

DISTANT THUNDER

A geologist's Christmas in Wales

Geologist and science writer Nina Morgan recalls a Christmas in Cymru

Pity the poor geologist obliged to work on Christmas Day. And pity even more those who can't even take time off to celebrate their birthday. Such was the fate of the geologist John Phillips [1800 – 1874], nephew of William 'Strata' Smith. Phillips, who was born on Christmas Day, found that the Geological Survey mappers in Wales wait for no man, so he couldn't make it home to York for the holidays. And to top it all, he had to deal with the disappointment this posed for his sister Anne and their dog Cholo.

Tactical approach

To mitigate the sadness he knew Anne would feel, he broached the possibility of his absence early in the month. Writing to Anne at St Mary's Lodge in York from Llandeilo on 5 December 1841 he blames the bad weather for his potential non-appearance.

"My Sister

You seem to have enough of wet. But nearly not so much as we have here – a Great deluge above, below, & all around us! Scarcely any thing else for 21 days. This has sadly & seriously delayed our work, yet I still hope by the end of Dec^r to have got rid of the whole of the sheet of the Ordnance Map on whose completion so much time has been spent. Then as soon as possible I shall work homeward... "

But by 13 December, things are not looking good.

"My Annie

The progress we have made of late in the rain & wind is not bad, but yet it prevents my march homeward not a little... I hope by the end [of] the month to clear up my business about Llandovery & set the young ones to work on the next (Brecon) Sheet. This done I propose to fly homeward, hoping to arrive at all events by old Xmas day, which must for this once be my plum pudding day."

And on 18 December – it's still



looking dodgy.

"Castle Inn

Llandovery

18 Dec. 1841

My dearest Sister

All Snow, beautiful & white! over all this woody, hilly, mountainous land! ...

The object is on the 27th or 28th to make one grand Section by actual measure & 6 assistants carefully exploring step by step in one valley which shows every bed of Silurian rock under Old Red Sandstone for 3 miles! Then I shall hope to be able to make a run of it & soon after the commencement of 1842, come to help to roll you a Snow Ball in St Mary's Lodge garden terrace."

And even worse on 21 December – so he proposes a desperate dash...

"Llandovery

21 December 1841

My dear Annie

I thought that by mentioning to you in many letters for a month past the great probability there was of my working here (on this corner of the Sheet) till the end of December, I should have prevented your forming to yourself any positive hope of my return to Xmas pudding & pleasures of a better sort... However, it can not be long before I now return ... I may get away so as to be home by old Xmas day (5 Jan I suppose) as I told you ever so long since ...

The ground here is all white & the cold

extreme, yet we go out daily & not very much impeded. There is some sign of a thaw or else of more snow, I know not which, but we shall see to morrow.... Cholo, Cholo!"

The end in sight

Then finally on 27 December he has some good news.

"8 am

My dear Sister,

...I have at present great hope of getting home by the 5th Jan 1842!

God bless you.

J Phillips"

The date when Phillips actually arrived at St Mary's Lodge is not recorded, but he was sure to have received an enthusiastic welcome from both sister and dog!

Nadolig llawen a blwyddyn newydd dda – a Happy Holiday Season to all!

End Notes: I thank the archivists and librarians in the Hope Library at the Oxford University Museum of Natural History (OUMNH) for their help in accessing the letters from John Phillips to Anne Phillips over many years, and the Director of the OUMNH for permission to publish extracts from the letters.

* **Nina Morgan** is a geologist and science writer based near Oxford. Her latest book, *The Geology of Oxford Gravestones*, is available via www.gravestonegeology.uk