

## LEACH, ARTHUR LEONARD (1869 - 1957), historian, geologist and archaeologist

**Name:** Arthur Leonard Leach

**Date of birth:** 1869

**Date of death:** 1957

**Spouse:** Sarah Leach (née Currie)

**Parent:** Sarah Leach

**Parent:** John Leach

**Gender:** Male

**Occupation:** historian, geologist and archaeologist

**Area of activity:** History and Culture; Nature and Agriculture; Science and Mathematics

**Author:** W. Gwyn Thomas

Born at Tenby, 12 November 1869, elder son of John and Sarah Leach of Tenby. John Leach (1841 - 1916), having been a printer with the *Tenby Observer*, established his own printing and publishing business in the town and launched a successful rival local newspaper, to which his younger son Ernest H. Leach subsequently succeeded; both sons shared his antiquarian interests which may have been stimulated by his association with [Edward Laws](#). Arthur Leach's formal education was confined to the local National School and Trinity College, Carmarthen, where he qualified as a teacher in 1890, but in those academic subjects to which he contributed significantly he was of necessity largely self-taught. His teaching career (which he readily admitted he disliked) was entirely spent in south-east London, mainly at the Elementary School, Ancona Road, Plumstead. But school vacations often saw him back in Tenby, exploring and noting the antiquities of the area, and this pattern continued after his marriage on 23 December 1897 at St. Margaret's Church, Plumstead, to Sarah Currie (born 1871) who had moved to Plumstead from the Liverpool area.

The first of his many publications appeared the following year, *Leachs Guide to Tenby*, published by his father to compete with the older *Mason's Guide* from the rival press; there were several later editions. From about this time also short articles by him on local history, antiquities and natural history began to appear in the *Tenby and County News*, his father's weekly newspaper, a practice which continued throughout his life, even after that paper had been absorbed by its rival; notes by him also appeared in the Woolwich local paper. His lifelong membership of the Cambrian Archaeological Association began in 1899, but influenced by [Dr. Arthur Vaughan](#) and E.E.L. Dixon his interest was directed rather more towards geology, and after attending lectures on this subject at the Woolwich Polytechnic (where he befriended another notable geologist, R.H. Chandler) he joined the Geologists' Association in 1905. The *Proceedings* of this Association for that year carried the first of many reports by him of its excursions to sites both in north-west Kent and in south Pembrokeshire (he was the organiser of its meetings in Tenby in 1909), and over the following thirty years or so more than forty papers and reports by him appeared in the *Proceedings* as well as others in which he was joint-author. He made an important contribution to the work of the Association, first as auditor and member of its Council, but most notably as General Secretary during the years 1913-18. His continued services were recognised by his presentation with the Foulerton Award in 1925 'for good amateur work', by his Vice-Presidency over many years, and ultimately by his election as President for 1932-34 (the topics of his two presidential addresses were the geology and scenery of his native area), and he was made an honorary member in 1943. He was elected Fellow of the more prestigious Geological Society of London in 1910 and received an award from the Society's Wollaston Donation Fund in 1926. His contribution to understanding the geology of south Pembrokeshire was acknowledged in Dixon's major study of that area. *Memoirs of the Geological Survey, Geology of the South Wales Coalfield*, Part XIII (1921).

Exploration of the Pembrokeshire cliffs as a geologist led to his archaeological discoveries (hearths, middens, etc. and flint implements) which were reported in a series of notes in *Archaeologia Cambrensis* and other journals such as *Nature* from 1909 to 1933. Of particular importance was his finding flint-working sites on submerged land and also his exploration of the habitation site at Nanna's Cave on Caldey Island which, though somewhat modified by more recent work, was meticulously recorded. In the early years of the 20th century he became involved in controversies that arose from evidence of early man in relation to recent (Pleistocene) geological features, his approach being characteristically factual rather than speculative. Holidays would often be spent visiting important archaeological sites in western and central France, on which he would subsequently give public lectures illustrated with his own lantern slides.

On retiring from teaching in 1929 he was able to undertake historical research on local history, using the resources of the British Museum and other repositories in London. The fruit of this was his most substantial work, *The History of the Civil War (1642-1649) in Pembrokeshire and on its Borders* (London, 1937), the publication of which, however, he had to subsidise himself. Though in large measure a documentary compilation, it showed a sure handling of the sources and has

remained definitive (reviewed in *Archæologia Cambrensis* 93 (1938), 267-71 by [Sir Frederick Rees](#)). At the same time he was collecting material for a history of Tenby which unfortunately was never prepared for publication, although extracts often appeared as notes on various historical topics in the local newspapers.

In 1940 he settled in Tenby and was at once invited to become Honorary Curator of the museum there, an independent institution, subsequently acting also as its Secretary and Treasurer for fifteen years. To this work he devoted much of his time, while by lectures and regular press reports he kindled a greater public awareness and use of the museum. As early as 1918 he had produced a small publication *Some Prehistoric Remains in Tenby Museum* (second edn. 1931), and he now brought some expertise to the display of such material. He was uniquely qualified to write an account of a neglected but significant Pembrokeshire antiquary, the Rev. Gilbert Smith (*Archæologia Cambrensis*, 98 (1945), 249-54). The museum's collection of drawings prompted the publication of his *Charles Norris (1779-1858) of Tenby and Waterwynch, topographic artist* (1949), incorporating a catalogue of [Norris](#)'s works. The local museum's affiliation to the National Museum of Wales led to his membership of its Council, in which he also served on the Science Committee. In 1948 the University of Wales recognised his academic achievement by conferring on him the honorary degree of M.A.

His prolific writings, reflecting an inquiring and alert mind, were always precise and informative. Despite a rather severely academic and sceptical attitude, he could convey his enthusiasm for knowledge to others, especially to children although he had none of his own. He died at Tenby on 7 October 1957, his wife having predeceased him in March of the previous year, and was buried in Tenby cemetery.

## Author

W. Gwyn Thomas, (1928 - 1994)

## Sources

*The Tenby Observer*, 11 October 1957

*Proceedings of the Geologists' Association*, 69 (1958), 67-70

papers in Tenby Museum

and personal knowledge

## Additional Links

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