GOWER

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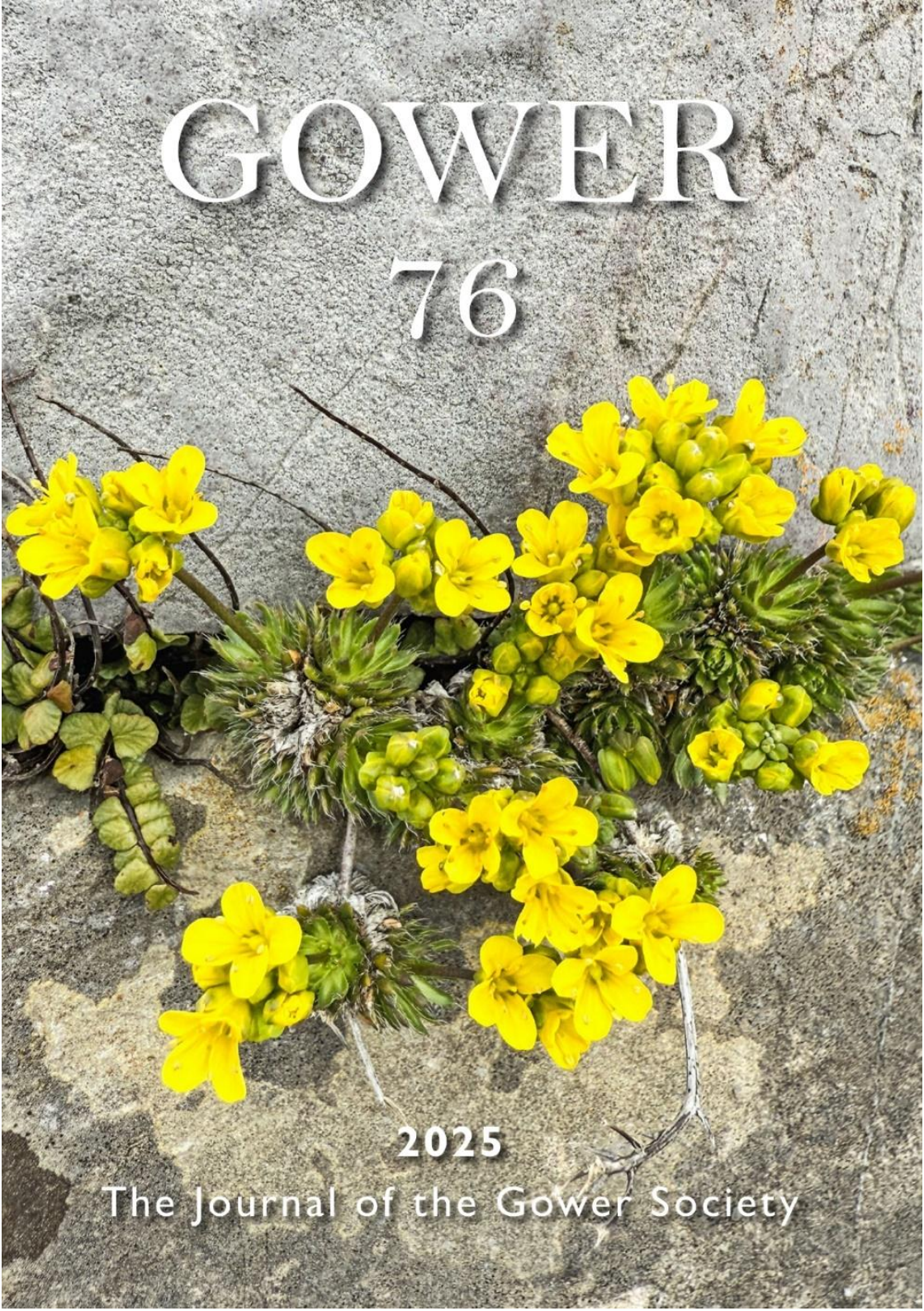

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Contents

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Laver Seaweed: a Slippery History of Laverbread on Gower

