



Mari Llwyd New Year 2015



Wales has a number of its own unique midwinter customs. Mari Llwyd, the Grey Mare, is the one now associated with New Year, but is quite ancient and probably has its roots in pagan beliefs. A horse skull was decorated with ribbons and baubles. Sometimes a carved wooden skull was used. Its body was usually a simple stick with a piece of cloth, but some places it may have been a full model of a horse, or something in-between. The important part was that the lower mandible is present and articulated so that the mouth could open and snap shut. It was taken from door to door through a village on New Years Day by a party of folk. The householders were challenged in verse, and had to reply in kind, whether it be pleasantries or insults. The battle of words continued until one side could not think of a response. If the householder lost he had to invite the Mari Llwyd inside and provide a drink for each of the party, while the Mari Llwyd would snap its jaws frightening the family. If the householder won he was rewarded with pies and sweetmeats. In more recent times this exchange gave way to Christmas carols, but often became boisterous due to drunkenness. The custom is currently having a bit of a revival, with the accent on dressing up, rather than verse.

The Welsh Post Office has decided to mark the beginning of 2015 with a set of stamps featuring famous Mari Llwyds from the past. These have been carefully selected because of their uniqueness, and for the way that each has surreptitiously found its way into the English language and fiction. Forget what other publications inform you; this is the truth behind some words and characters. An extensive search of both public and private archives was undertaken for old surviving photographs of the chosen Mari Llwyds and contemporary villages to use for the backgrounds.

The village of Horeb Chapel, near Aberporth in Cardiganshire, has a tradition of a Mari Llwyd steered by a young local lad. It is thought that it dates back to the 10th century. The horse's body is similar to that used by the tourney horses of mummers, the strolling players of medieval times, with a round frame around the lower part of his body covered in decorated fabric. English mummers were known to venture over the border and borrow (ie steal) ideas. Yes, the Horeb Horse is the origin of the term hobby horse.

In Flintshire the lead-mining village of Pantymwyn has an unusual Mari Llwyd, where the skull is attached to a two-man horse suit. Records dating back to 1310 reference this and its origin is possibly much earlier still. A few other villages later copied it, but wherever it appeared it was always known as a Pantymwyn horse. The style later found a place in seasonal theatricals, and has since evolved into a familiar sight on stage at Christmas. Yes, its name has changed just a bit to pantomime horse!

The village of Godafau in Carmarthenshire dates to pre-Roman times, with the earliest occupation evidenced in the nearby caves after which the village is named (Gogof = cave). Their Mari Llwyd was also a four-legged 'beast', this time ridden by a maiden of the village, accompanied by her attendants; the Prince and the Monk. Records state that those who saw her would be convinced it was a real horse she rode, but with a skull replacing its head. This was probably as much to do with drink as the bouquets of heady herbs she carried and wafted around. At some point way back in time it is also said that she would ride naked with only her bouquets to hide her modesty. There are Welsh historians who say they can link the Lady of Godafau with Saxon Coventry. Earl Leofric's wife must certainly have heard of this Mari Llwyd when she held her horseback protest, adopting the Anglicised name of Lady Godiva.

High on the Denbighshire moors is Cysgod Ffachs, another village that traditionally used the hobby horse design for their Mari Llwyd. Theirs was one of the more ornate with embroidered coverings, and was controlled by an elderly man with a long grey beard and dressed as a wizard. Now many of you will be aware that Tolkien used names of places he had visited in his Middle Earth stories. Is it coincidental that Cysgod is Welsh for shadow, and there is a runic 'G' sewn into the cloth?

One of the more obscure Welsh legends concerns Ceidwad and his faithful companion Gwyllt who held off an entire army of Saxon invaders threatening their village community. Where this is said to have happened is Cwm yr Sabrau, the Valley of the Swords, near the town of Montgomery. The Mari Llwyd used there was draped in a silver shroud and carried by a man wearing a black mask, so that he would not be recognised. You may be wondering now if this has been translated into a well known American comic and TV cultural icon. The answer is that no-one knows. There were Welsh emigrants who went to towns like Pittsburgh to work in the steel mills, who probably took tales of their homeland with them. Certainly there are almost too many coincidences for anything else, right down to Cwm yr Sabrau. Even the translation of the legendary heroes names fit the modern story. Hi ho.

You will have noticed that there are two first class stamps, two second class, and a third class in the set. The WPO state that these, respectively, guarantee next day delivery within Wales, day after delivery within Wales, and perhaps sometime next week in the rest of the UK. These stamps would have been used on the envelopes, but unfortunately they are not valid until after Christmas. Neither are they valid for items posted outside Wales.

Editorial Note

I believe the WPO has slipped up here. Any attempt to have a true, as opposed to manufactured, 1st January cancellation for these stamps will be foiled by the fact that there will be no collections on 1st January.