

GWEN ferch ELLIS (c. 1552 - 1594), first victim of execution for witchcraft in Wales

Name: Gwen Ferch Ellis
Date of birth: c. 1552
Date of death: 1594
Spouse: Lewis ap David ap Gwyn
Spouse: Lewis ap David ap Gruffith Gethin
Spouse: John ap Morrice
Parent: Ellis
Gender: Female
Occupation: first victim of execution for witchcraft in Wales
Area of activity: Law
Author: Lisa Cowan

Gwen ferch Ellis was born about 1552 in Llandymnog parish, Denbighshire. Her parents' identities are not recorded - only her father's forename, Ellis, is indicated by the Welsh surname prefix 'ferch', meaning 'daughter of'. The historic record shows that she had a sister, Elizabeth ferch Ellis (d. c.1579), and an uncle, Harry ap Roger, with whom she was sent to live in Yale at the age of five or six. Gwen was married three times during her short life. Her first husband, Lewis ap David ap Gwyn, died just two years after marriage. Gwen then married her second husband, Lewis ap David ap Gruffith Gethin (Lewis Gethin), a miller, and in 1588 the couple were living at a mill near Llaneilian-yn-Rhos. After eighteen years of marriage, Gwen was widowed a second time, and in 1592 she married her third husband, John ap Morrice of Betws-yn-Rhos. Gwen is identified in the transcript of her trial as his 'supposed wife'.

Gwen ferch Ellis was a cloth spinner, who was well-known in the community for practising the art of healing using charms, 'salves, drinke and plasters', for which people compensated her with wool, corn, butter, and other items which constituted her main source of income. Accusations of maleficent witchcraft were made against Gwen after a paper charm assumed to belong to her was found in the parlour of **Thomas Mostyn** (1535?-1618) of Gloddaeth, an influential member of the local gentry. Written backwards, the charm was believed to be intended to cause harm. Gwen was implicated by her association with Jane Conway, widow of **Hugh Gwyn Holland** of Conwy, who had a dispute with **Thomas Mostyn**. Two of Jane Conway's sons were Puritan clergymen who published anti-witchcraft tracts - **Henry Holland**, author of *A Treatise against Witchcraft* (1590), and **Robert Holland**, author of the Welsh-language dialogue *Dau Gymro yn taring yn bell o'u gwlad* (c. 1595), the latter quite possibly intended to demonstrate the family's opposition to witchcraft following the trial of Gwen ferch Ellis.

When suspicious bailiffs visited her home, Gwen was discovered to be in possession of Catholic paraphernalia - a bell without a clapper, and a brass and tin depiction of Christ rising from the dead. In June 1594, Gwen was arrested on the authority of William Hughes, Bishop of St. Asaph, and imprisoned in Flint gaol. Though her case began before the ecclesiastical court, at Llansanffraid Church, it was later moved to the Court of Great Session which convened at Denbigh in October 1594. Inter alia, Gwen was accused of causing the death of Lewis ap John, a neighbour's son, causing the arm of Robert Evans to break after he struck her, and putting a 'devill' fly in a jug of ale served to bailiff William Gruffith and his companions, which they assumed to be her witch's familiar. Seven witnesses testified against her - five men and two women. The brief transcript of Gwen's examinations shows her bravely defending herself against the combined forces of the Church, the court, and the gentry. She frankly admits to using charms and proceeds to recite one in Welsh before the court. She states that she has been healing for around ten years, having been taught the art by her sister Elizabeth, and that various members of the community came to her for help, which is what she believed she was providing. She denies having brought the charm into Mostyn's home, and even claims that she saw a similar charm in Jane Conway's prayer book.

Despite her protestations, Gwen was convicted. In October 1594, she was hanged in Denbigh Town Square, pursuant to the penalty laid down by the 1563 Witchcraft Act. She was 42 years old. As an innocent victim of persecution, Gwen ferch Ellis deserves to be commemorated irrespective of whether the events surrounding her accusation, trial, and execution are particularly exceptional. However, Gwen's case is noteworthy as the first person on record executed for witchcraft in Wales, where the witch hysteria which swept Europe and America during the Early Modern period was comparatively rare. Indeed, Gwen's case is one of only some 40, only five of which resulted in executions. In addition to providing insight about the history of witchcraft and the changing understanding of the concepts of white and black magic in the early modern period, the case is also useful for study of themes common to many witchcraft accusations, including religion and Reformation, gender, social class, and community dynamics.

Author

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Sources

Richard Suggett, *A history of magic and witchcraft in Wales* (Stroud 2008)

Richard Suggett, 'Witchcraft Dynamics in Early Modern Wales', in Michael Roberts and Simone Clarke (eds.) *Women and Gender in Early Modern Wales* (Cardiff 2000)

Gwen ferch Ellis: NLW, Great Sessions 4/9/4/10-15, NLW Denbigh Gaol Files (1594)

Further reading

Wikipedia Article: [Gwen ferch Ellis](#)

Additional Links

Wikidata: [Q18914804](#)

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