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The history of laverbread production on Gower remains largely undocumented, unlike the more widely recognised cockle-picking industry with which it shares many similarities. Laverbread making has long been a quiet tradition, seldom recorded or acknowledged. This elusiveness is mirrored in the seaweed itself, often called the gambler's weed for its unpredictable nature, sometimes abundant, sometimes buried and inaccessible. Searching for it at mid- to low tide is always a risk; one day the rocks are thick with it, the next it vanishes beneath shifting sands. The history of laverbread making follows a similar pattern, hidden beneath layers of hearsay and stories as unpredictable and fleeting as the harvest itself. For these reasons, any such history is necessarily uncertain, shaped as much by shifting recollections and oral traditions as by recorded evidence. Yet, despite this elusive nature, traces of its past can still be found and so I present here what I have discovered as part of a UNESCO-Bridges project researching traditional sustainable fishing, piecing together fragments from historical accounts, personal narratives, and surviving traditions.[1]

One such example of this uncertainty is a short two-page article on laver seaweed, published in 1959 (Volume 12) of *Gower* under the author abbreviation J.M.T. [for J. Mansel Thomas] *The Weed of Hiraeth*, the only article ever published in the Journal on laver seaweed or laverbread, explores the enduring significance of laverbread in Welsh identity and tradition. It portrays the black, glistening laverbread as a symbol of home and hiraeth and, to make a point, it recounts the poignant tale of a Cornish seaweed gatherer who, through happenstance, becomes bound to a Gower laverbread family, their lives intertwined through the generational trade of this black gold. This is a beautiful tale, one that every laverbread-making family I spoke to could relate to. It reflects how laver seaweed was traded over distances, transported via the railway network, connecting families whose lives became intertwined over time. Yet, with no verifiable records, the story remains unconfirmed and no family I spoke to could attest to it. That is not to say it isn't true, only that it exists within a complicated, tangled, and unclear history. The era in which *The Weed of Hiraeth* is written marked the later heyday of a two hundred year old industrialisation of laverbread production that shaped the land, culture and livelihoods of Gower's sea-farmers. It's hard to estimate the size of this trade, but even in living memory, during the busiest days, a single market stall could sell as much as half a ton a day. 'And that's only one stall, there were at least twelve

stalls in Swansea. Can you imagine five or six tonnes of seaweed?' (Liz Williams, retired laverbread maker, Crofty).

Laverbread, Welsh black mush, *Porphyra umbilicalis, Bara Lawr,* a delicate, single-cell-thick red alga, cooked into a rich, smooth purée and famously known as Welsh caviar. The name laverbread refers to the final prepared dish, while laver, the seaweed itself, traces its linguistic roots back to the Latin *laver, laveris,* a connection it shares with the Welsh *lawr*. It is found, when you can find it, clinging to the rocks along the western shores of the British Isles, thriving in cold, nutrient-rich waters. It is a rare plant-based source of vitamin B12 and packed with essential minerals, particularly iron and iodine, the latter responsible for its distinctive umami depth. To the untrained eye it is limp on the sand, hardly noticeable, like a tangle of discarded black plastic, slick and unremarkable, and yet, within this flat-faced dark slime is a culinary tradition deeply rooted in Gower's coastal life (see Figure 1). Some suggest it was first used as a survival food after Viking raids, while others believe it dates to Wales' earliest inhabitants. Food historian Seren Charrington-Hollins argues that laverbread has been a staple for centuries, often sustaining communities through periods of hardship, invasion, and displacement.[2] This idea is echoed in oral ethnographic accounts collected during my research as part of the UNESCO Coastal Tales research project, which reveal connections between Wales and Ireland during the Great Famine (An Gorta Mór, 1845–1852).[3] This evidence suggests that families along Ireland's west coast survived in part through their knowledge of eating laver seaweed.

Figure 1. Laverbread in its natural environment

Whatever its origins in Wales, evidence from a Neolithic burial site in Orkney confirms that seaweed was consumed as food 5,000 years ago, with traces preserved in the calcified plaque of human teeth.[4] Its agricultural use may equally be ancient. Pliny the Elder, writing in the first century AD, recorded that the coastal communities of Gaul gathered seaweed to fertilise their fields, a practice also long carried out in Scotland, Ireland, Pembroke and Jersey. Several types of seaweed have traditionally been used as fertiliser, valued for their rich mineral content and natural plant growth stimulants. In Wales knotted wrack and bladderwrack and the brown seaweeds (Kelp) like *Laminaria digitata* and *Laminaria hyperborea*, were used for their slow-

