



## Welsh Politically Inspired Labels



This month's offering is a selection of politically inspired labels. These have been accumulated over a number of years from the length and breadth of the principality, from various shady sources. Look after them.

David Lloyd George was Britain's only Welsh Prime Minister. His fame comes from his creation of the bedrock of the Welfare State, scandals including being economical with the truth over insider dealing of Marconi shares and cash for honours, and the great drinking song "Lloyd George knew my Father, Father knew Lloyd George". For the uninitiated these words are sung repeated faster and faster to the tune of Onward Christian Soldiers. As Chancellor of the Exchequer he introduced National Insurance for workers which paid for medical care, and simultaneously created the branch of Cinderella Philately of collecting National Insurance stamps and cards. Not everybody was impressed by the Welfare State and The Bystander magazine in 1911 lampooned Lloyd George as Queen Victoria on a stamp for a front cover. Beneath were the words "Wanted: A Good Licking". There were a limited number of stamps produced of the artwork on the cover and here is an example for you.

A second label celebrates the translation of Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* (volume 1) into Welsh, even before the Russian version in 1872. South Wales has always been a hotbed of left leaning politics and *Das Kapital* would be a popular read (probably in the little shed at the bottom of the garden). Unfortunately this first translation was done as a school project by a group of 8 young, but enthusiastic, scholars in Pontypridd. They were, in fairness, of different abilities and the understanding of the individual contributions is perhaps illustrated by the one responsible for the first few chapters translated the title as "Caerdydd". First editions with this goof are much sought after. A label from 1971 celebrates this event. Mysteriously, the labels also echo the mistake.

Merthyr Tydfil is famous across the globe for a variety of diverse facts. It is named as the place of the martyrdom of St Tydfil. It was here that researchers found a drug for angina had certain side effects and Viagra was born. In 2007 life here it had improved to the extent that it was only the fifth worst place in Britain to live. And in 1831 it was in Merthyr that The Red Flag as a symbol of the working class was first flown. The workers of the town had rioted and took control for several days until the army managed to regain control. Though the workers came second this revolt led directly to the Reform Act and the birth of trade unions.

To mark the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary a group of local anarchists / comedians / idiots (depending on your sympathies) proclaimed the formation of the Socialist Republic of Merthyr Tydfil. They chose the Saturday that the rugby team were playing a cup final match at Cardiff Arms Park. Hence all the local dignitaries were there occupying free seats as well as good proportion of the town. So the neo-revolutionaries had no problem running up the red flag on all civic buildings and flying banners advertising the town's independence. One group managed to get

into the post office sorting rooms and put these labels on all the post there. The stamp shows Merthyr Town Hall and a red flag with symbols of the mining industry, and a follow-up to the original rioters call of "Caws y Bara". They then appropriately painted the town red and were admitted into St Tydfil's Hospital A&E between around 3:00am. Interestingly no-one noticed what had happened until the Tuesday morning. Which was a shame for the delegation from the People's Republic of South Yorkshire which the lads had invited to discuss formal links, and had forgotten all about. They waited on the platform for half an hour and caught the next train home.

John Marek, former MP for Wrexham and former Welsh Assembly Member for the same is not to be confused with the man of the same name currently on Death Row for sexual assault and murder. This one won the Westminster seat in 1983, beating the standing MP who had defected to the Social Democratic Party. Successful in defending the seat in the next three general elections he was also elected as an AM in 1999, pulling in salaries for both positions until he stood down from Westminster in 2001. He then fell out with the Labour Party and was deselected as candidate for the 2003 AM elections. So he stood as candidate of the inventively named John Marek Independent Party and won. With some other disaffected rebels from his old party the JMIP became Forward Wales, apparently a new socialist voice for Wales. At the launch, Tommy Sheridan was present; the former leader of the Scottish Socialist Party found guilty of perjury when he brought a libel against a newspaper which published accounts of his visits to swingers clubs. Attempts to form a liaison with the Blaenau Gwent Independent Voice failed and for the 2007 AM elections Marek stood as independent, despite retaining leadership of Forward Wales. He lost. So for the 2011 elections he abandoned his socialist heritage and joined the Conservative Party. He lost. One wonders whether his rightward swing will continue in 2015 with yet another political party. The label celebrates proverbial leopards and spots.

He was also appointed as vice chairman of Wrexham AFC in 2006 he has seen the football club demoted from the Football League, the departure of a former Premiership manager, the club nearly going into administration, and the sale to new owners for £1 fall through.

During the 1980s there was a campaign by (amongst others less famous) a group called Meibion Glyndwr (Sons of Glyndwr, after Owain Glyndwr the leader of the 1400 Welsh revolt) against the English buying second holiday homes in Wales. Some 220 firebombing incidents were recorded. In the 2000s a group descended from this movement formed calling themselves Meibion Gethin after Rhys Gethin, one of Owain Glyndwr's followers. They followed a different course. TV reality shows like Grand Designs and Place in the Country attract people desperate to get on TV for fame or to get cash to continue the completion of their dream home. Meibion Gethin plays on this. They have a number of derelict homes for sale described as "with potential" hoping to lure in TV participants. They stress a quick sale is essential, trying to lure the buyer to sign without survey or sight of the property. The homes are actually worthless, yet they have unloaded at least 10 on mugs. The label shows a typical "bijou cottage" sold for £325,000 in 2009. Before it collapsed it housed cattle and would never get planning permission to be a home. The nearest road is two miles away. The group celebrates by issuing labels

In the late 1830s and early 1840s a series of protests against the turnpike charges and new toll gates on side roads swept across Wales. Gangs of protesters, most in women's clothing, and calling themselves Rebecca or Daughters of Rebecca, after

a verse in Genesis, rallied against the toll gates recently erected by greedy landowners and burnt down the toll houses. They would actually perform a scene with the leader speaking and the rioters responding.

