BETHAN PHILLIPS tells the story of Wil Richards Cefncoch who was the quarry in one of the biggest manhunt ever seen in West Wales.

ON A cold November evening in 1908 the neighbours of Old Dolfor Woods on the estate of one of Cardigan's most powerful squires, Edward Vaughan of Trawsogad, had no idea that their peaceful existence would be disturbed by one of the most intensive manhunts ever seen in West Wales.

It was the night of November 28 when William Richards of Cefncoch set out with two companions, Morgan and Henry Jones, from Llandysul to poach game on the Trawsogad estate. Times were tough for the locals, and the meat they had been encroaching, wages were low, and the trapping of the odd rabbit, hare or other small game, was a welcome addition to the meagre fare of those forced to live on the wages of subsistence.

But the gentry jealously guarded their game and Edward Vaughan of Trawsogad was no exception. He had had four gamekeepers, the chief keeper being an Englishman named Joseph Belfield. The Game Laws were severe, and if caught, poachers such as Wil Cefncoch could expect to receive stiff sentences. They could be jailed or even transported to the colonies for seven years.

Thus, it was with a mixture of caution and apprehension that Wil Cefncoch and the Jones brothers threaded their way through the tangled undergrowth of Old Dolfor Woods that fine evening. They knew that Vaughan had more record for his poachings than his tenants, the last man caught and charged with poaching on public land was he to a matter of great importance and a status symbol for Edward Vaughan.

Nothing was more embarrassing for the old squires than the poachers, and when shooting parties visited his estate. Wil Cefncoch poaching had become a means of harassment and an annoyance to the authorities. And every hare, and every rabbit killed provided not only a tasty meal, but also a victory over his oppressors.

It was on this note of defiance that Wil and his two companions started their journey through the trees. Wil carried a huge poaching rifle, while Morgan and Henry had smaller ones. The trio hunted the woods heavily, and by the time they reached the farm they were hot, and the need for refreshment immediately alerted the keepers who were patrolling Tysuyddyr Wood only a short distance away. The quick thinking brothers knew that his only hope lay in leaving the area.

But Cefncoch followed the port of Liverpool where he managed to meet a fellow American and, with the police surveillance and the frenzied efforts to capture him, Wil Richards Cefncoch safely reached the shores of the New World in 1909. Even in America he was helped once again in 1922, he returned to Britain, and the years passed.

The history of him and his story is one of a man who, in his youth, was described as "wild and reckless" and was accused of being a "criminal". But his life was one of redemption, and he was welcomed home in 1922. He died in 1924 and was buried at Llandysul, Cardigan.

Under the influence of his wife, who was described as a "beautiful lady" and a "woman of character", he was accepted as a "reformed" character. Nevertheless, he always kept a watchful eye on his future, and it was known that the chief constable considered sending him to the colonies to protect the mahogany trees from the depredations of the poachers. But he was destined never to return. He died in the grand old age of 80 and was buried at Oak Hill Cemetery, Llandysul, Cardigan.