release nutrients. Their use as a natural soil enhancer has seen a resurgence in the last few years, particularly for farmers growing grass for silage. I've been lucky enough to work on trials at the Agricultural Research Centre (ARC) at Coleg Sir Gâr's Gelli Aur campus. Here, seaweed from Cârr-y-Môr (St David's) is being tested alongside conventional fertilisers in controlled trials, with drones monitoring its effectiveness as a sustainable grass enhancer (Cârr-y-Môr, 2025). This is the future, a model of science and food producers working to solve real-world farming problems. Feeling rather pleased with myself as I recounted this story to Ashley Jones (Selwyn's Seafood, Llanmorlais), as we chatted on the phone, he pointed out that this partnership between science, practical knowledge and laver seaweed has been going on in Wales for much longer. He told me 'Back in the day, pickers from Gower and Pembroke worked with Kathleen Baker on her research.' Ashley was talking about Dr Kathleen Drew-Baker, the British botanist whose 1949 work on the Welsh coast revealed the hidden triphasic life cycle of *Porphyra umbilicalis* (Laver). This discovery transformed seaweed cultivation at a critical moment in Japan's nori industry which had been devastated by repeated crop failures. Drew-Baker's findings revolutionised nori farming, ultimately securing the future of sushi.[5] I am reminded, once again, that this is a slippery history, where we have forgotten as much as we have remembered.

The written history of laver seaweed starts with Gerald of Wales who mentions its use in Pembrokeshire in the 12th century. At Freshwater West on the southern coast, women collected the seaweed from the rocks and laid it out in huts. These huts were important because seaweed can keep when dry and was then easily transported to Gower. This traditional method is still practised at Cârr-y-Môr, where foragers' hands turn orange from the iodine-rich, sopping wet weed as they drape it over washing lines in the sweltering heat of a summer polytunnel.[6] On a warm day, the harvest dries into thin crispy sheets in under three hours, transforming it into a lightweight, easily transportable product that can be stored and sold in bulk. 'You don't want to carry it wet, it's best to lay it flat and let the wind do its work whilst the sand pulls out all the water,' Spencer Williams, a laverbread maker, told me when we met in Crofty. Before the advent of modern transportation and refrigeration, this method was essential. Spencer was referring to the Gower way of drying, but in Freshwater West, where vast quantities of seaweed were harvested and the distance to market was greater, a different approach was needed. There, the last surviving seaweed drying hut stands, a remnant of a group of twenty. A simple rectangular structure with triangular elevations at either end, it supports a pitched, thatched roof, with a doorway facing southwest to catch the prevailing winds. The seaweed was laid on the floor for a week, harvested by women of Angle and, once dry, sent to Bishopston, for processing into laverbread.[7] These drying huts were once common along the south coast of Wales, though this tradition appears to have died out by the 1940s. By the 1970s the last of them was in a state of disrepair, before being restored by the local Roundtable and then

designated as a Grade II Listed Building in 1995 (CADW, 2023). This is what you see today, a lone disintegrating survivor.

The first written account of laverbread making seems to be by William Camden, writing in his monumental 'Britannia' in 1607, which gives a detailed account of how laver seaweed was harvested in springtime:

> In many other places along the Pembrokeshire Coast, the peasantry gather in the Spring time a kind of Alga or seaweed, where they made a sort of food called 'llawvan' or 'lhawvan', in English 'black butter'. The seaweed is washed clean from the sand, and sweated between two tile stones. The weed is then shred small and well-kneaded, as they do dough for bread, and made up into great balls or rolls, which some eat raw, and others fry with oatmeal and butter.[8]

The spread of laverbread beyond coastal communities accelerated in the late 18th and early 19th centuries as industrialisation reshaped Wales, drawing rural coastal workers from the seaweed-eating corridor of south Pembrokeshire, Carmarthenshire and Glamorgan, into the expanding urban centres of the metallurgy industries and coalfield factory towns. This affordable, keepable and nutrient-rich slime, became a dietary mainstay for labourers in the copper, tin and mining sectors. Coastal migrants carried the tradition inland with them, often eating laverbread wrapped in oatmeal: a simple way to soak up the sea's juices before the widespread use of calico or the invention of cellophane. Oral histories recorded in the 1960s recall that, by the 1890s laverbread was most often fried in bacon fat; a hearty breakfast for miners and metallurgy workers doing 12-hour shifts, six days a week. This connection to seaweed as a working-class food came up many times in my conversations with Liz Williams, a retired Crofty laverbread maker and mother of Spencer Williams, 'There was a family in Dyfatty producing for the tin and copperworks. It would come in on the train to Swansea and then be taken to Bishopston for making, so Dyfatty was a good place to set up for the tin- and copperworks.' Laverbread has long been associated with industrial manual labour because of its health benefits, yet by the 19th century, it had become ubiquitous on Wales' coastal tables. In 1808, after visiting Swansea, Mrs Maria Rundell included a refined recipe in her middle-class cookery book, recommending Welsh mutton served with hot laverbread mixed with the sharp citrus of Seville orange juice. Later, in 1865, George Borrow described enjoying 'moor mutton with piping hot laver sauce'.[9]

