

= Mari Lwyd =

The Mari Lwyd is a wassailing folk custom found in South Wales . The tradition entails the use of an eponymous hobby horse which is made from a horse 's skull mounted on a pole and carried by an individual hidden under a sackcloth . It represents a regional variation of a " hooded animal " tradition that appears in various forms throughout Britain .

The custom was first recorded in 1800 , with subsequent accounts of it being produced into the early twentieth century . According to these , the Mari Lwyd was a tradition performed at Christmas time by groups of men . They would form into teams to accompany the horse on its travels around the local area , and although the makeup of such groups varied , they typically included an individual to carry the horse , a leader , and individuals dressed as stock characters such as Punch and Judy . The team would carry the Mari Lwyd to local houses , where they would request entry through the medium of song . The householders would be expected to deny them entry , again through song , and the two sides would continue their responses to one another in this manner . If the householders eventually relented , then the team would be permitted entry and given food and drink .

Although the custom was given various names , it was best known as the Mari Lwyd ; the etymology of this term remains the subject of academic debate . The folklorist Iorwerth C. Peate believed that the term meant " Holy Mary " and thus was a reference to the Virgin Mary , while fellow folklorist E. C. Cawte thought it more likely that the term had originally meant " Grey Mare " , thus referring to the heads ' equine appearance . A number of earlier folklorists to examine the topic , such as Peate and Ellen Ettlinger , believed that the tradition had once been a pre @-@ Christian religious rite , although scholarly support for this interpretation has declined amid a lack of supporting evidence .

Although the tradition declined in the early to mid @-@ twentieth century , in part due to opposition from some local Christian clergy and changing social conditions , it was revived in new forms in the mid @-@ to @-@ latter part of the century . The tradition has also inspired various artistic depictions , appearing , for instance , in the work of the painter Clive Hicks @-@ Jenkins and the poet Vernon Watkins .

= = Description = =

The Mari Lwyd itself consists of a horse 's skull that is decorated with ribbons and affixed to a pole ; to the back of the skull is attached a white sheet , which drapes down to conceal both the pole and the individual carrying this device . On occasion , the horse 's head was represented not by a skull but was instead made from wood or even paper . In some instances , the horse 's jaw was able to open and close as a result of string or lever attached to it , and there are accounts of pieces of glass being affixed into the eye sockets of some examples , representing eyes . An observer of the tradition as it was performed at Llangynwyd during the nineteenth century noted that preparation for the activity was a communal event , with many locals involving themselves in the decorating of the Mari Lwyd .

The Mari Lwyd custom was performed during wither festivities , specifically around the dates of Christmas and New Year . However , the precise date on which the custom was performed varied between villages , and in a number of cases the custom was carried out for several consecutive nights . There is a unique example provided by an account from Gower in which the head was kept buried throughout the year , only being dug up for use during the Christmas period .

The custom used to begin at dusk and often lasted late into the night . The Mari Lwyd party consisted of four to seven men , who often had coloured ribbons and rosettes attached to their clothes and sometimes wore a broad sash around the waist . There was usually a smartly dressed " Leader " who carried a staff , stick , or whip , and sometimes other stock characters , such as the " Merryman " who played music , and Punch and Judy (both played by men) with blackened faces ; often brightly dressed , Punch carried a long metal poker and Judy had a besom .

The Mari Lwyd party would approach a house and sing a song in which they requested admittance .

The inhabitants of the house would then offer excuses for why the team could not enter . The party would sing a second verse , and the debate between the two sides ? known as the pwnco ? would continue until the house 's inhabitants ran out of ideas , at which time they were obliged to allow the party entry and to provide them with ale and food . An account from Nantgarw described such a performance , in which the Punch and Judy characters would cause a noise , with Punch tapping the ground to the rhythm of the music and rapping on the door with a poker , while Judy brushed the ground , house walls , and windows with a broom . The householders had to make Punch promise that he would not touch their fireplace before he entered the building , otherwise it was the local custom that before he left he would rake out the fire with his poker . In the case from Llangynwyd , however , there was no interplay between the householders and troupe , but rather the latter were typically granted entry automatically after singing the first verse of their song .

