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Dublin Core

Title

When Abercastle met Alfred | Pan ddaeth Alfred i Abercastell

Subject

Alfred "Centennial" Johnson

Abercastle

Abercastell

Atlantic Ocean

Cefnfor Atlantig

Creator

Natasha de Chroustchhoff

Publisher

Ports, Past and Present Project

Date

2023

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Relation

<https://perma.cc/9HP8-9B55>

Format

Curatescape story

Language

English

Welsh

Coverage

51.95973005291314, -5.127664112686866

Curatescape Story Item Type Metadata

Lede

Sixty six days after leaving his home port in Gloucester, Massachusetts, Alfred Johnson set his shaky feet on the Welsh shore, to the amazement of the villagers of Abercastle.

Lede (Welsh)

Chwe deg chwe diwrnod ar ôl gadael ei borthladd cartref yn Gloucester, Massachusetts, dododd Alfred Johnson ei draed sigledig ar y lan yng Nghymru, er mawr syndod i bentrefwyr Abercastell.

Story

The inhabitants of Abercastle, Pembrokeshire were much surprised on Saturday [10th August 1876] by the arrival on their coast of a seaman named Alfred Johnson in an open boat in which he left Gloucester Massachusetts on the 15th June. The boat is called "Centennial" and is only 15ft 6ins keel...After partaking some refreshments at Abercastle he again put to sea, directing his course for Liverpool.

This short report in a local newspaper is Pembrokeshire's only contemporary record of an extraordinary event, the landfall of the first person to cross the Atlantic singlehanded.

We can only guess their thoughts when a gaunt, weather-beaten and dishevelled man stumbled up the beach. Although Welsh was their mother tongue some would have spoken English too. The sailor's Danish-American accent must have sounded odd and when he said he'd sailed from Gloucester they may have assumed he'd come from the Bristol Channel.

Danish-born Alfred Johnson was ever a man of few words and it's unlikely he would have had the energy to do much explaining. But we know that he had left his home port in Massachusetts determined to perform a feat worthy of his adopted country's century of independence that year of 1876: thus he named his boat *Centennial*. He was a fisherman by trade and although not yet 30 he had already spent years catching cod and halibut on the Grand Banks of Newfoundland. His job was an especially gruelling one: he was a dory man. Dories were small boats taken along on the schooners and set down with a two-man crew to catch the fish. With one man rowing and the other baiting the lines the catch had to be hauled in and taken back to the mother ship day in, day out, in all weathers.

Back on land in a fisherman's tavern Alfred may have boasted about his seamanship for it seems he was bet he couldn't cross the Atlantic on his own. If his acceptance of the 3000 mile challenge was impulsive his preparations for the voyage were meticulous. He had a dory built to his specifications, based on his experience at sea. The mast could be folded down for rough weather, there were sealed hatches for basic provisions, a water tank, and a stove, only useable in dry weather. There was no cabin just a small open cockpit which meant that Alfred would be exposed to the elements at all times. The ballast was pig iron (a bad choice, the metal skewed his compass).

Rough weather delayed Alfred's departure until 15th June. The small crowd who waved *Centennial* off from Gloucester harbour bound for Liverpool docks were not optimistic: they had seen many lives lost to the waves. Ahead lay the perilous North Atlantic where icebergs and freezing fog were year-round hazards; it was also a busy shipping lane. This meant Alfred had always to remain alert at night to avoid being run down by larger vessels.

Two weeks and 800 miles into the crossing Alfred foresaw a storm brewing. He lowered the mast and roped himself to the deck. He had no alternative but to sit it out while the waves tossed the little dory to and fro. He had no shelter and could not reach his food supplies. All he could do was take the occasional nip of whisky and hang on for dear life. After 36 hours the storm abated: Alfred was alive but wet, cold and hungry. This was only the beginning. Two more storms were to follow. In the second, Alfred was knocked unconscious and rolled around the seething deck for three hours, waking with a gashed head and earache. The third storm was the most severe.

Centennial had travelled 1700 miles when the wind turned to gale force and the dory capsized, flinging Alfred into the water. With superhuman strength and determination he managed to clamber on to her upturned hull and then, using his own weight and the force of the waves, right the boat, climb back in and start baling out. At this point a shark rolled up and had to be fended off.

By now off Cape Clear in Southern Ireland, he soon spotted the lightbeams of Kinsale and Tusker Rock followed by the beacons on The Smalls and South Bishop off the Welsh coast. His strength failing, Alfred searched for somewhere to put in. The tides took him to Abercastle bay, its bright white cottages visible from afar. Dismissed by The Admiralty as 'affording no shelter even for the smallest vessel', Abercastle's long inlet leads to a cove without a harbour or quay, just a sandy beach where boats hauled out.

