

**Cymdeithas Hanesyddol Tyddewi a Phebidiog**  
**St Davids and Dewisland Historical Society**  
**Captain George Mathias (& the Beynon Family Tree)**  
**John Beynon**

Whilst clearing the attic of the Penlan farmhouse an oil painting, painted in Antwerp, was discovered ... revealing Captain George Mathias (great uncle to John Beynon). Born on the family farm in Letterston George went off to sea when just 15 years of age. Through hard work and determination he progressed to become Captain by the age of just 23, when he took command of the '*Rising Sun*', owned by Messrs. W.R. Wright of Liverpool in whose service he continued for a quarter of a century.

George Mathias was an imposing figure – around 6'6" tall and with considerable strength, which made him an excellent seaman in the days of sailing ships where the work was arduous and ships and crews were often away from home ports for months, or years, at a time. A good captain was responsible for his crew and on one occasion – when the crew were ashore after a long period at sea – George came upon one of his crewmen about to be arrested by the local constabulary. When he prevailed upon the policeman to release the crewman into his care the policeman refused and George knocked him down and picked up his drunken crewman ... along with the policeman's truncheon, which had been dropped in the scuffle! He boarded his ship and sailed – on schedule - from Liverpool!

Captain George Mathias' commands included the '*Royal Saxon*' – at a time when the ship was chartered by the Government to carry troops and munitions to the Red Sea ... in pursuit of King Theobald of Abyssinia. As his reputation grew he captained successively larger ships: '*Royal Family*'; '*Grand Duke*' and '*Duchess of Argyll*' which were the fastest clippers of the period. He frequently made the voyage from the Mersey to Sydney, Australia in 78 days, a remarkable feat at the time if the round trip could be completed in under 6 months ... and more cargoes carried each year. Rather than goods on the outward voyage Captain Mathias' could carry convicts for Australia or Scottish immigrants for New Zealand. The cargoes for the return voyage included wool from New Zealand and Australia or more exotic cargoes from the ports on the way back to Liverpool - including silks and ivories or exotic timbers from the East Indies and India. One return voyage the crew mutinied off the coast of West Africa and Captain Mathias and his 1<sup>st</sup> Mate locked the crew below-decks and sailed the ship back to Liverpool themselves. For this act of heroism George was given command of '*Duchess of Argyll*' – the largest and newest ship of the line at the time.

When he was only 26 years of age he was persuaded to take command of the '*Three Brothers*' one of three big steamships built by Cornelius Vanderbilt. Originally launched as the '*SS Vanderbilt*' she was designed for transatlantic passenger service but during the American War of Independence (1861-64) she was taken over by the Union Navy – which used her to hunt Confederate blockage runners – before being returned to the transatlantic runs. She was then sold and her side-paddles and engines were removed – returning her to a three-masted clipper. Under George Mathias' command she continued to set world records on the run between San Francisco and Liverpool. When off the coast of Rio de Janeiro during a storm the ship's rudder was carried away and in his efforts to keep the vessel afloat in order to make the necessary repairs Captain Mathias sustained a compound fracture of the leg and with his own hands managed to set his own bones. The '*Three Brothers*' continued to sail between San Francisco and Liverpool, with massive cargoes of wheat from the New World, until she was finally scrapped in 1899. Captain George Mathias retired around 1900, when aged 62, and died in Letterston in 1923, aged 90.