Once inside , the entertainment continued with the Mari Lwyd running around neighing and snapping its jaws , creating havoc , frightening children (and perhaps even adults) while the Leader pretended to try to restrain it . The Merryman played music and entertained the householders . The folklorist Iorwerth C. Peate believed that in recorded examples from Glamorganshire it was apparent that the Mari Lwyd custom had become " indistinguishable " from the practice of wassailing , although added that there were still some examples of wassailing that did not involve the Mari Lwyd . He added that links between Mari Lwyd and wassailing were also apparent from recorded examples in other part of Wales , thus opining that Mari Lwyd represented a variant of the wider wassailing custom that was found throughout Britain .

The Mary Lwyd was part of a wider " hooded animal " tradition that the folklorist E. C. Cawte identified as existing in different forms in various parts of Britain . Features common to these customs were the use of a hobby horse , the performance at Christmas time , a song or spoken statement requesting payment , and the use of a team who included a man dressed in women 's clothing . A related example is the hoodening custom of East Kent in south @-@ eastern England .

= = Early development = =

= = = Etymology = = =

Most recorded sources term this particular custom Mari Lwyd . Jones considered this to be a translation of " Blessed Mary " , and thus a reference to the Virgin Mary , a key religious figure in Roman Catholicism . Although translating it slightly differently , as " Holy Mary " , Peate endorsed this viewpoint . Although some of his acquaintances later suggested that the use of Mari for Mary was unknown in Wales prior to the Protestant Reformation , he countered these criticisms with the observation that the term Mari was being used in reference to the Virgin in the mid @-@ 14th century Black Book of Carmarthen , thus attesting to its early usage in Welsh . He nevertheless accepted that during the medieval period the term might have been restricted largely to poets , given that there is no evidence of its usage among the common dialect in this period .

Given that llwyd is the usual word for " grey " in the Welsh language and that Welsh speakers would have been exposed to the English word " mare " , an alternative suggestion considered by Peate was that the term Mari Lwyd had originally meant " Grey Mare " . This etymological explanation would have parallels with the name of a similar hooded horse tradition found in Ireland and the Isle of Man , which is known in the former as the Láir Bhán and in the latter as the Laare Vane , in both cases meaning " White Mare " . Initially believing that " there is much to be said for this suggestion " , Peate later embraced it fully . Cawte similarly believed that that " Grey Mare " was the most likely original meaning of the term , noting that the Mari Lwyd appeared to represent a horse and that similar hobby horse customs in neighbouring England , such as the hoodening tradition of East Kent , also made reference to horses with their name . Peate suggested that even if the term Mari Lwyd had originally referred to a " Grey Mare " , it could still have come to be associated with the Virgin Mary in popular folk culture following the Reformation , thus explaining why the Virgin Mary is referred to in the lyrics of some surviving Welsh wassailing songs .

A further suggestion is that Mari Lwyd derives from the English term Merry Lude , referring to a merry game . Peate opposed this idea , arguing that if the latter was converted into Welsh then the result would be merri @-@ liwt or merri @-@ liwd . Peate also dismissed the idea that had been suggested to him that the term Mari in this context had derived from Morris , a reference to Morris dancing . Another reason to doubt this idea is that there is no known historical link between the Mari Lwyd , which was found in South Wales , and the Morris dance , which was concentrated in the north of the country .

In other recorded instances , the Mary Lwyd custom is given different names , with it being recorded as Y Wasail (" The Wassail ") in parts of Carmarthenshire . In the first half of the 19th century it was recorded in Pembrokeshire under the name of Y March (" The Horse ") and Y Gynfas @-@ farch (" The Canvas Horse ") . One account from West Glamorgan has the head termed the aderyn bee [bi ?] y llwyd , meaning the " Grey Magpie " , although this may be due to an error on the part of the recorder , who could have confused the horse 's head for the aderyn pica llwyd , an artificial bird in a tree that was carried by wassailers in the same area .

