming the countryside and taking a special delight in robbing the rich.

Later in life, this lovable rogue is said to have cast off his villainous ways and married Joan, also known as the heiress of Ystradffin, going to live in a grand house near Tregaron. He is said to have become a wealthy landowner, a magistrate, and Mayor of Brecon. When he died aged 79 he was considered a pillar of society, much respected and beloved.

From Tregaron, the group embarked on their own exploration, travelling deep into Rhandirmwyn Nature Reserve to Twm Siôn Catti 's Cave.

On the slopes of the densely wooded Dinas Hill, about 12 miles north of Llandovery, the river Pysgotwr joins the larger River Towy and flows through the rocky gorge below the cave. Legend has it that Twm would hide here from his arch-enemy the Sheriff of Carmarthen.

Inspired by the majestic landscape that surrounds the cave, and by the names of visitors dating back over 300 years inscribed into its rock, the students began to bring the past to life.



Ensnared in the sounds of rushing water and lonely birdsong, how did it feel to be Twm, hiding from the authorities on a mountainside? The pieces of writing created by the students captured every sight, scent and sound; the first elements to inform the narrative of their play.



## 2. Into the Archives: The National Library of Wales

The first tales of Thomas Jones - or Twm Siôn Catti - were passed down by word of mouth, and the first pamphlets and books recording his exploits began to surface from around 1763. Deepening our exploration of the work itself, our second trip took the students to visit the National Library of Wales.

The first edition of *The Adventures and Vagaries of Twm Siôn Catti* appeared in 1828 and is widely regarded as the first Welsh novel. At the time, Prichard's story gave voice to the suffering of Mid Wales' rural poor, earning the writer a significant Welsh readership. But subsequent versions did not gain acclaim in England and Prichard's contribution to literary history has remained in the shadows for almost two centuries.

Drawing revised editions of the novel from the Archives, the group discovered how the times in which Prichard himself lived informed his vision, and how his changing attitudes can be charted in the alterations to the novel over half a century.

Learning for the first time about poverty and social injustice in Victorian Wales, the group contributed thoughts and feelings on what life would have been like for a young writer leaving his home in Builth Wells to encounter London for the very first time.







*"...for those working the land these are dreadful times. Higher prices, lower wages, food shortages, tenant farmers being forced out all the time, and the country teeming with absentee landowners; a poor working man is no longer allowed parish help within his own home so his only recourse is to the workhouse. Once there, forcibly separated from his family, the prospects are bleak indeed."*

Tom Prichard, *Tom a Twm* by Ralph Bolland

### 3. Prichard's Builth: the Past beneath the Present

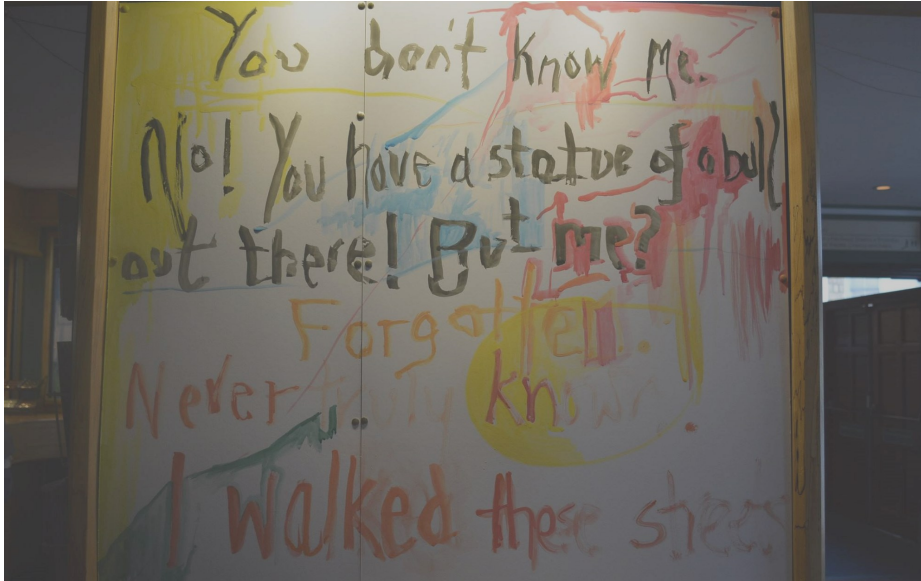
In our final event during the project's first phase, the Twm Siôn Catti Club walked through their home town. Accompanied by Jim Davies of the Builth Wells Heritage Society, they discovered where TJ Llewelyn Prichard would have written his novel before the Great Fire of 1907 destroyed Builth Wells' streets.



