

Wales is a land steeped in myth and legend and nowhere more so than Carmarthenshire in the south west, birthplace of that most celebrated legendary figure Merlin the Magician. But while tales of Merlin and King Arthur enjoy worldwide acclaim, few outside Wales have heard of *Twm Sion Cati*, a real-life Robin Hood figure who robbed the rich to pay the poor, while hiding away as a bandit in the lonely hills of the Cambrian Mountain. This year marks the 400th anniversary of the death of this dandy highwayman – an event which, it is hoped, will spark off something of a Twm Sion Cati renaissance ...

Article by Vicky Douch, Marketing and Tourism Dept., Carmarthenshire County Council.

Everyone adores a loveable rogue, especially one with a good 'rags to riches' story attached and they don't get much more thrilling than the tale of the 16th Century Welsh highwayman, Twm Sion Cati.

Whatever account of his life you believe, and there are several, there is little doubt that Twm Sion Cati was an historical character named Thomas Jones who was an exceptionally crafty trickster.

Jones, nicknamed Twm Sion Cati (Thomas son of Catherine), was born at a time of great political unrest in Wales and, according to folklore, quickly won himself a reputation for being a master of mimicry and disguise; robbing the rich and giving to the poor.

What makes Twm's story even more delicious is that he later received a Royal Pardon for his misdemeanours, and even went on to become a magistrate and well-respected Welsh historian. Legend has it that the young Twm had that true fairytale quality - he was an outlaw with a big heart and this is something which has continued to endear him to the people of Wales for centuries.

Never wanting to kill or hurt anyone, Twm would instead release a well-aimed arrow which cleverly pinned his opponent to his saddle thus allowing our audacious hero to escape - with the loot - to his hideout in the hills.

This cavernous den, close to the village of Rhandirmwyn, is known as Dinas Hill and is today an RSPB sanctuary, providing a home for the Red Kite. The cave sits in the slopes directly above a rocky gorge through which the River Tywi flows.

The grotto is difficult to locate but a way-marked footpath runs right around the hill, with a detour to Twm's hidey-hole. Once reached, it is possible to squeeze into and imagine what it must have been like to be an outlaw hiding in the shadows. Twm Sion Cati's cave is a place of mystery and intrigue and still continues to attract some visitors hoping to re-trace the steps of Wales's very own Robin Hood.

The locals love the tales where Twm's big heart wins the day. A particular favourite is the one where Twm quarrels with a fellow highwayman of whose cruel antics he disapproves. Twm decides to trick the rascal and so disguises himself as a poor farmer riding a tired old nag and he fills the saddle bags with nothing but shells.

As the cunningly-disguised Twm rides past, the dastardly scoundrel jumps out of his hiding place and holds the old farmer at gunpoint. But instead of quietly relinquishing the bags, Twm throws them over the hedge next to the road. As the highwayman scrambles to pick up the 'loot', Twm jumps from his old nag to the robber's beautiful mare whose saddle bags are already full of treasure. He rides away as fast as he can.

After an adventurous youth, Twm fled to Geneva in 1557 and returned a few years later to receive a Royal Pardon which excused him of all his criminal activities.

The new, virtuous Twm then married Joan, a wealthy heiress of Ystrad Ffin Farm, and widow of the previous Sheriff of Carmarthenshire – a title that Twm audaciously went on to claim as his own. His later years were devoted to the study of Welsh history and literature and some of his works still survive.

The tales of Twm Sion Cati still form an important part of Welsh history and culture but for some reason his legend has never achieved the national treasure status many believe it deserves.

Local history enthusiast Alun Jones, of Rhandirmwyn, hopes this year's anniversary of Twm's death will help raise the profile of his favourite Welsh hero. A Twm Sion Cati festival is being planned in the area with a weekend of singing, dancing, crafts and culture paying tribute to his life. "We want to resurrect a feeling of national pride by celebrating the life of Twm Sion Cati and hopefully get the visitors here again," he said.