

Wrexham's first African?

Affricanwr cyntaf Wrecsam?

*"Of the Condition of this Negre
Our information is but meagre;
However here, he was a dweller,
And blew the horn for Master Meller.
Here, too he dy'd, but when or how,
Can scarcely be remember'd now,
But that to Marchwiell he was sent,
And had good Christian interment.
Pray Heav'n may stand his present friend,
Where black, or white, distinctions end.
For sure on this side of the grave,
They are too strong, tw'ixt Lord & Slave.
Here also liv'd a dingy brother,
Who play'd together with the other,
But, of him, yet longer rotten,
Every particular's forgotten,
Save that like Tweedle-Tum & dee,
These but in notes, could [n]e'er agree,
In all things else, as they do tell ye,
We're just like Handel and Corelli.
O had it been in their life's course
T'have met with Massa Wilberforce,
They wou'd in this alone, have join'd,
And been together of a mind,
Have raised their Horns to one high tune,
And blown his Merits, to the Moon."*

Philip Yorke (1743-1804)
Published in 1802

Philip Yorke (1743-1804)
Cyhoeddwyd yn 1802

'A Negro Coachboy' is one of Erddig's most famous paintings. Traditionally the painting was known as 'John Meller's Coachboy'. John Meller was the owner of Erddig in the early 18th century.

In the late 18th century, Philip Yorke, then owner of Erddig, decided to commission portraits of his servants. This painting was seen as the first in the series. Philip Yorke wrote a poem to accompany the portrait of the coachboy.

Mae 'A Negro Coachboy' yn un o beintiadau mwyaf enwog Erddig. Adnabuwyd y peintiad fel 'John Meller's Coachboy' yn draddodiadol. Roedd John Meller yn berchen ar Erddig ar ddechrau'r 18fed ganrif.

Ar ddiwedd y 18fed ganrif, penderfynodd Philip Yorke, perchennog Erddig bryd hynny gomisiynu portreadau o'i weision. Ystyriwyd y peintiad hwn fel y cyntaf yn y gyfres. Ysgrifennodd Philip Yorke gerdd i gyd-fynd â'r portread o'r coetslanc.



A Negro Coachboy,

British School, 18th century, oil. 07/47.1 ERD.P.10.
Kindly lent by The National Trust, Erddig, The Yorke Collection.

A Negro Coachboy,

Ysgol Brydeinig, 18fed ganrif, olew. 07/47.1 ERD.P.10. Benthycwyd drwy garedigrwydd Yr Ymddiriedolaeth Genedlaethol, Erddig, Casgliad Yorke.

The poem tells of a black horn player – servant of John Meller. The Erddig accounts for 1719 record a payment of £5 to 'the black', whilst a letter from the Rector of Marchwiell to John Meller in 1721 says 'I know no reason, if the Major [Meller's brother-in-law] send his Black to me today, but that he may be christen'd this morning.' Perhaps here is the subject of the painting?

Recent research, however, suggests the coachboy's uniform dates from the late 18th century and that the poem itself was an addition to the painting hiding a name - 'John Hanby'. It now seems likely the portrait was not painted in John Meller's time. Instead the portrait was possibly acquired by Philip Yorke to commemorate a particular servant who had stuck in the memories of local people.

The poem hints at the changed attitudes to slavery since the time of John Meller. Maybe the great abolition debate taking place during the 1790s encouraged Philip Yorke to celebrate the coachboy who had once worked at Erddig.

It is unlikely we will ever know the real identity of John Meller's coachboy. Instead it is more interesting to think about how and why he came to be in Wrexham, what he thought about living and working here in Wales nearly three hundred years ago, and how local people reacted to possibly Wrexham's first African.

Dywed y gerdd am chwaraewr corn tywyll ei groen – gwas John Meller. Mae cyfrifon Erddig yn 1719 yn cofnodi taliad o £5 i'r 'the black', tra fo llythyr gan Reithor Marchwiell at John Meller yn 1721 yn nodi 'I know no reason, if the Major [Meller's brother-in-law] send his Black to me today, but that he may be christen'd this morning.' Efallai mai ef oedd testun y peintiad?

Fodd bynnag, awgryma gwaith ymchwil diweddar fod gwisg y coetslanc yn dyddio o ddiwedd y 18fed ganrif a bod y gerdd ei hun yn ychwanegiad at y peintiad ac yn cuddio enw - 'John Hanby'. Ymddengys yn awr, na chafodd y portread ei beintio yng nghyfnod John Meller. Efallai y bu i Philip Yorke ei brynu i goffau un gwas arbennig a oedd wedi aros yng nghof pobl leol.

Awgryma'r gerdd bod newid agwedd i gaethwasiaeth ers cyfnod John Meller. Efallai bod y drafodaeth am ddileu caethwasiaeth a gafwyd yn y 1790au wedi annog Philip Yorke i ddatlu'r coetslanc a fu'n gweithio yn Erddig unwaith.

Mae'n annhebygol y cawn y wybod gwir hunaniaeth coetslanc John Meller. Yn hytrach, mae'n llawer mwy diddorol ystyried sut a pham y daeth i Wrecsam, beth oedd ei farn am fyw a gweithio yma yng Nghymru bron i dri chan mlynedd yn ôl, a sut oedd pobl yn ymateb efallai i Affricanwr cyntaf Wrecsam.