*Engraving of Builth Wells in the 1830s - Henry Gastineau*

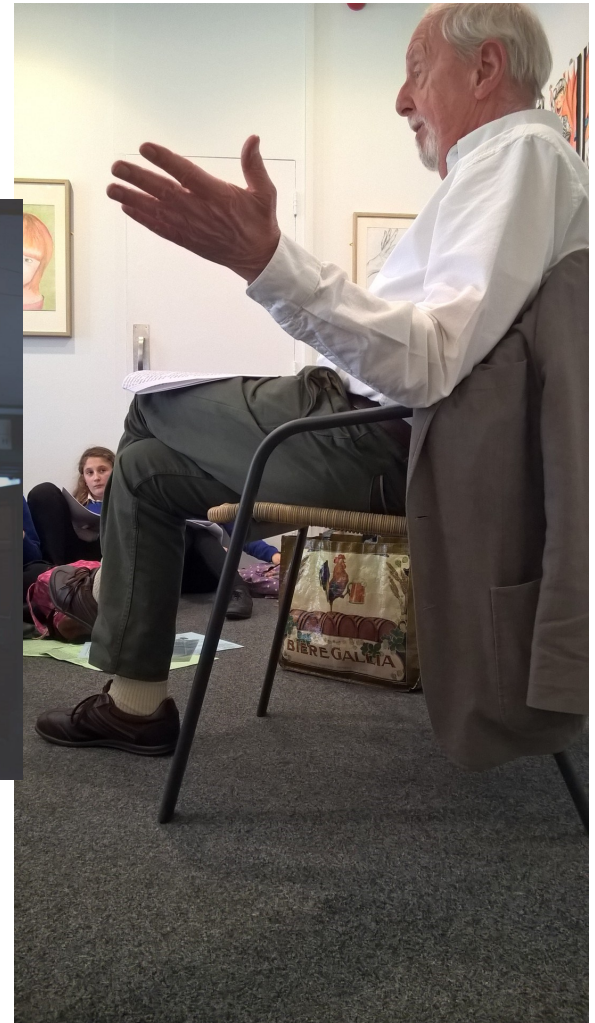


Charting the process of change that culminated in Built's heyday and the construction of Wyeside itself, the students walked to the arts centre to meet Sam Adams, leading scholar on Prichard's life, who generously shared his knowledge.



*"You don't know me. No! You have a statue of a bull out there! But me? Forgotten. Never truly known. I walked these streets and not so long ago. Charles Dickens, you know him? Byron, Shelley, Keats, all these, you nod and say - what a man of letters, what a poet! What of your own?"*

Tom Prichard, *Tom a Twm* by Ralph Bolland



## 4. Tom Prichard's life

The mystery of TJ Llewelyn Prichard is as rich as that of the character he set in fiction. Until recently, the true circumstances of both Prichard's birth and death remained unknown. A research quest by the scholar Sam Adams slowly brought the truth to light.