= = = Origins = = =

Positing the custom to be " the survival of some ancient popular rite or ceremony " , in 1888 David Jones suggested that its origins were Christian , and that it had once been part of the festivities of the Feast of the Ass , a commemoration of the Biblical flight of the Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph into Egypt that was historically marked on 14 January . According to Jones ' idea , the Mari Lwyd itself represented the donkey on which Mary rode during the story .

Peate was of the opinion that the Mari Lwyd was " no doubt a survival of a pre @-@ Christian tradition " that had once been spread across Britain and other parts of Europe , and which ? having survived the Christianisation of Britain ? had been renamed Mari Lwyd in reference to the Virgin Mary during the Middle Ages . He expressed the view that the original custom had been " horrific in origin and intention " and that from an early date it had been connected to wassailing . Cawte concurred that it was " reasonable to accept " that the Mari Lwyd head had become attached to an independent wassailing tradition , but said that the connection to the Virgin Mary was unnecessary . Pearce also suggested the possibility that in parts of Glamorganshire and Monmouthshire the Mari Lwyd tradition came under the influence of Miracle plays , thus explaining why later recorded examples from those counties contained characters known as " the Sergeant " and the " Merryman " .

The folklorist Trefor M. Owen also suggested that the Mari Lwyd was a practice " which probably had a religious (if pre @-@ Christian) origin " , adding that by the time it had been recorded , it had become " emptied of its religious content " . Also embracing Peate 's suggestion of ancient origins , Ellen Ettlinger believed that the Mari Lwyd represented a " death horse " , as symbolised by the white cloth worn by its carrier , suggesting that it was originally employed in a pre @-@ Christian ritual to mark the festival of Samhain . The folklorist Christina Hole suggested that this " ancient character " was once " a bringer of fertility " . However , after 1970 the folkloric trend for interpreting such hobby horse traditions as pre @-@ Christian survivals had ended , as scholars came to express greater caution about proposing origins for such customs .

= = Regional coverage = =

In mapping the distribution of Mari Lwyd appearances , Cawte noted that it was principally a custom associated with Glamorganshire , with two @-@ thirds of instances falling within that county . The custom stretched east into the industrial valleys of Monmouthshire , with the most easterly account coming from Monmouth itself ; this account is also one of the earliest . A number of examples were also found in Carmarthenshire , with a single example found in both Brecknockshire and Cardiganshire . There is a single record of the custom being performed in North Wales , in an example from Wrexham , which Cawte believed was the result of a Glamorgan man bringing the custom with him as he moved north . Previously , Peate had cautioned that the comparative

absence of recorded examples from Mid and North Wales was not proof that the Mari Lwyd custom had never been present in those areas .

Cawte opined that there was " no clear reason " for the distribution of the Mari Lwyd custom , which cut through various local cultural features . Those areas where it was found did not correlate with any distinction between English @-@ speaking and Welsh @-@ speaking areas in South Wales . He acknowledged however that there was a " reasonable correspondence " between the areas in which the Mari Lwyd was recorded and the areas which were used for mineral production in the 14th century . He therefore suggested the possibility that it might have been performed by coal and iron miners in western Glamorganshire , Carmarthenshire , and western Monmouthshire , and that from there it could have spread into those villages where goods were manufactured using those minerals .

= = Recorded appearances = =

= = = 18th and 19th centuries = = =

The earliest published account of the Mari Lwyd appeared in 1800 in J. Evans ' A Tour through Part of North Wales , in the year 1798 , and at Other Times . Although the book itself focused on North Wales , the chapter in which the passage was included discussed the language and customs of Wales more generally . In this section , Evans related that :

A man on new year 's day , dressing himself in blankets and other trappings , with a factitious head like a horse , and a party attending him , knocking for admittance , this obtained , he runs about the room with an uncommon frightful noise , which the company quit in real or pretended fright ; they soon recover , and by reciting a verse of some cowydd , or , in default , paying a small gratuity , they gain admission .

