



Typical pages of John Perkins' diary, from Friday May 31 to Tuesday June 11 1799.

# His pen was mightier than his plough — A Vale farmer's diary, 1788—1801

**D**IARIES ARE IMPORTANT historical documents, but few Welsh farmers find the time to keep a daily diary for long. One notable exception was a farmer in the Vale of Glamorgan, whose personal diary gives a uniquely valuable picture of the local farming and social scene at the end of the eighteenth century.

This diary was providentially rescued from the flames of a garden bonfire in Bath some years ago, by neighbours helping to clear the effects of a deceased neighbour. It consists of 14 home-made booklets, ruled in ink with space for six days on each page and it runs from 1 January, 1788 to 31 December, 1801, a total of 14 years or 5,114 days, without missing a single day.

Nowhere in the diary did the diarist give his own name or address, but my research finally revealed him as John Perkins (1760-1816), a gentleman farmer of Llantrithyd in the Vale of Glamorgan.

As a young man John Perkins had sold his own family estate of Saint-y-Nyll, and married a wealthy widow, Elizabeth Willis, eight years older than himself. In December 1789 they moved to Pentra farm, Llantrithyd and there they remained until July 1801. Thus the diary covers the whole of this period of farming at Pentra, a mixed farm of about 60 acres, for which Perkins paid a rent of £60 per annum. In addition, John Perkins farmed another 24 acres of land on lease, and also enjoyed a sizable income from other holdings in the Vale.

The brief, factual entries in the diary give a detailed picture of farming, family and social life in the Vale of Glamorgan during the Napoleonic Wars, a boom-time for British farmers.

The farming year at Pentra was dominated by the demands of the hay and grain crops. The hay harvest extended from late June to the end of August. The wheat was sown in November, some of it on limed summer fallow, and the barley and oats in the spring. The grain was harvested from late August to mid October, and thrashed and winnowed from October right through until April.

In January, the main tasks were thrashing and winnowing wheat and barley, which continued through to March, when the bulk of the tillage was done for the spring sowing. The oats were sown in March and the barley in April. Potatoes were planted in April and May, which was the month for ploughing summer fallows, sowing rye-grass and weeding the young crops. June was the time for burning and spreading the lime, before the start of haymaking which continued through July and August. Harvesting oats and wheat began in late August, and continued through September until the barley was ready. The barley harvest occupied the first half of October and then came lifting potatoes, gathering apples for cider-making, thrashing the seed wheat, and prepar-

ing the soil for the November sowing of wheat. The remaining potatoes were lifted in November, and stored in a 'clath' (clamp), and in the short days of December came the jobs of hedging, continued thrashing and winnowing of barley and wheat, and the start of ploughing for the spring barley.

The farm implements and vehicles at Pentra were few and primitive. For cultivation, wooden ploughs, drag and brush harrows, a field roller, and a few hand tools such as spades, clod-breakers, picks, hoes and weeding sticks. Sowing was done by hand, from a seed lip. Scythes were used for mowing the hay, barley and oats,

## John Perkins' diary gives a unique insight into farming and the social scene at the end of the 18th century.

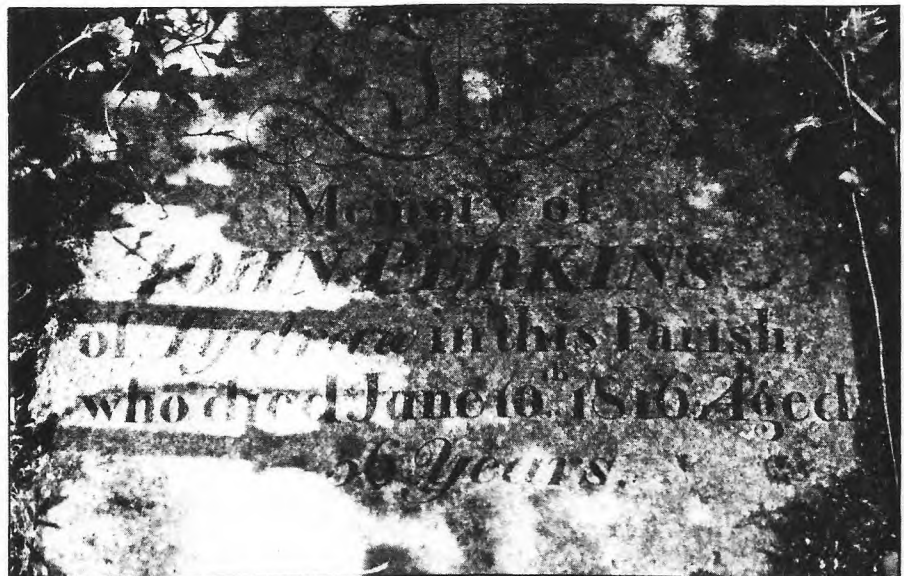
and reaping hooks for the wheat, with rakes and forks for turning and lifting. The vehicles were a Glamorgan two-wheeled cart or butt, an Irish car, and a wagon. Thrashing was done by flails on the wooden floor of the barn.

