



Come to Wales



You've all seen those nice Cinderella sets of stamps that can be classed as tourism or promotional labels. Often they feature all the finest architectural heritage of a great European city or stunning landscapes from the countryside. There is one such set from Wales, but it has a slightly darker side into how it came into being.

During the winters of 1922 and 1923 Wales was afflicted by firstly an epidemic of the Swansea flu virus, which though not usually fatal, many sufferers claim never to be fit for work again. Then the following year came the great famine caused by the laver weevil, which decimated the harvest the then staple diet of laver bread. Thousands emigrated from the principality to find alternative sources of this delicacy. Both these events had quite a detrimental effect on the fledgling Welsh tourism industry. It had already been recognised that Wales was going to have a hard time competing with English sea-side resorts for the nation's two week annual pilgrimage to the coast, and these two events put people off in droves. So someone came up with the idea of promoting Wales as somewhere different for a holiday destination, and one little part of that was some stamps to put on the back of letters highlighting what Wales offered that nowhere else could.

Step in photographer Antwn Wyddfa and designer John Williamson. Wyddfa was well known as a photographer with an eye for detail. He had recently had an exhibition of photos showing the smithies of Wales where he showed that across the country there was no differences in the tools, forges and anvils used by the blacksmiths. His previous collection of photos of farm gates was considered a masterpiece. Williamson was young, relatively new to designing and had never set foot outside his home town of Newcastle; but he impressed with some ideas and was chosen to put Wyddfa's photos into an eye-catching design. So where did things go wrong? Williamson and Wyddfa did not meet up to plan the stamps. Wyddfa submitted his photos and let Williamson select those most suitable. He had labelled them all in Welsh and Williamson could not read the titles. Instead he let a chap down the pub who claimed to speak Welsh 'translate' them for him, and this chap decided to have a bit of a laugh. Williamson fell for it hook, line and sinker. And being the sort who never got out much, preferring to stay working within the confines of his studio, and probably believing the Welsh were a different species to the English, he accepted the stories he was supplied with and worked with them. The other big error was that no-one really checked the finished designs before they went to print. They were given a cursory examination and deemed suitable. That someone really should have looked harder at each design.

These stamps soon caused uproar and were hastily withdrawn when the truth came out. True some had the correct text on them, but by and large most were unacceptable. So here are some the 'best', with an explanation of what the photo really was.

Grumping with attitude featured Mrs Daisy Garreg, reputed to be Wales' oldest woman at the age of 108 at the time. She and all her three generations of descendants lived in the two room hovel behind her.

The miniature log-flume was built during the Welsh Gold Rush of 1902, when a nugget weighing 15 grammes was discovered in the Crychan valley. The prospectors redirected the streams and used these structures to sort the gravel from gold.

Extreme dressage is a scene from the Welsh Naval yards near Port Talbot. The carts are delivering sacks of fleeces for the ratings' bedding.

Mass assisted potholing showed the scene at Coed Mawr colliery when crowds gathered for a Guess the Depth of the coal mine lottery. Shortly after this picture was taken the police arrived to arrest everyone for illegal gambling, but all charges were dropped when it was found that the Chief Inspector had come closest.

The Karting by rail photo comes from the slate quarries of North Wales. It shows a pedal assisted wagon the quarry owners used for being transported 100 yards from one end of the quarry to the other. Needless to say the peddling was done in rotation by quarrymen on a day off work.

Geology for Ladies recorded the big event of 1921 in Glascoed when HRH Agatha, Duchess of Conway volunteered to help rescue coal miners trapped by a cave in. Her attempts to help hindered the rescue and delayed those trapped coming to the surface by several hours.

Riverboating for Profit is actually close to the truth, though this is a canal boat on the Shropshire and Montgomery canal. Because of the lack of customs houses where the waterway crosses into England there was much smuggling of goods where local taxes made them more expensive on one side of the border.

The Superfluous Bridges photo was taken in Pontypridd. The old arched bridge was always too steep for wagons and a flat bridge was built alongside for traffic. The townsfolk liked the old bridge so much they asked that it be retained. Both are still there, though few use the old bridge. But they get a god view of it from the newer one

The story doesn't end there. Wyddfa gave up photography as he found visitors to his exhibitions were only attending with the intention of coming up with funny lines for his shots. The final straw was when a Welsh language magazine called 'Dyrnu' started using them for such a purpose in its monthly caption competition. He took up bee-keeping, but was stung to death in 1933. Williamson had something of a mental breakdown and finished the rest of his life in secure accommodation, kept happy with the paper and wax crayons he was supplied with, drawing mountains, sheep and beach scenes.