

FAREWELL TO SIONI BACH

With great sadness, we note the passing of John Evans, a redoubtable Welshman mourned by the Welsh and Sydney communities alike.

Known across the harbourside city as “Taffy”, John was a loving family man who knew hardship from the time of his childhood. He built a new life in Australia yet always cherished the memories of his beloved Wales.

John was a dutiful father to two children, Shan and Philip and the devoted husband of his wife Maria. A successful businessman who served on the Cymdeithas Committee, he was a fine tenor who sang with both Sydney Welsh Choir and Sydney Male Choir.

The youngest of seven children, William John Evans was born on 17 July 1937 in the tiny front bedroom of a small farm called Waen Llan in the village of Penmachno, North Wales.

His father worked as a slate miner in the local quarry while his mother, Gracie, ran the household and helped out on the farm.

But while John was still a toddler the family was dealt a terrible blow when his father died of the awful miners’ disease, silicosis of the lungs. In those days there was no workers’ compensation so Gracie was left to raise the children and run the farm on her own – a responsibility that she undertook with determination and a mother’s strength.

“Caring and brave...”

As John’s niece Nerys observed in a letter sent from the U.K. in time for it to be read at his funeral: “We all reflect on our memories of times spent in Penmachno and how lucky the Waen Llan family were to have come from a loving Welsh background steeped in community spirit. It was a very hard life – one which made them all strong, caring and brave, even when they had to cope with hardships, extreme pain and suffering.”

After finishing school Sionni bach, as he was known from childhood, went to work in Birmingham where his sisters Gwen and Grace had moved. Not long after Grace emigrated to Australia with her

family, John decided to make the same journey across the world.

Reaching Sydney in April 1963 as yet another wrongly-categorised “10 pound Pom”, John worked hard to adapt to this new life in a city that he quickly grew to love.

Soon after he met his lifetime partner, Romanian-born Maria, and within a year they were married.

Successful in business

At first John worked in pest control, learning the trade and demonstrating very quickly that although he was small in stature he lacked neither ambition nor aptitude. He and three fellow workers pooled their meagre capital resources, borrowed to buy the equipment they needed and set up their own company.



Eventually, through hard work and perseverance John was able to buy out his partners and run his own business specialising in quarantine control.

Stories of John’s fortitude and good humour through his years as a businessman, Welsh-speaking expatriate and singer abound.

Baritone Jim Craft recalled the time when Sydney Male Choir travelled to Taree on the mid-North Coast and “Taffy” realised he’d forgotten to bring his black shoes.

“He ducked down to K-Mart and bought the only pair of black, shiny shoes left in the store,” recalled Jim. “We thought he was walking a bit strangely but he got through the concert without incident. The only problem



was the shoes were three sizes too big! So he ‘donated’ them to one of our younger singers, Damien Blackburn, who was, naturally, delighted by his good fortune.”

A Welsh-speaking M.C.

In 1988 during a tour of England and Wales with Sydney Male Choir, John was able to catch up with his remarkable relative - also named John Evans – who was, at 110, reckoned to be the oldest man in the U.K. and one of the oldest in the world. The old man listened to the choir in concert in Swansea, graciously accepted one of its records and then sang for the choristers one of his favourite hymns, *Lead Kindly Light*.

Ten years later when Sydney Male Choir made another tour of Wales, John arranged for a concert in his old church in *Betws-y-Coed* in Snowdonia National Park. His fellow choristers were delighted – and John was proud as punch – when he was able to M.C. the concert speaking in his native Welsh throughout.

It was inevitable that following John’s death last October after a short illness, members of Sydney Male Choir would pay tribute to their mate and sing at his funeral.

Jim Layton, president of the choir, said: “John was extremely popular, a very fine tenor and probably the most friendly singer in the choir. We have many, many memories of happy times in his company and he is sorely missed.”

John Webb, president of Cymdeithas Cymry Sydney, said: “We lost John Evans all too soon. He was a great mixer who brought a wealth of business and life experience to the committee of Sydney Welsh Society. While Sioni bach always gave wise counsel he was so young at heart it’s hard to believe that he was 73 when he passed away. We extend our deepest sympathy to Maria and the rest of the family.”