



Welsh Firsts



This set of Welsh regional commemorative stamps, issued in 1994, was inspired by the main theme depicted on the 26p (first class) stamp. Ask people who made the world's first powered flight and, excluding the 'duh' replies, most answers will be the Wright Brothers. Pub quiz fanatics will mention Wilbur and Orville, Kittyhawk, and 17th Dec 1903. How wrong they are. Naturally this distinction goes to a Welshman, William Frost of Saundersfoot in Pembrokeshire. In 1894 he patented his design for the Frost Airship Glider, and in 1896 had completed his working prototype. Foot pedals operated two vertical lifting fans. When enough height had been gained the wings were unfolded and the machine glided forward. When it had descended enough the wings were folded up and the fans operated again. To land the wings were tilted against the airflow and the fans were pedalled backwards; at least in theory, because Bill's flight ended with him being tipped into brambles. Bill's big mistake (the one whereby he didn't gain international fame) was to demonstrate his 500 yard maiden flight to just a few friends and not having any proper record of this flight recorded. All we know is derived from verbal accounts after the event. His second biggest mistake was leaving his machine outside unprotected that night, because a big storm caused it to be broken up in the high winds. Bill never rebuilt his aircraft or tried again. He returned to his trade, carpentry, until his death in obscurity in 1935.

Wales is not short of aviation firsts, so choosing something to accompany Mr Frost and his flying machine on the stamp was a difficult choice. Craft from the Welsh space program and Anghyrtgord, the first supersonic airliner were beaten by the world's first passenger helicopter service. This was introduced by BEA in 1951, using Sikorsky S-51s. They flew between Cardiff and Liverpool, with a stop off at a field in Wrexham, Plas Coch, with two scheduled flight in each direction every day. Though they could carry up to three passengers and a bit of luggage this service ran on hope more than anything. Though intended for managers of industry the full return fare was close to the weekly wage of an average worker and when only 270 passengers had been carried in the first year it was withdrawn. A shame, but again the Welsh were pioneers of aviation.

The 25p (second class mail) stamp celebrates the Swansea and Mumbles Railway (originally the Oystermouth Railway) which in 1807 became the world's first fare-paying passenger railway. It was built three years earlier to transport stone from quarries on the Mumbles peninsula, along Swansea Bay, to the docks. A local entrepreneur, Benjamin French, taking advantage of the lack of a road connection along the route applied for permission to carry passengers in a horse-drawn tram along the track for a £25 per year fee. His idea was a success. The railway at the time of its closure in 1960 was also the world's longest continuously operated railway. In the early days it was horse operated, and Dame Shirley Bassey recalls some humorous anecdotes from this era in her autobiographies, but it part-converted to steam traction as late as 1877. But over the years it also used electric, diesel, petrol and even sail power giving the railway a



third record - the most forms of traction on one line. Trials with teams of huskies for use during the winter proved unsuccessful and were never implemented. Even pedal-power, by third class passengers of course, was considered.

The 37p stamp commemorates Prince Madoc ab Owain Gwynedd who in 1170, or thereabouts, became the first European to successfully colonise the Americas. There are other claimants. Columbus came along 300 years later, and was reputed to have knowledge of Madoc's journeys. St Brendan was earlier, but his story seems to be myth and religious allegory. Lief Erikson too was earlier, but his expedition packed up early and headed back home.

Madoc was a prince back in North West Wales, but his elder siblings were squabbling over the succession of the royal family, so he set off to seek his own kingdom. And succeeded. It's thought that he landed near Mobile, Alabama and once his fleet of settlers had settled went home and returned with ten more boatloads of his kinsmen. These peaceful and agreeable Welshfolk then made their way north and eventually integrated with the Native Americans. True that this is mainly folklore and there was no contact with them after the second fleet set sail, and that the tribes said to have mixed with the Welsh were spread from Georgia to the Dakotas, but there were sufficient stories circulating to have Lewis and Clark ordered to look for them on their journeys. The Mandan tribe are said to have numerous words in their language that are very similar to their Welsh equivalents, and they also build boats very similar to Welsh coracles. Some claim Madoc to be myth, but there's enough legend to give his story credibility. It seems you need to plunder and conquer to get your name in the history books.

Cwrw da! The 43p value commemorates Britain's first and oldest lager brew, Wrexham Lager. Founded in 1881 by a homesick and thirsty German immigrants called Levinstein and Isler, the lager brewery was a novelty in a small town that already over 20 breweries plus a few unregistered ones. The original brews were the real thing, unlike some of the concoctions branded as lagers in more recent years. The product however didn't take off at first, with the colliers and steelworkers preferring their regular ales. But the brewery kept going by supplying the Great Western Railway and the British Army. You could even buy a bottle of Wrexham Lager in Khartoum in the 1890s - no Taliban in those days then. The owners found a good way of improving local sales. They bought up pubs and only sold their own beers. Sadly the brewery was taken over by bigger and bigger concerns and conglomerates which robbed the lager of its identity and led to the brewery closure in 2000. However the name and recipes live on and even now Wrexham Lager arise from the ashes like a phoenix - its back on sale October 2011. The stamp recreates the 1950 advertising campaign with Dylan Thomas endorsing the brand. Suggestions that Thomas fluffed his lines and photo shoots in order to have his glasses constantly refilled could well be true. His contract stipulated that a whisky chaser (large) had to accompany any beers.

Included with this issue is a printers proof sheet of one of the four values.

As usual, all information in the story behind the stamps is true, apart from the bits that aren't.

