



Fwd A Taste of Wales



In 2001 the Royal Mail was planning ahead for the special stamps to be issued in 2002 and 2003. Amongst the proposed ideas that managed to make it through to the final selection were a set of four issues, one for each country of the United Kingdom, featuring the best and most classic regional foods. The Welsh dishes (*Fwd*) selected included a traditional Welsh breakfast, Welsh rarebit, Cawl and the Oggie pie.

Despite the Welsh designs being made up to the final designs for release and being prepared as perforated complete stamps, the entire idea was scrapped. England could draw on many well known dishes. In fact they were spoiled for choice with fish and chips, Lancashire hotpot, Norfolk Knuckles, Taunton trotters, jellied eels, jugged hare, and so on. Scotland found the task a bit harder. After haggis with neeps and tatties and deep fried battered Mars Bar they started to struggle. After Buckie wine was discovered to be English they settled on Irn Bru and porage as their other dishes. This did not help, but it was Northern Ireland's lack of choice that scuppered the issue. All that could be found suitable to depict was fried soda bread. All the other suggestions had their roots in what is now the Irish Republic.

The Welsh set was due to be the first release and were the only set to have made the journey from the initial designs to a finished article. Very few were printed and many of these were destroyed when the idea was abandoned. You are therefore privileged to own a set of the unreleased stamps in their final form, perhaps the only ones outside the official archives. The dishes were prepared by Dahlia Smith (no relation), designed by LTA, and printed by De La Rude.

For the uninitiated here is a description of the dishes featured.

Welsh Rarebit generally uses anything but Welsh ingredients. It is a mix of Cheddar Cheese, with chopped onions, eggs, Norfolk mustard and Worcestershire sauce, spread on toasted bread and cooked under the grill. The sprig of flat-leaf parsley depicted on the stamp is a more modern addition and traditionalists consider it optional.

It was originally called Welsh rabbit and this could be taken as an insult. The poor in England 300 years ago could not only afford butcher's meat and had to make do with rabbit. But the poor Welsh couldn't even have that so cheese was their rabbit. Despite this there have been variations called English, Scottish and Irish rarebit, but these have been found to be poor alternatives and have passed into history.

What is Cawl? It's too lumpy to be a soup and too runny to be a stew. It is somewhere in between and is neither. The common variations always use lamb meat and root vegetables, but the big secret of Cawl is the addition of cheese. The most favoured is Caerphilly cheese, from the South-east of the principality. There is much dispute whether the cheese should be added to the lamb or whether it should be served at the side to be eaten with the meat and vegetables. The difference of opinion led directly to the Lampeter riots of 1908 during the judging of the Cardiganshire Show Welsh food entries. The show was banned for 10 years following this and only after another 10 was Cawl allowed to be exhibited again, and only then in two separate categories. The stamp shows the with cheese variation acknowledging that the protagonists for this came off slightly better in the riots.

If you stay in a Welsh hotel, especially those closer to the West coast around Cardigan Bay, you may be treated to a traditional Welsh Breakfast. There will be variations, but expect succulent sausages and crispy bacon served with *ffrwyth y môr* (fruit of the sea), such as cockles harvested in Whitland Bay down by the Gower Peninsular, and the very Welsh Laver Bread. The preparation of this cannot be rushed. Seaweed is collected under a new moon and washed in pure spring water issuing in a westerly direction from a limestone hillside before being blessed by a Druid. It is then gently simmered for 24 hours or until tender before being, in turn, diced, chopped, minced and ground until it is a soft glutinous amorphous gloop. It is now ready to serve.

A word of caution. Hotel guests who ask for tomato ketchup or HP sauce to pour over their laver bread will find the request sternly refused and will return at the end of the day to find their belongings moved into the little used attic room.

"Who ate all the pies?" The answer has to be the Welsh Rugby supporters at the Millenium Stadium, providing we are talking about Oggie Pies. Giant Oggie Pies. Nearly as big as a rugby ball. The fans don't just eat these pasties. They pass them around the crowd recreating the last pass of their heroes on the field. This happens, not just at international matches but at all levels of the game down to local club level.

The Oggie can either be the original beef, leek, turnip and potato or the more recent lamb, swede and mint variety. There detractors who argue that the Oggie is merely the Welsh version of a Cornish pasty, but an epic poem read at the 1953 Eisteddfod, which won first prize, showed that in fact it is the other way round. And do not forget that the Cornish are also Celtic folk who are often referred to as the West Welsh.