It was industrial transportation that finally allowed the economies of scale and production that would allow laverbread to take over our tables. The South Wales Railway, engineered by the great Isambard Kingdom Brunel, extended its line from Swansea to Carmarthen, opening on 11 October 1852 and later being extended to Haverfordwest. This quickly became a key artery for market foods including laver seaweed, being picked on the south Wales coast. 'At each station they would add another sack, a

bit here and a bit from there, until it arrived in Swansea and then went on horse and cart to the market gardeners in Bishopston,' (Liz Williams, Crofty). No one knows how or exactly when this industry took hold in Bishopston/Murton, but by the beginning of 19th century, a handful of market gardeners were producing fruit ice cream in the summer and laverbread in the winter, when laver seaweed is at its best for making into laverbread after the fronds have been hit by the first frost. The last of these remaining market gardeners is Mr Evans from the Murton Farm Shop, a family-run business that has been growing produce since 1870. When I went to visit Mr Evans to ask him about his family's involvement in laverbread making, he was perched halfway up a ladder, retiling his slate-roofed cottage. He paused when I asked about seaweed and gestured towards a wooden shed, that now housed the tractor: 'They used to make the laverbread there, but there's nothing left. That's where they had the cold slabs for drying and weighing; we tried to save them when the building came down, but they were made of slate, and they broke apart.' He told me to wait and disappeared into a shed, coming out with a faded, laminated, handwritten list, with the names of market gardeners from the 1960s and '70s: a list compiled by family and friends from memory, of 36 neighbouring farms, some marked with an 'L' for laverbread. According to this list the laverbread makers were Stephen Marmant of Murton, Graham Jones of Herbert's Lodge Farm in Bishopston, Archie Gwyn and John Jones of Murton, Albert Jones of Lime Kiln Lane and the Roach family of Murton. I cannot speak to the accuracy of this list; I tried to track down the names on it without much success. I did however manage to get hold of Graham Jones who, though a lover of laverbread, had never produced it commercially. He could however remember the production of laverbread at Murton Farm by the Roach Family and confirmed that the other big producers in the area were the Jones family (Murton) and Archie Gwyn (who later sold his business to the Williamses of Crofty). As luck would have it, there is a short oral history of the Roaches gathered from David Roach by 'Gower Unearthed' as part of the Story of Mumbles project.[10]

Established in the late 19th century, the Roach family's business was a multi-generational operation, led by George and Elizabeth Roach alongside William, Winnie, Stanley, Margery, and Aunty Maud (Davies) from Manselfield Road. Like many market gardeners in the area, they did not only cultivate vegetables for local markets but also produced laverbread on a significant scale. Laver seaweed was sourced from as far afield as Stranraer, Portpatrick, north Wales, Pembrokeshire, and Ireland. The process was labour-intensive: laver seaweed was washed and then boiled in 50-gallon cast iron, coal-fired boilers, with 3.5 to 5 lbs of rock salt added. After hours of boiling, the laver was passed through a modified mincer before being spread onto slate-bedded tables to drain and set overnight. In the morning it was weighed and portioned and made ready for sale at Neath, Port Talbot and Bridgend Market, and at the family stall in Swansea Market. Or it was sold to the cockle women of Penclawdd, who would sell it in Llanelli and

Maesteg. Following Elizabeth Roach's passing around 1970, Stanley and Margery Roach took over the market gardening business, running it from 15 Pyle Road with additional fields at Pwlldu Lane. Here, interestingly, one of the last surviving Gower outdoor boiling cauldrons can still be seen embedded in a limestone wall at the end of the lane (see Figure 2).

