



The Tipi Nation Butterfly Stamps



The old pre-1974 shires of the Welsh borders, Brecknock and Radnor, are quite sparsely populated. Radnorshire could only count 18,000 inhabitants, and the population density is comparable to countries like Niger. It was to this area in the early 1970s that a number of former hippies migrated from the cities, in search of a true back-to-nature way of life. A number of communes (no-one knows quite how many) sprang up, and soon the favoured form of accommodation there was the Native American tipi. People came and went, but there was always a core of people for whom this was the ideal lifestyle.

But life wasn't always a bed of roses, or quite possibly hidden grove of cannabis plants. The hippies weren't always welcomed by some of the locals, who viewed them with suspicion, accused them as being layabouts who lived off state benefits, and generally objected to their appearance and lifestyle. A trip into the local town would see them greeted by shops displaying "We Do Not Serve Tipi Dwellers", or more bluntly, "No Dirty Hippies" notices.

In the face of such opposition the various communities had to form some degree of co-operation and organisation, offering each other goods and services. So a Tipi Nation was declared. Some wanted a name to reflect where they were, and opted for Brycheiniog, the old Welsh name for Brecknock and the name of the early principality that flourished in the area about 500-900AD. Others were happy with Tipi Nation, so both were adopted and considered interchangeable. That they managed to do this organisation in itself was remarkable, because each of the tipi villages attracted quite different people. Some were idealistic hippies, declaring peace and love, while others were more politically active. These were the forerunners of today's eco-warriors. There were out and out anarchists, and those who were well known to the police back in their old urban life. Others were just simply drop-outs who rejected modern life, while for others it was just a bit fun.

It was against this background that the Tipi Nation Post evolved. Remember that this was in the days before mobile phones and the internet. Letters and packets would be passed from one village to another, payment being informal at first, but becoming more formalised. Many were quite enthusiastically for it, and the others just took a 'whatever' attitude. Mail was divided into different categories - in increasing 'cost' of whenever it can be delivered, soon please, and packets. Cost is in inverted commas, because there was no actual fixed rate. Those who were going from one community to another would see if there was any post to take, and generally accept what the sender had to offer in return for delivery. An offer could be cigarettes, bottles of beer, certain pharmaceuticals and plant derivatives (usually the payment of choice), food items, and services like collecting firewood, or field clearance. Despite the seemingly haphazard nature of the organisation it worked well in its own way. Expectations were not high so complaints were few.

The stamps appeared in 1977. Someone knew someone who knew someone back in London who could run up a few thousand sheets of perforated stamps in return for some of the home grown cannabis from those hidden plantations. While some were loathe to give up any of it, the summer had been hot and dry and the crop

was a bumper one. And there were concerns about holding onto such a large amount should there be a police raid. The basic design was common to all stamps, four bright yellow daisies with Tipi Nation Post and Brycheiniog inscriptions, plus a tipi logo. Back in the villages the stamps were decorated with cut-out butterflies providing a 3D quality to the stamps. By general agreement the butterfly on the largest daisy would indicate the postal rate. Post to be sent anytime has the Orange Tip butterfly; while for mail to be delivered sooner the Silver Washed Fritillary was chosen. On packets you would find the Purple Emperor. The stamps are additionally decorated with other butterfly species, such as Marbled White, Brimstone, Greyling, Red Admiral and Large Blue.

There has been a broad opinion amongst alternative philatelists that the species and positioning of the butterflies was some form of code used to indicate what type of message was enclosed. Suggestions included the Large Blue was used when a tip-off about a police raid was passed on, or the Red Admiral indicated communications about drug deals. However this was dismissed by someone who manned one of the post offices. Penelope Atkins, who made her name in advertising in the 1980-90s, lived in a tipi in the early days under the name of *seren*. Interviewed by *Sell It* magazine she said "I lived in the Rainbow Valley village from 1974 to 79, and did a lot of the jobs associated with the postal system that operated between the different tipi communes. It was something to do, and could be a bit of fun. It was me who decorated the stamps we used, sticking on the little butterflies. Some people have said that the butterflies were used for a secret code, but that is rubbish. I did start off using one type of butterfly for the stamps used for letters going to a particular village, but after a while that lapsed and I just contented myself with adding one or two extra butterflies to each stamp, so they would look nice. I think the rumours of a code arose from the fact that I would often enquire what the letter was about and be ever so careful as to how I positioned them and which ones I used. I was just trying to make each one that little bit different".

The Tipi Nation lasted a few years, but too many winters living in a tent, lack of newcomers and a change in attitudes saw it, and its postal service, fade away. Do any tipi dwellers still live there now? There are rumours of a few hardcore hippies still living isolated lives in secluded valleys, but these days you can give tipi life there a try for yourself. These tipi villages are an alternative holiday choice for middle class trendies. They now come with plumbing and electricity, comfort and hot tubs. You can go on cycle rides and practice archery. What happened to the former hippies? Some drifted back to a conventional life, happy to have experienced tipi life, while some are still there - selling those tipi holidays. There's only one difference though. There's no Tipi Post anymore.