



# Y Sioe

## The Show



Officially it is the Annual Welsh National Sheep, Ram, Lamb, Teg, Wether, Hogget and no-goats-at-all Exhibition, but to everyone in Wales it is simply Y Sioe. Think of a cross between Crufts Dog show and the Badminton Three Day event involving *Ovis aries*, and you'll be half way there. Everyone associated with sheep go to The Show. It's both a family and a farming event. Little girls take their pet lambs with them. Lonely elderly mountain farmers take their pet lambs too. However there has been criticism that the organizers are pandering to populist ideas, especially with Extreme Shepherding being introduced as an event in 2010. These Welsh regional commemorative stamps were issued in 1985 to celebrate the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Y Sioe. Even two world wars couldn't stop it. The closest it has been to not happening was in the two years after the Lampeter Riots of 1837 when accusations of widespread cheating involving ringers and suspicious off-show betting led to half the town being razed to the ground. Though officially banned The Show still went ahead in 1838 and 1839 with the location being passed on by word of mouth, before being permitted to continue.

The Show comprises a wide range of competitions. Apart from the obvious Best of Breed there are awards for the show jumping events in a number of categories, a Miss Wales for the most attractive ewes and more recently fleece styling, while some entrants are sacrificed to compete in Best Mutton Stew or Lamb Chop. Then from all the category winners a supreme champion is chosen. These champions are often the main subject of discussion in farmer's pubs across Wales, and many can name all the champions back to 1785. A painting or photograph of the supreme champion records the achievement. It is from these that the central design for the stamps was chosen, and so they reflect the attitude of artists to the sheep over the past 200 years.



Fleece styling winner in 1954

The 17p stamp shows the winning entry from 1839; one of the illicit shows. In those days the winners were not always identified by name, but the big difference between then and now is how much the judges' taste in sheep has changed. Entrant 1742 was of the Hyll breed, noted usually for their negative qualities; tough stringy meat, very short fleece absolutely useless for wool, bad temper and all round unattractiveness. The breed's survival depends not on its commercial value but its rampant fecundity. However sheep 1742 scored 47/47 in the dressage competition, a feat unbeaten to this day, ensuring its enduring legacy.

On the 22p stamp is the supreme champion from 1954, Queen of Cwmbryn. She won Best of Breed for the Brynserth breed. It is a rural myth that Welsh sheep have legs

shorter on one side than on the other in order that they can stand upright on the side of hills. In reality this breed has shorter legs at the front, so is always facing uphill. Their little front stumps allow them to bend really low to nibble the course grass and weeds very short and get maximum nutrition from the almost bare hills they live on. This breed's other notable feature is that when its fleece gets wet (as it almost always is on the Welsh hills) any sunlight falling on it (as it rarely does) gets split into rainbow shades. Getting Queeny both wet and fluffy for the show was a trick that farmer Pryce never divulged, not even to his own sons.

Bobo, with Bronwen Hughes, featured on the 31p stamp, won the under 5's show jumping event in 1909. He managed 6 clear rounds in increasingly faster times. In fact he did better than the under 7's, under 10's and under 27's winners. The only points lost at the judging were for jockey Bronwen's rather informal attire. Even at the under 5's event show judges expect top hat and tails or fancy dress. Farmer Hughes' appeal that Bronwen was in fancy dress went unheeded because everyone knew that was how she dressed all the time.

Finally the 34p stamp depicts the grand champion of 1990, Nastwrsiwm, a lamb who caused a sensation in the Frolicking Event when she frolicked for over 3 hours non-stop, gamboling and clearing hedges, fences and gates repeatedly, and winning the hearts of all of Wales. Even today you will hear farmers telling their lambs to eat plenty of clover so they will grow up like Nastwrsiwm.

At the end of the event the owners of all the winners get an invite to the Show Supper, where the winners are served in a bewildering array of succulent dishes, hence the sprig of mint motif on the stamps. Then the winner's rosettes are cast into a nearby river as votive offerings to the gods of the hillsides and valley. Serving up the winners may seem a sad way for a winner to go, but this was the concession that won a legal reprieve for Y Sioe in 1840. This way no-one could re-enter a champion under a different name the next year at long betting odds. No-one wanted another Lampeter. Nastwrsiwm, it was said, provided the best lamb cutlets anyone could remember!

For the bicentennial event winners also received a limited edition of the stamps presentation pack. Only 400 were produced, 200 in English and 200 in Welsh. They over-estimated the take-up for the English language version, and spares languished in a cupboard unwanted for 25 years. Hence the opportunity for you to have your own copy.

If any of this story is untrue the reader has the option to not believe it.

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