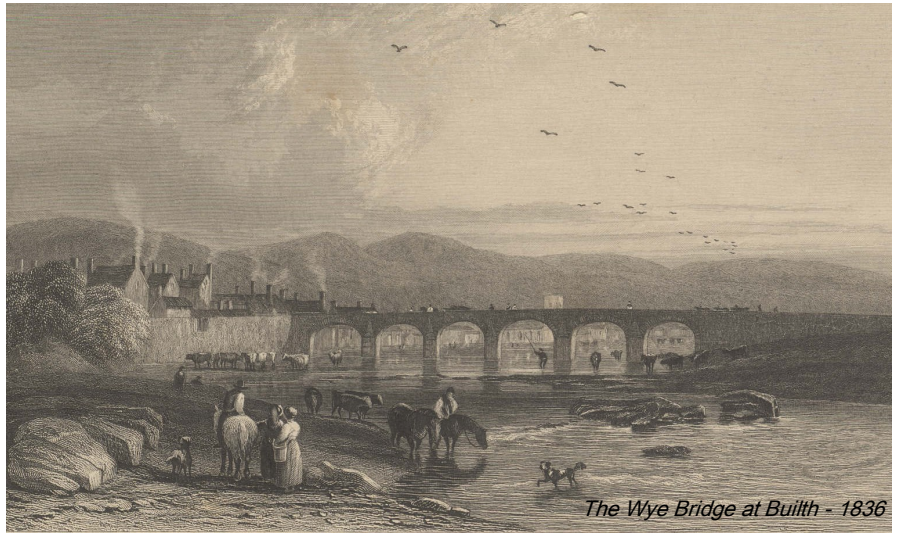
Thomas Jeffrey Llewelyn Prichard, writer and actor, was baptized at St Mary's Church Builth on 29 October 1790 but the family seems to have moved away soon afterwards. As a young man, Prichard tried his luck as a poet and actor in London but returned to Wales, hoping to sell his first book of poems, but with little success. In 1826 he married Naomi James and in 1828 published the first edition of *Twm Siôn Catti*. He settled once more in Builth and over the next decade three of the couple's four children were baptized at St Mary's.

After the publication of a second edition of *Twm Siôn Catti* in 1839 he is thought to have left the family home, acting on stages in Brecon and Abersytwyth and employed for a time by Lady Llanover to catalogue her library.

TJ Llewelyn Prichard was denied the hero's life and death that he gave to his triumphant character, Twm Siôn Catti. Poverty stricken, he sold his books from door to door but barely covered his expenses. He lost his nose and was forced to spend the last half of his life wearing a wax nose attached to a pair of spectacles. Reduced to living in a hovel in Swansea, isolated from his family and from the community he knew, and taunted by local ruffians, he died destitute when his clothes caught fire.

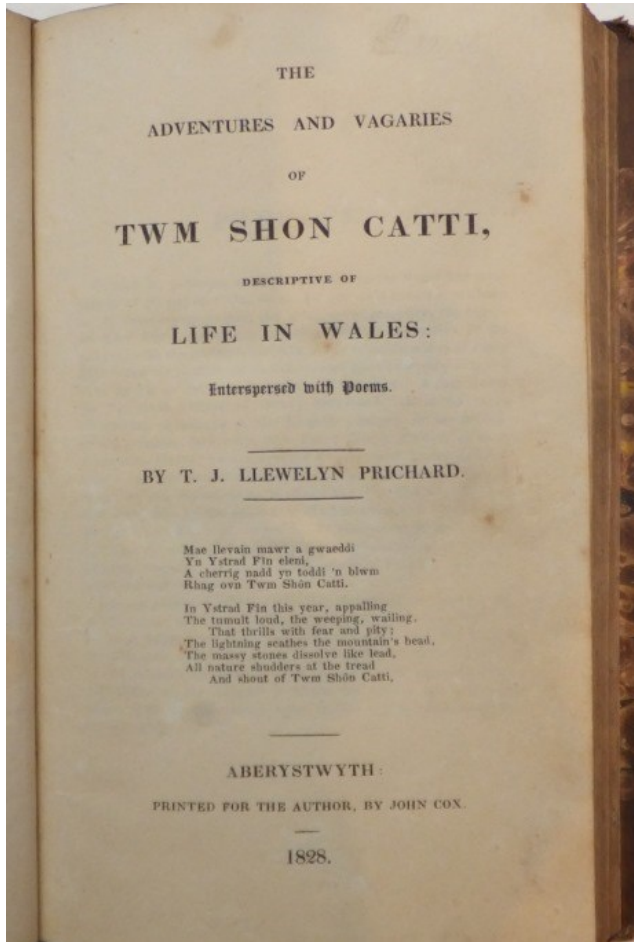
A writer, as he put it '*of English-Welsh blossoms... hastily formed into a bouquet*', TJ Llewelyn Prichard deserves a place in history as one of the progenitors of Anglo-Welsh identity. But more: he was a fascinating figure.

