

## THOMAS, JOHN WILLIAM (Arfonwyson; 1805 - 1840), mathematician

**Name:** John William Thomas  
**Pseudonym:** Arfonwyson  
**Date of birth:** 1805  
**Date of death:** 1840  
**Parent:** William Thomas  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** mathematician  
**Area of activity:** Science and Mathematics  
**Authors:** Robert Thomas Jenkins, Llewelyn Gwyn Chambers

Born in 1805, the son of William Thomas, labourer, of Allt Isaf, Pentir. He attended school for three years, from the age of 7 to 10; after that he became a quarry boy, but attended night school where he showed a particular aptitude for arithmetic.

At the age of 17, in order to get more facilities for study, he became a traveller for a Beaumaris bookseller; he gave this up after a year, and for three months studied at the school kept by [Robert Roberts](#), the almanac-maker (1776-1836), at Holyhead. Then, he himself opened a school at Tre-garth and began work on his book, *Elfennau Rhifyddiaeth*. At the age of 21 he married, and moved to Bangor; the story goes that he was again engaged for a time in selling books in Anglesey; however, [J. H. Cotton](#) obtained for him the mastership of a school at Ffestiniog. There, he and the local clergyman failed to see eye to eye; he lost his appointment, and returned to Bangor to keep another school; and here, towards the end of 1830, he published the first part of his *Elfennau Rhifyddiaeth*, which would, more appropriately, have been entitled 'Elfennau Mathemateg' - though there was nothing elementary about it; the second part appeared in 1831 and the third in 1832; the author also talked about publishing a *Dwned* (i.e. *grammar*) *Cymraeg*, and a *Geiriadur Cymraeg*, 'scientific and technical.' In 1832 he published a primer on reading English, *Ffordd anffaeledig I Gymro uniaith ddarllen Saesneg yn gywir*, one of the earliest books of instruction. For six months in 1832 he was editor of *Tywysog Cymru*, a periodical published at Caernarvon. In 1833 he produced his [Geiriadur Cymreig a Seisonig](#)<sup>[?]</sup>, the undoing of which was his acceptance of the views of [W. O. Pughe](#) - views which Arfonwyson was to defend vigorously later on in *Seren Gomer*.

In August 1834 the search for work took him to London, where he became a member of the Cymreigyddion Society and, in 1836 and 1837, its official 'bard.' He became private secretary to William Cobbett but on the latter's death was, once more, unemployed. It was during this period that he completed his *Trysorfa yr Athrawon*, 1837, for the use of Sunday schools. A letter which he had written on Halley's comet was brought to the notice of G. B. Airey, the Astronomer Royal, who found work for him at Greenwich Observatory; there he produced Welsh almanacs, and wrote many articles for *Seren Gomer* and other periodicals.

But, by this time, he had fallen into a decline, and he died 12 March 1840; he was buried at Greenwich. It is not often that we find such a striking example of triumph over grievous difficulties as we do in the life of Arfonwyson.

### Authors

Emeritus Professor Robert Thomas Jenkins, (1881 - 1969)

Dr Llewelyn Gwyn Chambers

### Sources

*Y Gwyddoniadur Cymreig* (1889-96)

*Seren Gomer*, 1849 (six articles by Hugh Tegai) - the two sources differ in some details and it should be observed that the recollections of Arfonwyson's father included in Hugh Tegai's first article are manifestly incorrect in places

T. M. Jones, *Llenyddiaeth fy Ngwlad* (1893), 162, corroborated by Gwyneddon in *Y Geninen*, 1903, 216

### Further Reading

*Y Gwyddonydd*, 11 (1973), 128

Coflein: [Bryn Twrw](#)

### Additional Links

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