Rebecca 2000 was intended to be a repeat of these riots, for there are still toll roads in North West Wales providing a short cut across the river estuaries. The journey around these tolls can mean an extra 20 miles of travel. A group of young farmers objected to paying the 20p toll for crossing the Arthog causeway to visit their local pub, and hatched their plan. It may have caught on had the member entrusted with obtaining the female clothing not been so insistent on the phone that the costumes were for men. When they arrived it was evident that the supplier had made certain assumptions. The gang arrived at the tollbooth dressed as drag queens, and the local press tipped off to record the 'event' had difficulty taking photos because of laughing. It is believed that these labels were actually produced by the toll road owners to ensure no-one else had the same idea. They seem to appear on post each year on the anniversary of Rebecca 2000. The farmers now enjoy a drink somewhere else.

1200 years ago both England and Wales were fragmented into a number of kingdoms and principalities. Offa of Mercia gained the throne of this middle England kingdom after civil war and a bit of assassination in 757. He quickly gained power with dominion over neighbouring kingdoms, but the Welsh were a constant threat to his western lands. So a dyke, surmounted by a wooden palisade, was ordered to be erected; from the Irish Sea in the north to the Bristol Channel in the south. It is about 200 km long. The Great Wall of China is said to be visible from orbiting spacecraft, but stand on Offa's Dyke and you can see all the way to the moon.

Since then the boundary between England and Wales has deviated somewhat from the line of this dyke. In 1978 a movement was formed to restore the national boundaries to those of Saxon times. In the north Wales would lose towns like Wrexham and Deeside which are probably over half populated with English anyway. Further south Wales would gain some of the English Marches including some choice Herefordshire cider apple orchards. It was even claimed that the line of the dyke was better because it was straighter than the recognised boundary. These stamps or labels were part of the promotion which got off to a good start. It seemed to grab the imagination of many despite the apparent pointlessness of the exercise. But as it grew questions started to be asked, especially about the founder who went by the pseudonym of Meiki Elwmawr. He was revealed to be a businessman who had a finger in many pies. These included businesses such as making road signs like as those proclaiming Croeso y Cymru or when you pass a county boundary. He also had the contract for supplying many local authorities with their stationary which would all need replacing. Consequently the idea fizzled away as fast as it took off. And the England and Wales border remains the same.

However this is not the only controversy over the where the English-Welsh border actually lies. The historic county of Monmouthshire lies in the south-eastern corner of Wales. It was now essentially known as Gwent but go back a while and its Welshness was questionable. In fact many official documents specifically state England, Wales and Monmouthshire just to make sure. The declaration of war against Germany in 1945 is one such instance. The documentation for the surrender of Germany in 1945 however were not quite so specific, This ambiguity was only remedied in 1974 when the Local Government Act (1972) came into force, which specifically included this county within Wales and effectively back-dated the legislation to cover this anomaly. However from 1945 until 1974

Monmouthshire was legally still at war with Germany. The Royal Monmouthshire Regiment was kept on permanent alert, the Home Guard still met on Tuesday nights in village halls and frankfurters and hamburgers were on a list of banned food items. Despite assurances from London and Cardiff the local population lived in fear of an invasion. German tourists were advised to pretend to be Swiss or Austrian. These labels were routinely used on mail sent by the War Department of Monmouthshire Council during the 1960s. It is an urban myth that they inspired in part a well known TV comedy show.

One of the thorns in the side of Welsh nationalism, and perhaps a major factor in its resurgence in the twentieth century, was the flooding of Welsh valleys and submergence of entire villages to provide water supplies for growing English cities. In summers and during droughts, when the water levels fall in the reservoirs, the old walls and streets can be seen appearing on the lake beds. Meetings and services are held in remembrance of these lost communities. One of the most evocative of these is Llangwlyb, where though the dam construction was completed in 1928, they forgot to tell the populace of the date they should move out. The village lay in a depression and the lake filled quickly over night while the residents slept and many drowned in their beds. The survivors lost everything. And the hatred still burns deep in the collective Welsh psyche. These labels are a reminder for all of the tragedy and are used on post by those whose families came from Llangwlyb when sending letters to England.

Margaret Thatcher will probably be remembered for many things, but mostly for the miner's strike, re-introduction of poll tax, and her handbags. Forgotten by all but a few was the ban on the import of affordable edible crustaceans in 1976 - the Prawn Laws, ostensibly introduced to maintain the price of home produced scampi. But this merely benefited the fat cats who controlled the harvest of the beaches of south and west Wales, and kept them in the life of luxury they were used to. Prawns are an essential part of the traditional Welsh breakfast and until then no self respecting Welshman or woman would not start the day without this. Suddenly prawns were too expensive and out of reach of the ordinary folk. Only those who could afford to dine in the swanky trendy restaurants of Bridgend ate prawns. When told that people were starving from lack of prawns, Thatcher was reputed to have said "Let them eat hake".

One of the first things John Major did when succeeding Thatcher as Prime Minister was to repeal the Prawn Laws. This alone brought him sufficient public popularity to win the 1992 general election.