



FACTsheet 11

Y Fari Lwyd – ancient or modern?

The Mari Lwyd (Y Fari Lwyd) is a reimagined Christmas and New Year custom. You'll see references online to the custom being 'ancient' or 'pagan', but there is no evidence of this, and its practice was not attested until 1800. Whilst The Mari Lwyd is mainly associated with Glamorgan, records of its practice have been found across Wales. In recent times the custom has enjoyed a modern resurgence, with groups in Flintshire, Rhondda, Swansea, Bangor and Glamorgan arranging Mari Lwyd events during the Christmas season.

The Mari Lwyd (grey mare) is a horse-figure (usually a horse-skull or hobby-horse head) taken from door-to-door by wassail-singing groups during the Christmas period.

The ritual begins with the group singing traditional Welsh stanzas at the door of the property, luring the owner to their door to give permission for the singing and admit the group into the house. They issue a challenge to the homeowner, to battle through verse.

If the homeowner accepts, the 'pwnco' happens next. This is a debate in singing verse, using a combination of traditional and improvised stanzas, between a member of the group and an opponent in the house. This is a bit like the rap battles we know today.



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The 'pwnco' often involves a lot of teasing and gentle mocking of the quality of the verses and singing ability.

If the Mari Lwyd group are the victors of the verse contest, they are welcomed into the house to enjoy cakes and ale, and sometimes a gift of money. A few songs would be sung, including a farewell song before the group moved on to the next property. As you can imagine, they would get more and more drunk as the night went on!

Here is the Mari Lwyd verse to practice, just in case you have Y Fari Lwyd on your doorstep next Christmas!



Wel dyma ni'n dwad
Gyfeillion diniwad
I ofyn am gennod i ganu
Os na chawn ni gennad
Rhowch wybod ar ganiad
Pa fodd mae'r 'madawiad, nos heno
'Does genni ddim cinio
Nac arian iw gwario
I wneud i chwi roeso, nos heno

Some other history

Using mock animals (normally wooden horse heads) at peak times of festivity was common in many areas of Britain.

The 'bringing out of a hobby horse at Christmas' was recorded in 1594 in Wisbech Castle; and prior to that the Royal Court of Edward VI bought 13 hobby horses to celebrate the 12 days in 1551. But academics warn that grouping together the hobby horse tradition with the tradition of the Mari Lwyd or other such customs, can be misleading. It was the 19th century when it became popular to take around figures of animals door-to-door for money, particularly in the eastern Kent area.

The Mari Lwyd may also relate to the Halloween custom of Y Ladi Wen and the two have conflated over time. It could also have been similar to the Láir Bhán recorded in Ireland.

We can't find any record of the Mari Lwyd custom being practised in Penmaenmawr, but local interest in the 'tradition' has increased over the last few years.