We don't know what sort of reception Alfred received but the Abercastle folk were seafarers too and they recognised an exhausted man. It's very likely they led him to the inn, The Blacksmith's Arms, and sat him down with a mug of ale, a bowl of *cawl* (soup) and a chunk of bread and cheese.

The tired mariner did not stay long. He had an appointment to keep in Liverpool and keep it he did, arriving on 15th August to a hero's welcome and a grand reception. Johnson never visited Abercastle again and it was not until 2003 that a plaque commemorating his landing was set in the wall beside the beach, in a ceremony attended by his grandson.

Story (Welsh)

The inhabitants of Abercastle, Pembrokeshire were much surprised on Saturday [10 Awst 1876] by the arrival on their coast of a seaman named Alfred Johnson in an open boat in which he left Gloucester Massachusetts on the 15th June. The boat is called "Centennial" and is only 15ft 6ins keel...After partaking some refreshments at Abercastle he again put to sea, directing his course for Liverpool.

Y pwt hwn o adroddiad mewn papur newydd lleol yw'r unig gofnod cyfoes sydd gan Sir Benfro o ddigwyddiad eithriadol, glaniad y person cyntaf i groesi'r Iwerydd ar ei ben ei hun. Mae'n amhosibl dyfalu beth roedden nhw'n feddwl wrth weld dyn main, blêr ac arno olion y tywydd yn baglu i fyny'r traeth. Cymraeg oedd mamiaith y pentrefwyr ond diau bod rhai yn siarad Saesneg hefyd. Rhaid bod acen Danaidd-Americanaid y morwr yn swnio'n od iddyn nhw a phan ddywedodd ei fod wedi hwylio o Gloucester efallai fod rhai'n tybio mai o Gaerlyw a Môr Hafren roedd e wedi dod.

Un digon dywedwst oedd Alfred Johnson, a anwyd yn Nenmarc, a go brin bod ganddo'r egni i wneud llawer o esbonio. Ond gwyddom ei fod wedi ymadael â'i borthladd cartref yn Massachusetts yn benderfynol o gyflawni camp a oedd yn deilwng o ganmlwyddiant annibyniaeth ei wlad fabwysiedig y flwyddyn honno, sef 1876: dyna'r rheswm dros enwi ei gwch yn *Centennial*. O ran ei grefft, roedd yn bysgotwr ac er nad oedd eto'n 30 oed roedd eisoes wedi treulio blynyddoedd yn dal penfras a halibwt ar Fanciau Mawr Newfoundland. Roedd ei waith yn arbennig o galed, fel dyn ceubal. Roedd y ceubal yn gwch bach a gâi ei gludo ar y sgwneri a'i ollwng gyda chriw o ddau ddyn i ddal y pysgod. Gydag un dyn yn rhwyfo a'r llall yn gosod yr abwyd, roedd rhaid tynnu'r ddalfa i mewn a mynd â hi'n ôl i'r sgwner drwy'r dydd bob dydd, a hynny ym mhob tywydd.

Yn ôl ar dir sych mewn tafarn pysgotwyr, hwyrach bod Alfred wedi brolio ei allu ei hun fel morwr, oherwydd mae'n ymddangos bod rhywun wedi betio na allai groesi'r Iwerydd ar ei ben ei hun. Os derbyniodd yr her 3000 milltir ar fypwy, fe baratôdd at y daith yn fanwl. Roedd ganddo gwch a oedd wedi'i adeiladu i ateb ei fanyleb ef ei hun, yn seiliedig ar ei brofiad ar y môr. Gellid plygu'r mast i lawr mewn tywydd garw, roedd yna gloriau wedi'u selio ar gyfer y nwyddau sylfaenol, tanc dŵr, a stof, na allai gael ei ddefnyddio heblaw mewn tywydd teg. Doedd dim caban, dim ond twll bach agored i eistedd ynddo oedd yn golygu bod Alfred yn agored i'r elfennau bob amser. Haearn crai oedd y balast (dewis gwael, gan fod y metel yn gwyro'i gwmpawd).

Oherwydd tywydd garw, cafodd ymadawiad Alfred ei ohirio tan 15 Mehefin. Doedd y dorf fach a ffarweliodd â'r *Centennial* wrth iddo ymadael â harbwr Gloucester am ddociau Lerpwl ddim yn optimistaidd: roedden nhw wedi gweld llawer o fywydau'n cael eu colli i'r tonnau. O'i flaen roedd peryglon Gogledd yr Iwerydd lle roedd mynyddoedd rhew a niwl rhewllyd yn beryglon gydol y flwyddyn; roedd hefyd yn lôn llongau brysur. Roedd hyn yn golygu bod Alfred bob amser yn aros yn effro yn y nos er mwyn osgoi cael ei daro gan longau mwy.