Impoverished, arrogant, a nationalist who was cut off from the cultural resurgence of his nation, a noseless, filthy, verbose travelling salesman, whose liberal values and empathy for the working poor placed him among the great thinkers of his time.





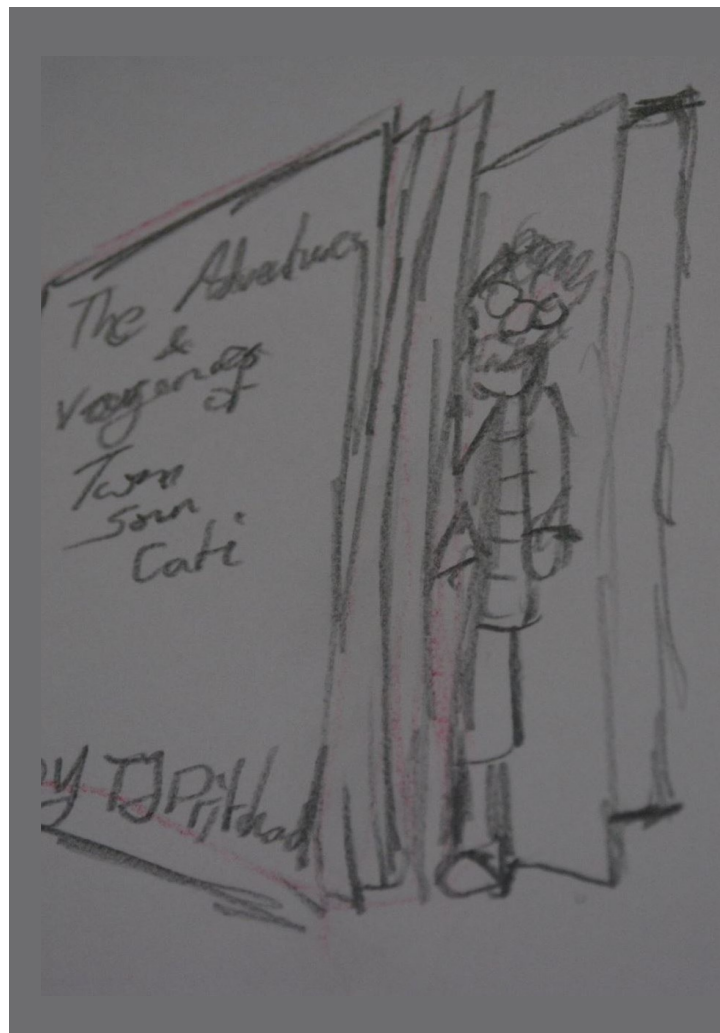
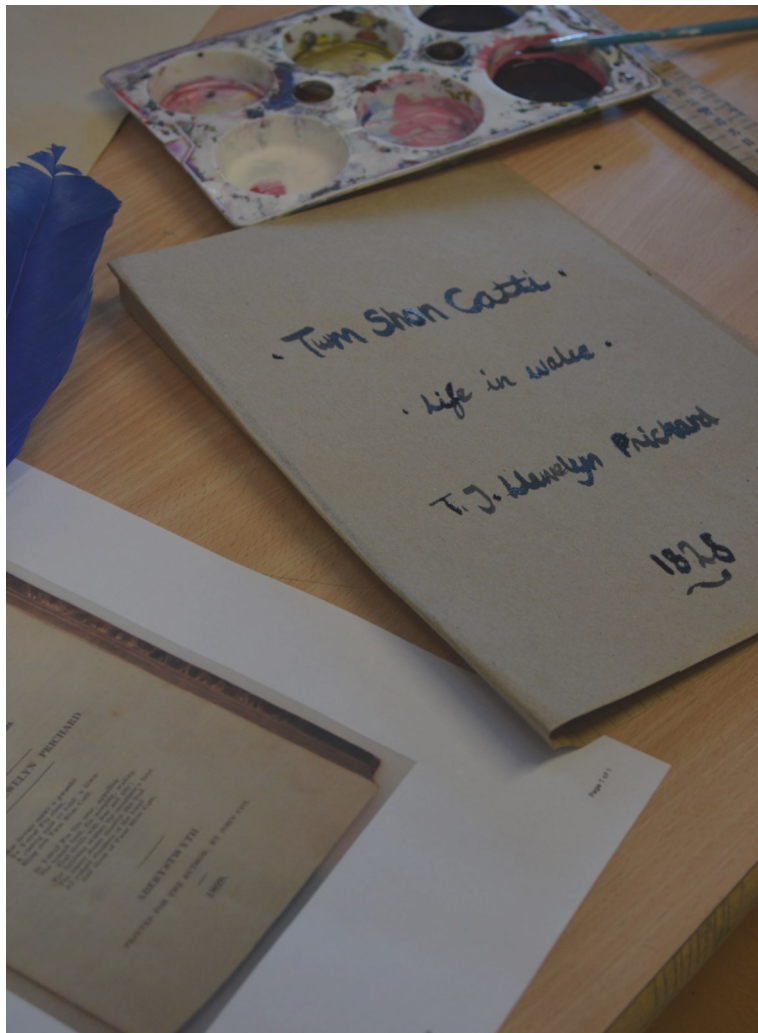
## 5. The Adventures and Vagaries of Twm Siôn Catti