Extra help was always obtained for the hay and grain harvest. All available casual labourers and the menservants or maids of friends and neighbours. Sheep were killed to provide food for the extra labourers, and home-made Pentra cider was dispensed to help the work along.



by Dr. William Linnard  
(Welsh Folk Museum, St. Fagans)

The harvesting procedure varied according to the season. The hay was cut by scythe, put up into small cocks, then large cocks, and eventually into stacks or mows which were finally headed (i.e. thatched). The oats were mown, bound into stooks, put into mows and the latter thatched. The barley was mown, raised into cocks, and



The grave of John Perkins in Llantrithyd churchyard.

# Trade stand judging

**T**HE ROYAL WELSH has long been one of my favourite shows, so it was with much pleasure that I accepted the invitation to judge trade stands again in 1988. My very first show with the Bath and West was, in fact, a Welsh one – at Neath in 1936. How the show scene has changed in those 52 years!

The standard of trade stands last year at Builth Wells was very high – especially in the agricultural machinery section – which made judging very difficult. The Royal Welsh innovation of having preliminary judging on the Sunday evening is an excellent one and I would strongly recommend other shows to follow this example. It enables the trade stand judge to carry out a detailed "recce" and to draw up a short list in comparative peace and quiet. This was particularly welcome in the case of machinery stands.

Now for the awards:

**Class 1 – Best trade stand displaying agricultural machinery.** After several return visits I selected KUBOTA of Thame, Oxon, for their well-laid out stand of compact tractors and equipment suitable for the smaller farmer. Congratulations on a fine display, and



a worthy winner of the Bevington Gibbins trophy.

**Class 2 – Best Agricultural Trade Stand, other than Machinery.** I chose the local firm of CAERFAGU PRODUCTS from Llandrindod Wells, for their highly professional display of treated timber products.

**Class 3 – Best Commercial Trade Stand (non-Agricultural).** With so many high-class stands to choose from I eventually gave the award of merit to the Hereford-based firm of JEWSON LTD. for their composite stand of materials and building trade.

**Class 5 – the Horse and Hound awards.** For stands under 20' frontage the winner was J. HAMPSHIRE of

Market Drayton, Shropshire, with their very attractive stand of cotton rope and rope products. The winning stand over 20' frontage was J. & M. MARREN (MASTER SADDLERS) of Whitchurch – a display familiar to all the horse fraternity at Agricultural Shows.

In conclusion, may I record my grateful thanks to Mr. Peter Evans, assistant director and his team of stewards for all their help in carrying out my duties. Also to David Walters and his staff for making my latest visit to Build Wells such an enjoyable one.

John W. Davis, MBE



**Pentra farmhouse, Llantrithyd, little changed externally except for the slate roof replacing the old thatch.**

then into mows or ricks, made with a base of furze, and then headed. Wheat was reaped by hooks, stooked, and then put into a thatched rick. After thrashing by flail, the wheat straw was kept and sold for thatching. The grain was sent to local mills for grinding.

John Perkins kept about ten cows, up to six plough oxen, a riding horse, and three or four draft horses. Two or three pigs (averaging about 11 score) were slaught-

ered on the farm each year. The flock of sheep was small (in 1799, 22 lambs were weaned from 19 ewes); after the lambs were weaned, the ewes were milked all summer, the milk-maid getting 1s. 6d. per week, the milk being used for cheese-making. Some geese and turkeys were also kept, as well as chickens, ducks and bees.

Local vets routinely bled the livestock, and bleeding was a sovereign remedy too for John Perkins and his wife and children.

John Perkins managed his land fairly well by the standards of the day, following, sowing clover and rye-grass, growing turnips, and liming. Like most Vale farmers, he burned limestone dug from his own quarry on the farm, employing local masons to build and repair a kiln as necessary, and paying lime-burners to operate it, while his own farm-servants prepared the limestone, carted in coal from small pits near Pontyclun to fuel the kiln, and spread the lime on the fields.