Bythefnos ac 800 milltir i mewn i'r croesiad gallai Alfred weld bod storm yn codi. Gostyngodd y mast a chlymu ei hun i'r dec â rhaffau. Doedd ganddo ddim dewis wrth i'r tonnau hyrddio'r cwch yma ac acw ond ceisio aros nes i'r storm gilio. Doedd ganddo ddim cysgod ac ni allai gyrraedd ei gyflenwad bwyd. Y cyfan y gallai ei wneud oedd cymryd ambell ddiferyn o chwisgi a dal ati am y gorau. Ar ôl 36 awr, gostegodd y storm: roedd Alfred yn fyw ond yn wlyb, yn oer ac yn llwglyd. Megis dechrau roedd pethau. Byddai dwy storm arall yn dilyn. Yn ystod yr ail, cafodd Alfred ei fwrw'n anymwybodol a bu'n rholio ar hyd y dec am dair awr, cyn deffro â chwt ar ei ben a chlust dost. Y drydedd storm oedd y fwyaf difrifol.

Roedd y Centennial wedi teithio 1700 o filltiroedd pan gododd y gwynt yn gorwynt a throdd y cwch ar ei gefn, gan daflu Alfred i'r dŵr. Gyda chryfder a phenderfyniad rhyfeddol llwyddodd i ddringo ar gefn y cwch ac yna, gan ddefnyddio'i bwysau ei hun a grym y tonnau, llwyddodd i droi'r cwch yn ôl, dringo'n ôl i mewn a dechrau gwagio'r dŵr. Ac wedyn dyma siarc yn ymddangos, ac yn gorfod cael ei hysio i ffwrdd.

Ac yntau bellach oddi ar Cape Clear yn ne Iwerddon, cyn hir fe welodd oleuadau Kinsale a Tusker Rock ac wedyn goleudai'r Smalls a South Bishop oddi ar lannau Cymru. Gan fod ei gryfder yn pylu, chwiliodd Alfred am rywle i lanio. Daeth y llanw ag ef i fae Abercastell, y gallech weld ei fythynnod gwyn llachar o bell. Er bod y Morlys wedi wfftio'r bae am nad oedd yna 'ddim cysgod hyd yn oed i'r llong leiaf', mae bae hir Abercastell yn arwain at draeth heb harbwr na chei, dim ond traeth tywodlyd lle roedd cychod yn cael eu tynnu i'r lan.

Dydyn ni ddim yn gwybod sut dderbyniad gafodd Alfred ond morwyr oedd gwerinwyr Abercastell hefyd ac roedden nhw'n adnabod dyn blinedig. Mae'n debygol iawn eu bod wedi'i

arwain i dafarn y Blacksmith's Arms, a'i roi i eistedd gyda llond mwg o gwrw, *powlen o gawl* a thoc o fara a chaws.

Arhosodd y morwr blinedig ddim yn hir. Roedd ganddo apwyntiad i'w gadw yn Lerpwl a dyna a wnaeth, gan gyrraedd ar 15 Awst a chael ei groesawu fel arwr mewn derbyniad mawreddog. Ddaeth Johnson byth yn ôl i ymweld ag Abercastell ac nid tan 2003 y gosodwyd plac yn coffáu'r glaniad ar y wal ger y traeth, mewn seremoni lle roedd ei wŷyr yn bresennol.

Factoid

Alfred "Centennial" Johnson never visited Abercastle again and it was not until 2003 that a plaque commemorating his landing was set in the wall beside the beach, in a ceremony attended by his grandson.

Ddaeth Alfred "Centennial" Johnson byth yn ôl i Abercastell ac nid tan 2003 y gosodwyd plac yn coffáu'r glaniad ar y wal ger y traeth, mewn seremoni lle roedd ei wŷyr yn bresennol.

Following a few months' stay in England, Johnson returned home aboard a passenger ship, with *Centennial* in tow.

Ar ôl aros ychydig fisoedd yn Lloegr, dychwelodd Johnson adref ar long i deithwyr, a honno'n tynnu'r *Centennial* o'i hôl.

The tidal island in Abercastle Bay that gives the place its name is thought to have been used defensively in prehistoric times.

Credir bod yr ynys lanw ym Mae Abercastell sy'n rhoi ei henw i'r lle wedi'i defnyddio'n amddiffynfa yn y cyfnod cynhanesyddol.

Centennial now resides in the collection of the [Cape Ann Museum](#) in downtown Gloucester, Massachusetts.

Erbyn hyn, mae'r *Centennial* yn rhan o gasgliad [Amgueddfa Cape Ann](#) yn Gloucester, Massachusetts.

[Carreg Samson](#), a 5000-year-old neolithic dolmen tomb, is located half a mile West of Abercastle.

Mae [Carreg Samson](#), beddrod dolmen neolithig 5000 o flynyddoedd oed, yn sefyll hanner milltir i'r gorllewin o Abercastell.

Related Resources

Rob Morris, *Alfred "Centennial" Johnson, The Story of the First Solo Atlantic Crossing from West to East in 1876* (Published by author, 2003)