

WOOD, Welsh gipsies

There are of course other tribes of gipsies in Wales, such as the Ingram's, the Boswell's, and the Lovell's, but the Wood's deserve special mention, for two reasons. In the first place, the tribe is so large and wide-spread that the expression 'Abram Wood's family' (in some places called 'Alabama's family') became a generic term in the rural areas for gipsies as such; e.g. in [Twm o'r Nant's Pleser a Gofid](#) 'Sal o'r Sowth' claims that she is related to Abram Wood. Secondly, for nearly two centuries this tribe provided Wales with a remarkable line of harpists. The principal source of the history of the tribe is the *Journal of the Gipsy Lore Society* (see under 'Wood' in the 'Names' section of the indexes to the various volumes), and above all the articles contributed by John Sampson (1862 - 1931), late librarian of Liverpool University. His views on the tribe are followed in the present article; opposite p. 200 of the *J.G.L.S.* for 1934 there is a detailed and complicated table of the Wood family prepared by Sampson, and based chiefly on the oral traditions of the tribe, the dates being in some cases confirmed by entries in the parish registers. Some of the writers in the *J.G.L.S.* have gone astray by assuming that every Wood in Wales was a member of this tribe, e.g. the Woods who were settled in Llanbryn-mair from 1500 on (one of them was a churchwarden in 1697), Woods who were respectable merchants at Carmarthen as early as 1630, even the Londoner, [Colonel Wood](#), who was Member of Parliament for Brecknock.

ABRAHAM WOOD (1699? - 1799), fiddler

It used to be thought that Abraham Wood and his family came to Wales from Frome (Somerset), but it is now accepted (*J.G.L.S.*, 1931, 171-87) that the man from Frome was not the same Abraham Wood. According to his great-grandson, [John Roberts](#), the Newtown harpist (1816 - 1894), who spoke Romany fluently, our Abram came to the Severn region (Llanidloes, Llanbryn-mair, Machynlleth) 'some 200 years' before the time at which [John Roberts](#) was writing. But, according to [Robert Roberts](#) 'the great scholar' (1834 - 1885), the Wood family were to be found round about Flintshire in 1765-8 ([Roberts's](#) autobiography 31-6). Abram was a fiddler and not a harpist - it was in Wales that his family learned to play the harp. He is said to have been 100 years old at the time of his death. The date is well known, for he died on the roadside near Llwyngwrl, and was buried at Llangelynnin, 12 November 1799 - the entry in the parish register being 'Abram Woods, a travelling Egyptian.' He is known to have had three sons, Valentine, William, and Solomon (the 'great scholar's' grandmother spoke of Tom and Robin), and a daughter, Damaris, who married an Ingram from north Cardiganshire. This article is concerned with only two of the sons, and those of their descendants who became well-known harpists. As has been already indicated, the family was very numerous - and, as is customary among the gipsies, there was a great deal of inter-marriage among the various branches of the family.

(A) VALENTINE (or JOHN) WOOD (about 1742 - 1818), harpist

He was born about about 1742. He married one of the Boswell's, and was buried under the name 'John Abraham Woods,' at Llanfihangel-y-Traethau, 14 April 1818, 'aged 76.' He was the first harpist in the family.

His children included

(1) ADAM WOOD (died between 1852 - 1857), harpist

Born at Abergynolwyn, who was 90 years old when he was buried at Lampeter some time between 1852 and 1857. Two of his sons were

(a) JOHN WOOD JONES (1800 - 1844), harpist

He is said by some to have been born on the roadside near Barmouth; he was christened at Llanfihangel-y-Traethau, 6 April 1800. He was taught to play the harp by his father and by [Richard Roberts](#) of Caernarvon (1769 - 1855), and became one of the most celebrated harpists of his tribe and, indeed, of the country; he was generally known as 'John Jones.' He was at one time family harpist to the [Gwynnes](#) of Glanbrân, near Llandovery, then kept a school for harpists under the patronage of [Carnhuanawc](#) at Carmarthen, and finally became harpist to the Llanover family; he died at Llanover, 12 December 1844.

(b) EDWARD WOOD (1838 - 1908), harpist

Born 26 August 1838, died at Bala about 1908 - see [J. Glyn Davies's](#) recollections of him ([Edward Wood a'r Dadgeiniaid](#) ) in the summer number of *Lleufer*, 1952, pp.57-65.

(2) ALABAINA WOOD

Her name in some districts became synonymous with 'gipsy.' [J. Glyn Davies](#) published some interesting details about her in the *Journal of the Gipsy Lore Society*, 1929, 143-4.

(3) THOMAS WOOD

Born in a barn at Llan-y-bydder, and died at Ruthin at the age of 95. He had nine children, among whom may be mentioned (a) ROBERT WOOD, a harpist frequently encountered at Glanbrân; (b) JEREMIAH WOOD, harpist, buried at Llanrwst; (c) ADAM WOOD, harpist (father of the harpist GODFREY WOOD), who was buried at S. Asaph; (d) SAIFORELLA WOOD, mother

of the MATTHEW (' MATCHO ') WOOD, from whom Sampson obtained much of his recorded gipsy folk-lore - Matthew died at Bala, 2 March 1929, 'aged 86,' and was buried at Llanycil.

(4) JEREMIAH WOOD (or WOOD JONES) 'Jerri Bach Gogerddan' (1778? - 1867), harpist

For fifty-one years he was the celebrated harpist of the [Pryse](#) family. He died 27 July 1867, and was buried at Llangynfelyn. Of his children (a) JEREMIAH, harpist, died at Abergavenny in 1878, (b) JOHN succeeded his father at [Gogerddan](#), but died and was buried at Rhyl about 1870, while (c) ELEANOR, after parting from her first husband, ' Dick Alabama,' married the Newtown harpist, [John Roberts](#), and became the mother of a houseful of harpists.

(5) ELLEN WOOD ('Blind Nelly')

Mother of BENJAMIN WOOD, who was christened at Llan-uwchllyn, 2 March 1831, and became a well-known harpist at Carmarthen.

The second son of old ' Abram Wood ' was

(B) WILLIAM (sometimes called THOMAS) WOOD

He was the father of (1) ARCHELAUS WOOD, who was the first pupil of [Richard Roberts](#), the Caernarvon harpist; (2) WILLIAM WOOD, father of HENRY WOOD ('Harri Ddu') the Llanidloes harpist who was so well known to the poet [Ceiriog](#) - Harry was buried at Penrhyn-deudraeth about 1883; and (3) SARAH WOOD, who married John Robert Lewis of Pentrefoelas, cousin of the almanac-maker [John Robert Lewis](#). Their son was [John Roberts](#) of Newtown (1816 - 1894).

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Sources

J. Glyn Davies, 'Welsh Sources for Gipsy History,' in *Journal of the Gipsy Lore Society*, 1930, 64-86

John Sampson, 'The Welsh Woods,' in *Journal of the Gipsy Lore Society* 1932 (56-71), 1933 (33-46) (196-205), 1934 (190-200)

R. Griffith, *Llyfr Cerdd Dannau* (1913) (which, in places, differs from Sampson's table)

information from the late Prof. J. Glyn Davies

J. Glyn Davies, [Edward Wood a'r Dadgeiniaid](#), *Lleufer*, Summer 1952, pp.57-65

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