The farmer's sporting recreations were rough shooting, hunting hares, and coursing the fallow deer in Llantrithyd deer park. The Glamorgan horse races were held on Stalling Down, there was occasional cockfighting at the 'Old Post', and the village mabsant or revel was held regularly in Llantrithyd at the end of July.

What is amazing to the modern reader is how limited were the farmer's horizons. In the whole 14 years covered by the diaries, John Perkins never travelled further than 10 miles from home, and never spent a night away. His normal circle was Llantrithyd itself, Cowbridge town three miles away which he visited regularly for the Tuesday fair or market, and local villages such as Gileston, Llancafarn, Bonvilston and St. Nicholas. Only rarely did he travel as far as Cardiff, Bridgend, Caerphilly or Llantrisant for livestock fairs.

In 1801, John Perkins moved the short distance to Ty-draw, at 360 acres the largest farm in the parish, and there he farmed until his death in June 1816. His mortal remains lie in the large family grave at Llantrithyd churchyard but his literary remains, the precious diaries, are now safely preserved just a few miles away in the archive of the Welsh Folk Museum at St. Fagans.

EXTRACTS FROM THE DIARY OF JOHN PERKINS.

(2404. Museum of Welsh Life, St. Fagans.)

January 1788.

8th. Thomas Williams came with me to Cowbridge. Mr. Robinson called to see the house; told him the rent £15. He said I should hear from him soon.

9th., Received a letter acknowledging the £20 received by Miss Carne. Went to town, called at the X, on Mr. Williams attorney and at printing office to buy a dictionary for Mr. Rich. T. Engaged to drink tea at the X on Friday next, in the evening I went to club. Thomas Thomas president. Returned at 10 o'clock.

10th. Received a court calendar from Henry Walters.

11th. In the evening, Bessy, Jonny and self drank tea at Mrs. Thomas's X. Bevan met us there, till twixt 12 and 1 to cards.

13th. Bessy, Jonny Maria and myself went to church. Mr. Williams Free School preached there for the first time.

14th. Mrs. Geddes called relative to renting the house. Gave her a paper of the particulars. Went to Young's in evening stayed till 10.

15th. A very fine day after a frosty night. Went to market. Mr. Robinson called to see the house. Mr. Alexander and Peggy Mathew dined here. Mr. Evans of Llanbethery paid half year's rent.

16th. In morning called at Great House. Mrs. Geddes not in. Saw Miss Keir and asked them both to dinner on Thursday next.

18th. Mrs. Geddes, Miss Keir and Thomas X and Harry dined with us after tea. Jack Thomas X and Bevan came and spent the evening with us.

20th. Agreed with Mrs. Geddes for the house -£14.

22nd. Portrey called in the morning. I went to market. Mr. Alexander sent us a brace of partridge in the evening. Called at Mrs. Geddes' and post office and Taynton's, and Jonny with me called at my mother's. Harry going to Bristol by Aberthaw tomorrow.

23rd. I went to club. Myself president. Returned between 11 and 12. Capt. Robinson called to inquire if the house was let.

30th. Portrey agreed to give me the house in March if I would grant him a field until May.

31st. Went to town and walked to Llanblethian. Called on Timothy's for the watch which was not ready.

February.

2nd. Timothy brought the watch home which he had to put a glass on.

5th. Went to market, received of Mrs. Simkins a razor and strap she brought for me in Bristol, and a shaving brush and two new scissors.

6th. Richard Aubrey was welcomed to the manor of Marcross. I went in the morning to town. Bought a whip of Anthony Thomas 9s. I went to club at the Horse and Jockey - Billy Deere president.

7th. Mr. Alexander carrying barley to the boat to go to Bristol. Paper for our room came from Bristol last night.

8th. Maria's birthday - 8. David Jenkins called here to pay £5 for Miss Carne. Received magazines from H. Walters.

9th. Went to town. Paid Bradley a bill for 1s.8d. Called at Coal's and bought a pair of

hinges and screws there. Called at Ann Clements and bought a tobacco box.

11th. Failed to go coursing with Jack Thomas as the people came here to lay the floor. Jno Jenkins called to pay his rent. 2 men laying the Hall floor. Mother killed her pig.

13th. Club at the Horse and Jockey.

18th. Bessy, Jonny and self went to Mr. Lewis' to tea and returned between 9 and 10 from Llanblethian.