*The Adventures and Vagaries of Twm Siôn Catti* was Prichard's lifework. First printed in 1828, with unexpected success in Wales, he was to spend the next quarter century attempting to revise it for a wider English readership. But he was not successful. In contrast to the triumphs of the character he immortalised, Prichard's own life ended in destitution and ignominy.

With its empathy for the rural poor, its complex insights into colonial relations and its romantic vision of Welsh landscapes and legends, *The Adventures and Vagaries of Twm Siôn Catti* is strongly rooted in the political and cultural issues of its time. New editions, revised by Prichard, were published in 1838, then in 1871 after his death. They chart a process of change in Victorian Wales – and in the fortunes of the author himself. Other unauthorised 'pirated' editions were published between 1829 and 1871, which must have been horribly annoying for poor Prichard, who was living in poverty.

An English speaker, Prichard sought to create an Anglo-Welsh identity both for himself and for the novel, and while history has come to value this hybridity, Prichard himself suffered destitution. His confrontational nature, forged by patriotism and poverty, and the vociferous nature of his prose, now offer a voice that speaks directly from the time in which he lived.



## 6. Making the play

Through creative writing, graphic novel storyboarding and roleplay, the students built the characters and places to be depicted in the new play.

Working with theatremakers, Ralph Bolland and Kama Roberts, artist Blue MacAskill and musician Jim Elliott, students designed and made the set and props and devised and performed accompanying music.

Ralph Bolland wrote the script based on the students' work.

The poem *Candlelight* about Prichard's life and lonely death is by Builth Wells High School student, Gwen Rees.







*My father, Tom Prichard, wrote a novel - the first in Wales, because he could, because he felt someone should. He wrote a novel because he was brave and passionate enough to do it. He wrote a novel that set himself among the ordinary people and squarely against the tyranny of fear and ignorance practised by the establishment.*

...

*My father wrote a book that that helped to slowly change the social and cultural map of Wales. He wrote a book that mirrored the political turmoil of the time, laying out ordinary stories of the rural poor - the starving poor - and those dispossessed by land-grabbers. His writing of that book should never be forgotten.*

...

*My father wrote a book that made and destroyed him; the story of a character he both loved and hated; a romantic version of himself who displayed his best and worst, but shared his dearest hopes, dreams and fears with those of his countrymen. By way of thanks, his countrymen loved the book then utterly forgot the man who wrote it.*

...

