# WILLIAM JONEs

1675 - 1749

The list of Scottish mathematicians is a long one, but there are not many from Wales. One of the best known Welsh mathematicians is William Jones, who was born in the vaguely unpronounceable village of Llanfihangel Tre’r Beirdd on the Island of Anglesey in 1675. He grew up to be friends with some great minds of the time such as Isaac Newton (gravity, calculus) and Edmund Halley (comet). While he made fewer contributions overall, he is responsible for one of the most famous things in mathematics. But more on that later.

William Jones was born on a farm and attended a charity school as the family was poor. As a small schoolchild William was probably confused to discover that while his friends had the same surname as their father, his own father was called Siôn Siôr\*. It must have played on his mind as he later named his own son William Jones too. This second William ended up even more famous, became a ‘Sir’, and has a much longer wikipedia page. (He was a renowned hyperpolyglot – look that one up).

Fortunately for circle-lovers everywhere, a wealthy man in the village spotted Jones’ mathematical ability and arranged a job for him in a counting-house in London. He was so good at this, that before long William found himself teaching navigation and mathematics on board Navy ships and in 1702 was involved in the Battle of Vigo near Spain. This must have frightened him off the idea as he soon returned to London and could be found teaching in coffee houses instead. Much safer.

In 1706 William published a book – *Synopsis Palmariorum Matheseos* – in which he introduced the Greek letter ‘π’ to represent the number formerly known as 3.1415926535… (and a lot more digits besides). Thank goodness he did, for where would we be without our silly reminders such as, ‘cherry pie is delicious, apple pies are too’? He later introduced the dot notation for differentiation too, and this enthusiasm for mathematical notation appears to be a Welsh speciality: Robert Recorde (born in Tenby around 500 years ago) introduced the world to the ‘equals’ sign (=) in 1557.

William Jones married Mary Nix in 1731 and died when his son (the other William) was just three years old.