19th. Sent a note to Camys to Park for the remainder of the rent.

20th. Lent my mare to Miss Lewis to go to Bridgend.

21st. Salt fish from Bristol. Went to club - Cole president.

22nd. Sent a letter by Henry Thomas of Llisworney to Kitt in India. Bevan brought dresses for Maria.

26th. To the sale at The Bear of Gen. Morris' furniture.

27th. Went to the sale in the motning. Miss Deere of Trallwn and Miss Molly Thomas X called. Drank tea at X. To club - Thomas Morgan president.

March.

2nd. Went to Penon. Mother in law very poorly.

3rd. A poor child killed by a cart coming down Stalling Down.

5th. Club dinner at the Spread Eagle - Mr. Williams attorney president. Evan Williams Pendoylan gave me a spaniel bitch.

7th. Dio Lewis here putting up the Hall grate.

8th. Packing up books, glass etc to go to St. Athan. Dio Lewis whitelimed the green room.

10th. Paid 4s.4d. church rate to Jno Miles and Isaac Skinner.

12th. Two workmen of Mr. Coal's here painting. Went to club - Ballard president.

14th. Cadogan here papering.

15th. Cadogan here making a window frame for the stair.

16th. Bevan called to see the child who is ill. Dr. Walton called here to see the child and sent up some castor oil.

17th. Dio Lewis here putting in the stair window. Bevan called morning and evening - the child a great deal better. Mrs. Geddes called. Peggy the glazier here. Bottled 7 dozen of ale.

20th., Mr. Alexander brought his horse and cart for the goods to St. Athan. Hired another. Bessy, children and self in the evening in The Bear chaise.

22nd. Evans of Llanblethian lent us his cart to bring furniture from Cowbridge.

April.

4th. Portrey took his cattle away.

5th. Bessy quarreled with Nancy and paid her off. Her mother pleaded for her return. Went to Aberthaw to get change for a guinea.

10th. Promised to give Cadogan and Cecil £90 for the house in Cowbridge if they cannot dispose of it for more. To Llanbethery agreed to give me double price for the cordwood for his use.

17th. Sowing barley.

30th. Went to Boverton Summerhouse.

May.

2nd. Went to the Leys to see Gilbert's cow.

3rd. Paid £8 10s for a 3 year old heifer.

4th. Willis here to baptise the child.

5th. Went in the morning between 4 and 5 to Cowbridge Fair. Breakfasted at Jno Thomas Gregory's and the X. Bought cow and calf of Gilbert £8-15.

12th. Lent Mrs. Alexander a mare to go to Llandaff Fair.

13th. Went to Cowbridge. Bought 4 ewes with lambs, a cow and calf.

16th. Went to Llantrisant. Received from Evan Rees £2 in past rent. Received rent from David Martin and Llewellyn John. Called at Newton at the Gibbons and at Mother's at Cowbridge.

18th. The drapes came from Bristol.

19th. Billy went to Newton and Trearingill. Offered £9 for George's cow - refused.

21st. Rode down to Aberthaw to inquire about a cask and box. John Jenkins and Evan Symmonds called and gave notice to pay £500 on 16th., January 1789.

27th. Went to Cowbridge. Paid Bevan and Walton a bill of £4. Paid tax on the house £2 5s. 10d.

28th. Bassett at Llancarvan.

30th. Received asparagus from Willis at Gileston.

June.

2nd. Kitt and I bathed for the first time.

4th. Sent to Bristol for 25lbs. of white lead and 2 gallons of oil and turpentine.

6th. Rachel called and made butter.

10th. Went to Cowbridge, dined at the X and drank tea there. Jack Thomas fought with Evan Williams who beat him. Sent my wool to Ballard who was not at home.

12th. Went to Penon to borrow a churn.

July.

8th. Went to Cowbridge and visited Wood, Walton, Bevan and Miss Thomas. Mother sent blackcurrants and Miss Thomas some lemonade.

9th. Mother sent walnuts for pickling.

16th. I was given some turnip seed.

25th. Billy to Cowbridge for train oil. Mrs. Alexander and Mrs. Mathews called on their way to Cowbridge to help old Mrs. Alexander to move to Penon.

31st. Rees Nicholas of Boverton brought two pairs of shoes for Bessy and Maria.

August.

27th. Parted the sheep. Those for feeding went to the South Field.

28th. Mrs. Geddes agreed with Dio Lewis to raise the chimney.