The Bishopston/Murton market gardeners were not the only producers on Gower. The Roberts family had been producing it for as long as anyone could remember, from a factory with four coal heated cauldrons at Penclawdd docks. They would carry on making laverbread until the mid-1980s, when they are lost to history, though their encouragement of one cockler left a lasting legacy. After a series of reduced cockle harvests in 1973, 1974 and 1975, cocklers were looking to diversify their interests and move into new seafood markets where they already had interests and personal connections. 'My husband was looking around for some way to make a living and Roberts said to him, "Why don't you make your own laverbread?" so we had a go with a saucepan on the Raeburn and a hand mincer and that was successful so off we went,' (Liz Williams, Crofty). They were followed a few years later by Ethel and Lenny Coglan, cocklers from Penclawdd, who had already been buying laverbread wholesale from the Roaches and selling it in markets alongside their cockles. Now they branched out into laverbread production, building a factory near the cockle plant on Salthouse Point.[11] Likewise, Selywn Jones and his wife Linda, enabled with a van purchased through compensation from the US army, first started selling cockles in the 1950s but were also producing laverbread by the late 1970s. The Jones' factory in Crofty is still called Selwyn's to this day though now it produces laverbread from stainless steel and chrome-plated equipment ensuring a sterile environment. The seaweed, washed in multiple water changes, is drained in plastic sieves before being transferred to stainless steel containers for an eight-hour cooking process. Once ready, the hot laver is moved to the mincer where it is processed into its final form. The four-generation family-run business, Selwyn's Shellfish Processors, has evolved into a modern operation. Now owned by Selwyn Jones' great grandson Ashley and his wife Kate, the company remains an important player in the trade. Adapting to stringent EU standards, the new factory is a highly regulated space

Figure 2. Gower's last surviving outdoor boiling cauldron, Pwlldu Lane, Bishopston

requiring strict hygiene protocols. Employees wear white plastic boots, coats, caps, and gloves, a stark contrast to the informal nature of past laverbread operations.

However, just down the road, you can get a feeling of the older way of doing things when you visit the largest producer of laverbread in south Wales. 'Just ask in Penclawdd, everyone knows Spencer,' Mr Jones of Bishopston had told me. I called in to the Royal Oak as the winter sun was getting low over the estuary. At 4pm the pub was full to the brim. I shouted to the bar staff over the noise, and I was soon shown directions. Spencer currently supplies Parson's with laverbread ready for tinning, which can be bought in supermarkets across Wales, but his passion is fresh laverbread, cooked the traditional way. Distribution has become more sophisticated with refrigerated vehicles The laverbread is made in a purpose-built brick building but this is where modernity ends. I find Spencer spooning the hot laver from a huge metal cauldron into the mincer (see Figure 3). 'We do it the way we were taught to do it and that's the way it's always been done. This means that you have to wash every bit of it by hand.' I ask if this is hard work. 'No, no, no, it easy enough, and why do you do it by hand?' He quickly answered his own question, 'Because fingertips are the most sensitive part of the body. Your eyes are no good, they will deceive you, but the fingers don't lie.' Spencer shows me into a refrigerated container, racks of laver seaweed line each side, dated with a tag that shows when it was picked and where. The weed hangs over the edges still clinging to the sand. 'We've lost so much; can you imagine how much my dad knew about laver seaweed? He could tell you exactly where the laver had come from just from the colour of the sand left at the bottom of the bowl when they washed it.'

This thought lingers in my mind as I sit with Mrs Liz Williams and Spencer over cups of tea, watching the sun set. 'They used to give it to women in the maternity ward in Swansea,' she recalls. 'We supplied them until the '90s and then they had [financial] cuts, and they forgot it was so good for you, I suppose.' As Liz speaks, she keeps reminding me of how little is known about this seaweed or more accurately, how much we have collectively forgotten.

Once a humble local staple, the *gambler's weed* now sits on the shelves of Selfridges in London, elevated by its Protected Designation of Origin status, secured after a four-year campaign led by Selwyn's Seafood. Yet here, in its hometown, it lingers quietly at the edges of memory. Though it sits at the heart of Swansea Market, laverbread remains on the margins of our remembered history. It has left behind no grand industrial structures to be preserved for tourism; there are no museum exhibits or artifacts to celebrate its past.

Yet its presence has saved the people of Gower from starvation, and it has nourished our mothers in hospitals. Its imprint lingers in the landscape, culture, and language but it remains , thank goodness, an enduring part of Gower life, waiting to be remembered again.

Figure 3. Spencer spooning the hot laver from the metal cauldron into the mincer

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