*My father wrote a book that was funny and exciting and that poked jibes at those who had always held the whip; a book that ordinary people might recognise; of places and people; poverty and song, church and land, and the truth of all these things at long, long last. He wrote a book that ordinary people might want to read, before ordinary people did read.*

**Candlelight - *Gwenllian Rees, Bulth Wells High School, 2016***

The man knew not comfort, knew not sweet foods or silken sheets  
But knew the agonies of love and hate more than any poet could ever write, than any bard could ever sing.

He sat in his desolate shadows and wrote,  
The dark-inked words flowing over the butterfly-wing paper, flickering in the candlelight.  
He wrote of princes and castles, lost heroes and villains, ancient lands in the light of a little candle-flame.

His life flew on, an elaborate sentence inked in flame  
But still his candle burned, melting like a wax man.  
His poems and stories lay around him, wet ink and paper bleeding.  
The wax man burned on, flaming in agony as his life drew to an end.

The writer filled his pages with last hopes, final words, desperate measures, until his fevered hand, aching but satisfied, was stilled.  
His heart of stories and legends that had beaten so strongly failed.

His papery skin crumpled, blackened, shrank.  
Inky words burned and shone in the darkness.  
The writer fell, just another tree in a forest of loss  
But his stories lived on.

The wax man fluttered on the edge of oblivion.  
Tired fingers of smoke trailed away.  
Then an icy draught blew through the hovel.  
Rotten beams creaked,  
Frail cobwebs fractured.  
The flame flared one last time  
And the candle blew out



## 7. Tom a Twm on Tour...









Wyeside

Created and performed by:  
Builth Wells High School

Written by:  
Ralph Bolland

Directed by:  
Ralph Bolland & Kama Roberts

Design by:  
Blue Macaskill

Musical Direction by:  
Jim Elliott

# Tom a Twm

A vibrant new play devised and created by Builth Wells High School and Wyeside Arts Centre

...at **CARAD**  
Saturday 7th May: 7pm  
Tickets £8 Full, £5 Under 16's

*It's 1861 on Swansea's poor street and an old man with a false nose is teased, taunted and harassed by local street urchins. As if Tom Prichard - Builth Wells' forgotten poet - didn't have enough on his (empty) plate. The arrival of an unexpected and persistent visitor, and daily hauntings from his most famous creation, Twm Sion Catf, begin to unearth the past that Prichard's left behind.*

*Then comes Tom's realisation: if history remembers either of them, then it's very likely to be Twm.*

**BAR AVAILABLE ON THE NIGHT!**

CARAD.org.uk | 01597 810561 (office) | all@carad.org.uk | East St, Rhayader, LD6 5ER



Directed by Ralph Bolland and Kama Roberts  
Design by Blue Macaskill  
Musical Direction by Jim Elliott  
Created and performed by Builth Wells High School

Friday 6th May  
7.30pm

A vibrant new play devised and created by Builth Wells High School and Wyeside Arts Centre, written by Ralph Bolland.

It's 1861 on Swansea's poor street and an old man with a false nose is teased, taunted and harassed by local street urchins.

As if Tom Prichard - Builth Wells' forgotten poet - didn't have enough on his (empty) plate. The arrival of an unexpected and persistent visitor, and daily hauntings from his most famous creation, Twm Sion Catf, begin to unearth the past that Prichard's left behind.

Then comes Tom's slowly dawning realisation: if history remembers either of them, then it's very likely to be Twm.

Tickets: £10 adults, £5 under 16s

To book email [info@shakespearelink.co.uk](mailto:info@shakespearelink.co.uk) or call 01597 811 487

[www.shakespearelink.co.uk](http://www.shakespearelink.co.uk)

The Willow Globe is signed off the A470, 4 miles south of Rhayader [f](https://www.facebook.com/willowglobe) [i](https://www.instagram.com/willowglobe) /willowglobe





**Wyeside**  
ARTS CENTRE

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