29th. Willis sent peaches and nectarines from Gileston.

October.

14th. Received goods from Bristol - a loaf of sugar, candles and 3 children's chairs.

27th. To Gileston for cider.

29th. Rode to Gileston. Saw two fine ships off.

November.

3rd. Went to the Mabsant at the Eagle. Took a turn in the dancing room.

4th. Took cheese to market at Cowbridge. Could not sell it so left it with my mother.  
Returned with spun yarn.

5th. Took the spun yarn to the weaver at Gileston.

14th. To John Spencer to see his pigs.

15th. To Michael Spencer's barn. Bought the pigs.

## THE WILLIS AND PERKINS DYNASTIES.

William Willis was born around 1700 into one of the most notable clerical dynasties in the diocese of Llandaff. His father, Thomas Willis, had been precentor of the Cathedral and the vicar of both Caerwent and Newbottle, Northants, whilst his grandfather, William Beaw had been Bishop of Llandaff between 1679 and 1706. William attended New College, Oxford and became rector of Gileston in 1738. He was also the rector of Huish Champflower, Somerset, having married the daughter and heiress of the previous incumbent. He inherited the lordship of the manor of Gileston through his marriage to Mary Allen, the widow of Richard Carne. She died in 1734. His third wife, Ann, died in 1760 and in January 1775 he married again "to his fourth wife, a Mantuamaker of Llancarfan of about 21 years of age, he of 73 years old", according William Thomas' Diary. Thomas later records William Willis' demise thus- "In these days was buried at Gileston the Revd. Mr. Willis, Rector and possessor of that parish, of above 80 years of age. and as reported he married four wives and the fourth buried him, whom he married being but a child from he, for he was near 60 years older than she, without nothing. The other three he gained from them, and from one of them Gileston came to him. But he left her at his death a very rich widow."

This rich widow, Elizabeth by name, married John Perkins in Cowbridge on 4th., August 1783. He was a member of a minor gentry family of Saint-y-Nyll in the parish of St. Brides Super Ely and following the death of his father in 1781 found himself responsible not only for Saint-y-Nyll but property throughout the Vale of Glamorgan. He did not stay there long, finally disposing of Saint-y-Nyll in 1787, but came to live in the Vale after his marriage, in Cowbridge, St. Athan and Pentra and Ty-draw farms in Llantrithyd. His diaries and account books show him to have been a quite wealthy gentleman farmer and rackrenter with extensive land-holding throughout the Vale. Perkins died in 1816, aged 56 and is buried in Llantrithyd Churchyard.

John Perkins was evidently a keen member of the Cowbridge and Llancarfan Book Society, though the only book mentioned in the diaries is "Tristram Shandy". He knew Henry Walters, the son of John Walters the lexicographer, who had taken over the printing shop in Cowbridge. However Iolo Morganwg is not mentioned, though it is obvious from the satirical song called "The Llantryddid Farmers" that Perkins was well-known to Iolo. In verse three he writes:-

Bestir then my muse, and I prithee be brief;  
There's Perkins of each awkward farmer the chief;  
Some say he'll pass muster, I know not in what  
It is not in farming, full well I know that.

### Sources.

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SOME twenty years ago, while helping to clear up the effects of an elderly lady in Monkton Combe near Bath, neighbours rescued from the flames of a garden bonfire a thick bundle of old closely written manuscripts.

These proved to be a set of uniquely valuable diaries written by a farmer in the Vale of Glamorgan.

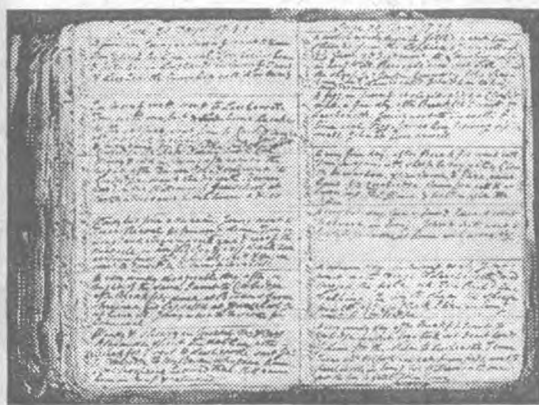
The diaries run for fourteen years without missing a single day's entry, from 1st January, 1788 to 31st December, 1801, a total of 5,114 days. Amounting to nearly a quarter of a million words, these diaries thus give a fascinating picture of family, farming and social life in the Vale during the Napoleonic wars.