Evans returned to the custom in his 1804 work Letters Written During a Tour Through South Wales , in the year 1803 , and at Other Times . Here he provided a clearer discussion than before , making it apparent that teams accompanying a man dressed as a horse or bull toured the local area from Christmas until after Twelfth Day , and that they were given food or money to leave the householders alone .

The Mari Lwyd next appeared in an 1819 account from West Glamorgan , where the Mari Lwyd itself was termed an Aderyn Bee y llwyd (roughly " Grey Magpie ") and was accompanied by " three or four partners in the profits of the expedition , who are by turns horse , groom , or attendants " .

It has been suggested that the Welsh Methodist revival contributed to the decline of both the Mari Lwyd and a number of other Welsh folk customs . In 1802 , the harpist Edward Jones of Merioneth published a book in which he lamented the destructive impact that Christian preachers were having on Welsh folk customs , which they were criticising as sinful . In his view , " the consequence is , Wales , which was formerly one of the merriest and happiest countries in the World , is now becoming one of the dullest " . Reflecting such a view , in 1852 the Reverend William Roberts , a Baptist minister at Blaenau Gwent , condemned the Mari Lwyd and other related customs as " a mixture of old Pagan and Popish ceremonies ... I wish of this folly , and all similar follies , that they find no place anywhere apart from the museum of the historian and antiquary . "

Owen suggested that the custom 's decline was also a result of changing social conditions in South Wales . He argued that the Mari Lwyd wassailing custom " gave an approved means of entering the houses of neighbours in a culture in which there were few public assemblies ? at least in the heart of winter ? in which the convivial spirit of the season could be released " . Further , he suggested that the gifts of food , drink , and sometimes money " no doubt helped to further the feeling of community among country folk while at the same time manifesting it " . He argued that the changing social conditions altered the ways that people in southern Wales celebrated Christmas , hence contributing to the folk custom 's decline .

= = = 20th century revival = = =

In a 1935 article on the subject of the Mari Lwyd , Peate stated that the tradition " is still met with ; it is practised in the Cardiff district , Bridgend , Llangynwyd , Neath and other Glamorgan districts " . He highlighted an example from Christmas Eve 1934 , in which a Mari Lwyd was observed performing alongside at least twelve singers in a chemist 's shop in the Mumbles , Swansea . Ettlinger subsequently expressed the view that " Dr. Peate deserves the sincerest gratitude of all folk @-@ lore students for having so valiantly penetrated the mysteries surrounding the Mari Lwyd . "

The historian Ronald Hutton stated that the Mari Lwyd tradition appeared to have become defunct in the early 20th century . In the middle of that century it was revived in Llangynwyd . In 1967 , Lois Blake published a letter in the journal English Dance and Song in which she noted that the Mari Lwyd appeared each Christmas Eve at the Barley Mow Inn at Graig Penllyn , near Cowbridge , where a man named John Williams had kept the custom alive for the past sixty years . Blake also explained that she believed that the custom was still performed at several villages in the Maesteg area of Glamorgan . During the 1970s , Hole commented that the tradition was still found in Glamorganshire and Carmathenshire .

During the 1980s , further revived forms of the Mari Lwyd tradition emerged in Caerphilly , Llantrisant , and St Fagans , all of which are in the same borderland between Vale and mountains . Commenting on the example of Llantrisant , which was inaugurated in 1980 , Mick Tems noted that the custom had " re @-@ established herself so strongly that there are complaints if she misses any of her regular calls " . He noted that in 1991 the Llantrisant Mari Lwyd was taken to Yn Chruinnaght , a Pan @-@ Celtic festival on the Isle of Man , and that it had also been taken to the Lowender Peran festival at Perranporth in Cornwall . Hutton believed that the custom re @-@ emerged in the borderlands between Vale and the mountains in part because people in Glamorgan sought to reaffirm their sense of cultural identity during the termination of their traditional industries , and partly because the Welsh Folk Museum was located in the area . More widely , he believed that the revival of the Mari Lwyd was in large part due to the " forces of local patriotism " , noting that a similar situation had resulted in the resurrection of the hoodening tradition in East Kent .

