



# The Welsh Antarctic Territories (2)



Antarctica as a whole has no government and no permanent population. Eight countries claim parts of Antarctica and five of these have reciprocally recognized one another's claims. These claims, which are regulated by the Antarctic Treaty System, are not recognised by any other country. The Welsh claim (the mainland part is known as The Dependency) is based on the amazing similarity of the coast lines of Wales and that of the Territory. It occupies a quadrant from 100°W to 150°W and covers some 1,175,000 sq miles of what has been named Marie Byrd Land. There is no permanent population, but there usually between 20 and 120 scientists and sheep farmers at any one time based there in the two research stations, named after famous Welsh singers.

Part 1 of this issue focussed on the definitive stamps. It wasn't until 1979 that we saw the first commemorative issue; not even a Royal Wedding or Queen's Silver Jubilee issue was forthcoming. The truth is that there's not too much locally to commemorate, but they've given it their best shots.



The story starts in 1979 with a single 7p stamp depicting Idris the Sick. Many of you will know that it was the Welsh in the person of Madog of Gwynedd, not Columbus or the Vikings, who first discovered the Americas. Idris takes this seafaring spirit further. He allegedly went to sea in his coracle (with his friend Trefor from the pub who volunteered to do all the rowing on account of Idris having a bit of a sniffle at the time) 1,000 years earlier and reappeared after 17 years with stories of a land with snow and weather worse than that experienced around Blaenau Ffestiniog, a land where the sun didn't shine for months, and strange birds that waddled on land and swam underwater. These tales were considered to be gross exaggerations at the time, but Welsh historians now consider him to be the first person to set foot on the continent of Antarctica. The penguins he described were said to stand 9 foot (3 metres) tall and tasted deliciously like mackerel. None have been seen since and it is supposed that Idris (and Trefor) ate that entire species. The stamp features a still from a recreation of the voyage made exclusively for S4C television.

The Welsh love nothing better than a rip-roaring adventure holiday, so it's no surprise to see the 1989 issue 20p commemorating 25 years of success for Happy Harpoon Holidays. What started as rehabilitation for young offenders is extreme fishing at its rawest, and has become a cult amongst both rural dwellers and townies looking for new experiences. It has been estimated that 1 in 20 of the Welsh population has spent 2 weeks there in open longboats harpooning whales, feasting on them in the evenings, and then making corsets to take back home as presents for friends and family. Even stars and celebrities (and I didn't mention Max Boyce) are known to have been on these trips in disguise when they want to get away from it all and avoid the paparazzi.

The stamp depicts a successful harpooning with the adventurers in their traditional attire. The real skill is in landing the whale into the rowing boat to bring back.

The Flora of the Dependency issue of 1995 was limited to a single 25p stamp. This was due to the only plants capable of growing there were the Hardy Leeks (*Allium brrrrrr*) found at the back of the laboratories where there is a bit of shelter from the chill winds and a drop of warmth from the drains. However why anyone should cultivate this plant is a mystery as the leaves have both a resemblance to and a taste of holly. Cooking them only makes them tougher and brings out more of the flavour. Despite this a number of recipes based on this vegetable have been published. The prickly leaves give a new dimension to cheese, potato and leek bake, while raw it has been incorporated into Welsh sushi.

The latest issue is the 55p 2009 issue commemorating Evan Thomas who set a world record for counting penguins back in 1959. He achieved 281,577 in the space of just 24 hours. He practiced for this feat counting sheep from boyhood on the hillsides of his native Montgomeryshire. Woe betide any tourist who broke his concentration by asking him what he was doing. This record still stands today, though there has just been one serious attempt at the record since then. In 1987 Oleg Dubshievski, a Russian, claimed to have beaten it, but independent observers decided he had counted one penguin twice and was disqualified.

Genuinely used examples of the post 1995 stamps are a rarity. Because Post Office regulation 63, article 3b, paragraph 7, section I specifically states that employees should not be expected to work further south than 70° for more than 3 hours and 27 minutes per week the only post office and collection box is located on Ewe And Me Island, 900 miles from the nearest base. Prior to that used covers are more common and carry the stamp of the base at which the sendee worked.

This brings us to the last stamps in this group which are a bit of an oddity. In 1988 rumours arose that Ewe And Me Island had declared Unilateral Declaration of Independence (*Datganiad Unochrog o Annibyniaeth*). Then some mail from the Daipendency started to arrive in Cardiff with D.U.A. overprints on definitive stamps used on the envelopes and *Ynys Benyw a Fi* (Ewe and Me Island in Welsh) postmarks. A battalion of the Welsh SAS (*Gwasanaeth Awyr Arbennig*), who were training in Patagonia at the time, were parachuted in. They arrived at the Communications Centre to find nobody there, just a sign saying 'Out for Lunch. Back in 1 hour'. Several sheets of the rebel stamps were found in the post office and were destroyed ... allegedly. When the staff were finally located a few days later (apparently their potential lunch had a habit of swimming away) they denied all knowledge and promised not to do it again.

There are no FDCs from the Daipendency. Because it can take you at least a couple of weeks to travel from the bases to the post office to post a cover with the new stamps the best you can hope for is a FMC or First Month Cover.