## No Pepys

When the farmer sat down to start his diary in January 1788 he could have had no idea that he was writing for posterity. It was a very private and personal diary, and he did not even put his name or address anywhere in it.

In fact, it was only by laborious detective work, cross-checking children's baptismal dates in the diaries against the old registers of a dozen different parishes in the Vale, that the identity of the indefatigable diarist was eventually revealed as John Perkins of Llantrithyd.

John Perkins was certainly no Samuel Pepys. His diary entries are brief, repetitive and factual: the day's weather, work on the



□ A typical page of the diaries.

# Rescued diary reveals unique Vale life view

Plucked from a garden bonfire, the diary of farmer John Perkins gives an account of his hard life 200 years ago. WILLIAM LINNARD reports.

farm, family events, meetings with friends, and so on. But cumulatively they form a unique picture of the daily reality of life in the Vale

John Perkins, born in 1760, was a descendant of a minor gentry family of St-y-Nyll. After his father's death he soon sold the family estate, and in 1783 he married a rich widow, Elizabeth Willis, eight years his senior.

Elizabeth had been the fourth wife of the notorious Reverend William Willis, Rector and Lord of the Manor of Gileston, who had married her when she was 22 and he was already 73. That wedding was certainly a cause for gossip in the Vale. The Rev. Willis died in 1780, leaving Elizabeth a wealthy young widow.

John Perkins and Elizabeth (Bessy in the diaries) lost no time in starting a

family. Bessy bore her new young husband eleven children, several of whom died in infancy.

After short periods in Cowbridge and St Athans, the Perkins family soon settled down on Pentra, a small mixed farm in the parish of Llantrithyd. John Perkins also had several other properties both freeholds and leaseholds, in the Vale. Later he moved from Pentra to Ty-draw, the largest farm in the parish.

## Napoleonic wars

His horizons were very limited. Llantrithyd, Cowbridge and the central Vale were his stamping ground. In the whole fourteen years covered by the diaries he never went further afield than Cardiff, and then only occasionally for the races or for jury service. He never spent a night away from home.

Brandy, wine and other imported goods he obtained from Bristol, via the busy little port of Aberthaw. Mail and newspapers he collected at the Old Post, a mile from his house on the main coach road from Cardiff. For the rest, he depended on the farm's own produce, stalls in Cowbridge market, and a host of local craftsmen.

The Napoleonic Wars were a boom time for farmers. Grain prices soared, and John Perkins benefited handsomely. He limed his land heavily, burning limestone from his own quarry, and carting in the necessary

coal from small pits at Pontyclun or Llantrisant, or from Llandaff North, on the newly-opened Merthyr-Cardiff canal.

His main entertainments were rough shooting, hunting hares, horse racing on stalling Down, coursing the deer kept by Sir John Aubrey in Llantrithyd Park, and dancing in the local mabsants or revels in the Vale. He occasionally attended cockfighting mains at the Old Post.

John Perkins sent his young sons to the Eagle Academy in Cowbridge. They boarded there through the week, walking home the three miles to Llantrithyd each weekend.

Health was always a problem. Bleeding was the sovereign cure for the farm animals, and for the farmer himself. Smallpox was a big recurring threat. Inoculation with the virus from a mild case of smallpox was repeatedly practised on all the Perkins children. Vaccination with cow-pox only came after Jenner's great discovery in 1798.

## Cut throat

Most of the special events noted in the diaries are of local significance only: "two young men were drowned at Aberthaw" (June 12, 1789); "man of Postcandril cut his throat" (July 26, 1790); "one of my oxen dead, hanged himself" (March 11, 1791); "snow very deep, a poor child perished in it last night" (February 1, 1799). Postcandril, a name now lost, was the Welsh name then current for the Old Post.

Only a few events of national importance feature in the diaries. On December 1797 he went to the Bear Inn at Cowbridge "to see the French prisoners", captured after the abortive invasion at Fishguard. On November 1798 he recorded "a general fest by proclamation for victory obtained by Lord Nelson in the Nile"

John Perkins stopped keeping his diary on December 31st, 1801. He made his will in 1815, and died on June 10 1816, at the age of 56. Bessy survived him by less than three years. Their mortal remains lie together in a large family grave in Llantrithyd churchyard, along with several of their children.

His literary remains, the precious diaries, are now safely preserved in the archive of the Welsh Folk Museum at St Fagons.