The town council of Aberystwyth organised " The World 's Largest Mari Lwyd " for the Millennium celebrations in 2000 . A mixture of the Mari Lwyd and Wassail customs occurs in the border town of Chepstow , South Wales , every January . A band of English Wassailers meet with the local Welsh Border Morris Side , The Widders , on the bridge in Chepstow .

= = In culture = =

The Mari Lwyd has prompted responses from the arts in Wales . The poet Vernon Watkins published his " Ballad of the Mari Lwyd " in 1941 . The Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams has written that this , " one of the outstanding poems of the century , draws together the folk @-@ ritual of the New Year , the Christian Eucharist , the uneasy frontier between living and dead , so as to present a model of what poetry itself is ? frontier work between death and life , old year and new , bread and body . "

The Mari Lwyd was utilised by the artist Clive Hicks @-@ Jenkins in a series of drawings from around 2000 that focused on a metamorphosing horse / man as a nightmarish harbinger of his father 's death . Catriona Urquhart wrote a sequence of poems titled The Mare 's Tale which were published alongside Hicks @-@ Jenkins ' images in 2001 . In her 1977 novel Silver on the Tree , the author Susan Cooper included an appearance from the Mari Lwyd .

= = Related Welsh customs = =

In 1919 , H. W. Evans recorded the existence of a similar custom which had existed in Solva , Pembrokeshire circa 1840 , during his mother 's childhood . He stated that this custom entailed the use of what he termed a " Mari Lwyd " , furthermore providing a drawing of it using his mother 's

recollections as a basis , although was unaware of how this costume had been used . According to Evans ' description , this Mari Lwyd consisted of a sheet that had been sewn together along two adjacent sides to make a cone , which was then stuffed with hay and decorated with buttons for eyes and harvest gloves for ears , thus resembling an animal 's snout . An individual could conceal themselves under the sheet and use a hay fork inserted into the hay to hold it up . A similar custom appears in an account from 1897 , in which an entity known as the Bwca Llwyd (" Grey Bogy ") was described ; it involved an imitation horse 's head being made from canvas and stuffed with hay , being carried about using a hay fork on All Hallow 's Eve .

Cawte also noted the example of other Welsh folk customs featuring the head of a horse , however he opined that these " so not seem to be closely related to the mari lwyd " . A horse 's head was prepared in a manner akin to the Mari Lwyd for a spring festival known as the mynwenta or pynwenta , which took place in Pembrokeshire circa 1820 . As part of this festival , young men and women gathered at a mill for a night 's entertainment . In the late nineteenth century , a tradition was recorded in North Wales that was known as " giving a skull " , in which the skull of a horse or donkey was placed over the front door of a woman 's house on May Day as a sign of contempt . In parts of Wales a horse 's head ? sometimes with horns attached ? was featured as part of the charivari processions designed to shame those who were deemed to have behaved in an immoral manner .

= = = Audio recordings = = =

Recordings of the Mari Lwyd custom @-@ made during the 1940s and 1950s by Peter Kennedy and others . Available at the Folktrax website [here](#)

" The Mari Lwyd " , by David Thomas , David Jenkins , and Thomas Jenkins , recorded by Peter Kennedy , on The Folk Songs of Britain , Vol . 9 Songs of Ceremony (1971) , Topic Records : TOPIC 12 @-@ T @-@ 197 .

" The Mari Lwyd " , available on Hyn : Traditional Celtic Music of Wales (1998) by Carreg Lafar , Marquis Music : B00004SZT2 .

" The Mari Lwyd " , written by Hugh Lupton , sung by Chris Wood , on Ghosts (2005) by the English Acoustic Collective , R.U.F. Records : RUFGD09 .