

## Under Rowley Hills

Much fuss is currently being made of Dylan Thomas in this, the centenary year of his birth. At the heart of much of the celebration is Under Milk Wood, the Welsh poet's famous radio play, which is itself exactly 60 years old. One excellent production has recently been touring the Midlands.

Each time I see or hear Thomas's magical account of one spring day in the life of Llareggub, I think of the Black Country. The accents could hardly be further apart, I know, and the setting too, but there's something about this little village of quirky and imperfect humanity, tightly-knit and self-observing, that reminds me.

I don't have the time or the talent to re-direct Milk Wood to Lower Gornal or Lye, though I'd love to try. But as luck would have it, I don't have to. The Black Country's own version of Rev. Eli Jenkins, minister and chronicler of Llareggub, did the job for me.

Back in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century the village of Rowley Regis was part of the parish of Clent. It was a curious combination, given the vast difference in terrain and occupation, but an accident of ancient history. The vicars of Clent kept themselves to the high road, and left a curate to look after the souls and the paperwork down in Rowley.

The curate for the first 40 years of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century was one George Barrs. Born in Caldecote in Warwickshire, Barrs came to the Black Country from Norfolk, marrying into the Haden family. Rev. Barrs had none of Eli Jenkins' generosity of spirit; he was in a permanent state of war with his ungodly and riotous flock, "scarcely in a state of common civilisation".

The Rowley parishioners were no more enamoured of Barrs, frequently abusing him in the street with words or missiles. The curate seemed to have little time for their very real sufferings.

Yet the people of Rowley were not in position to dispense with their hard-hearted curate altogether. It was he who joined their hands at the altar, christened their offspring, and laid them to rest. And it was in that final act that George Barrs was able to take his revenge, for he had access to the parish register, and he could write, and they (on both scores) did not.

So when Rev. Barrs committed their respective souls to the Lord, he also committed his opinions of them to paper, and annotated the parish records accordingly. So, to begin at the beginning...

29 March 1801. Joseph Windsor. He lived like an infidel, but yet was for some years governor of the workhouse in this parish !

16 December 1804. Mary Stokes, widow. She was a woman of very discontented disposition, and a notorious passer of bad coin. At 10.00 o'clock on the evening of her death she was as well as usual, but at 11.00 death had reduced her body to a corpse, and her soul was ushered into an awful eternity.

George Barrs was especially pleased when the sentiments of the Grim Reaper happened to coincide with his own. The fate of Joseph Hackett, then, would have given the good curate particular satisfaction.

29 December 1807. Joseph Hackett. He was a man who spent all the money he got in ale, except a very small portion with which he procured a little food, but ale was his chief support. Of course he was a drunkard in the most proper sense of the word.

The evening before his death - 25 December – he left a public house in the lower side of this parish, where he had spent a great part of the day in a state of intoxication, uttering profane curses. He was found dead and cold early the next morning, at a very small distance from that house. Let every drunkard beware. The chief bone of contention between the curate and his flock was the church building itself. Barrs had every intention to remove and replace this "cold, damp, ruinous, gloomy, dilapidated dungeon", but the parishioners feared the rate rise which would inevitably follow.

On this delicate topic too, George Barrs let his parish register do the talking. 29 November 1807. John Gould, 74. He took cold in the damp, cold, miserable church of this parish, during divine service about three weeks ago, and attributed his death to that cause !

And for those who opposed the new building, Barrs had a salutary warning. 8 March 1812. Benjamin Timmins junior, 26. A bitter opposer of the intended new church, he was taken ill while in the very act of opposition at a public meeting in the church, and died raving mad in about a fortnight after.

And there they all are, the wayward, all-too-human folk who lived under Rowley Hills, epitaphed for all time by their unsympathetic curate. Enough certainly to fill a play for voices.

As for Rev. Barrs himself, he passed from Rowley in 1840, brought down by asthma, just as the foundation-stone for his beloved new church was being laid. No doubt he felt that his health too had been undermined by that "dilapidated dungeon" in which he had served for so long.

But it would have to be someone else who annotated the burial register to that effect.