



The Museum of Our Forefathers' Suffering



As a collector of this series of stamps you are probably aware of Hughesovka, the Welsh speaking Ukrainian city on the banks of the River Don, founded by the steel oligarch John Hughes of Merthyr Tydfil. Hughes died in 1902, but in his will he set up a trust fund for a museum to ensure that the citizens did not lose sight of their heritage. The Museum of Our Forefathers' Suffering opened in 1906 and through the years has steadily added exhibits associated with the homeland. Unfortunately, the Communist era prevented travel to and from Wales, and the trustees of the museum became reliant on Mooncalf & Sons of Aberystwyth, purveyors of second hand and collectable goods. There have been suggestions that the items Mooncalf supplied were those he wasn't able to sell, and these arrived in Hughesovka with minimal information, leaving the trustees to make their own deductions concerning the labelling and descriptions of the exhibits. Communist propaganda told them that life in the East was of a higher quality to their down-trodden compatriots back in Wales which is reflected in some descriptions. The museum while popular in the early days, suffered from dwindling funding and falling visitor numbers. Nevertheless it celebrated its 75th anniversary in 1981 with a set of stamps showing some of the exhibits. Unfortunately it closed and boarded up six months later.

The eight stamps were of four values, in an unusual sheet arrangement, with two stamps of the same value alternating, with some of them inverted, providing collectors with a myriad of se-tenant combinations to collect. The stamp descriptions are adapted from the boards in front of the exhibits.

A typical 1950's Welsh serf's home is shown on one 1.60 stamp, though some doubt has been cast because of the number of possessions owned by the family. It was a cosy atmosphere with the cooking, eating and sleeping all in one large room. The additional room at the back, cut into the hillside, was for their livestock during the winter or a food store during the summer.

The other 1.60 value shows a representation of the three major influences on Welsh life; the Church with a cross, the Spirit with a megalith, and carnal desires with an ice-cream cornet (vanilla of course). Visitors were encouraged to discover their inner leanings by standing between the three items, blindfolded, and then to spin around until dizzy and seeing which model they grasped to steady themselves.

The first 2.00 value shows a typical Welsh public house lounge bar, with a barmaid in traditional costume for her trade. Beer is dispensed direct from the barrel, with spirits from an earthenware jug. You can see a hand of cards

on the table, indicating that the local fortune teller was around. Obviously, the curtains would be drawn around this exhibit on Sundays.

On the same sheet is a detailed picture of a typical working class Welsh dresser with the family china on display. According to the board in front of the exhibit the nobility and rich factory owners would constantly replace their tableware, giving the old away to the workers and the poor. In order that everyone had a fair and equal share the plates and cups would often have to be broken up to be distributed.

Welsh railways are represented by the display on one 2.50 stamp. One can see a rake of second class coaches used to take holidaymakers from Cardiff to Barry Island from 1930. It was quite normal for mixed coaching stock to make up a train. The first class coach would be similar to these examples, but with carpet on the floor. The display is completed with a cut-out figure of a typical railway owner.

The holiday theme is continued on the other 2.50 stamp, which shows a picture postcard from Aberystwyth. Many Hughesovkans were sceptical about the marine elephants which are often seen swimming across the bay, until they see the evidence here. The animals were made a protected species in the 1960s, and then promptly disappeared forever.

The first 3.00 value stamp shows the museum's collection of seaside pier amusements, many of which were still in working order. Visitors could change their roubles for pennies and shillings and try their luck on the gambling machines, listen to a record on the jukebox, or have their fortunes told by the mechanical gypsy.

The final stamp shows the strange exhibits gallery in its heyday. This was built onto the side of the museum in 1925. Here visitors could see a pair of stuffed monkeys said to have been part of the Welsh space program, complete with their little space suits. There was the only authenticated impression of the footprint of the Welsh Bigfoot, opposite a display of genuine photos of Teggie, the lake monster of Bala. You could see some of the Blaenau slate coins, models of Grand Champions of The Show, and then tour the balcony herb garden to see plants with unique uses in cooking, medicine and witchcraft. There were even some first editions of Huw Puw Caru, though there is debate as to whether any of his books ever managed a second edition.