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MORE THAN HORSEPLAY: A LIVELY FOSSIL WHICH REFUSES TO DIE?
AN ENQUIRY INTO MEANING AND INTERPRETATION OF
THE *MARI LWYD* TRADITION IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA ERA.

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Abstract.

William Roberts," Nefydd", in his 1852 Eisteddfod essay on the Mari Lwyd custom¹ condemned it as both pagan and papist and called for its banishment to its rightful place in the museum, while providing posterity with a useful blueprint for its ongoing performance.

Researchers, historians and folklorists have documented the decline, persistence, and revival of the tradition over the intervening century and a half.

By the third decade of the 21st century visual art and writing inspired by the Mari Lwyd in turn inspires further creativity, greatly aided by social media and online dissemination.

The number of Mari Lwyds enacting some form of the custom has grown substantially. No longer confined to Wales the custom is performed worldwide. In Wales the revival has been actively boosted by ongoing educational initiatives. A wealth of online videos and social media groups and pages dedicated to the Mari Lwyd now exist. UK government ratification of the UNESCO convention for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage means that the Mari Lwyd could be registered as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Wales.

The above is well documented. The purpose of this dissertation is to reflect these developments but also to consider the meaning and interpretation of the Mari Lwyd as subjectively experienced by performers or observers of the tradition. What does the Mari Lwyd represent now and in turn how is she represented both in enactment of the custom and in art? I plan to expand on the outline above and supplement it with contemporary views obtained from a questionnaire to be circulated to relevant social media groups and from more detailed interviews with practitioners of the tradition.

¹T.W.Roberts, *Crefydd Yr Oesoedd Tywyll, Neu Henafiaethau Defodol, Chwaraeuyddol A Choelgrefyddol*, (Caerfyrddin: Seren Gomer, 1852).

Introduction

The Welsh Midwinter tradition of the Mari Lwyd is more visible and more widely practised now, in the third decade of the 21st century, than it ever has been since the accepted first modern recording of it in 1800. The Rev. J. Evans, writing about his tour of North Wales in 1798, describes:

Another very singular custom I could never learn the rationale of is that of a man on New Years 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 ancient cwydd, or, in default paying a small gratuity, they gain admission.²

Although Evans does not name the Mari Lwyd or give a particular location- this is taken from the last letter in this collection which begins: ‘I must not forget the language of the country or the enthusiastic rage for poetry and music’ going on to a general account of Welsh musical, poetical, and other traditions- this description is certainly recognisable to those familiar with the tradition today in that it takes place at New Year in the midst of the festive season – Y Gwyliau- and is performed by a man carrying a horse’s head accompanied by a group of others who gains entry to a dwelling by knocking on the door and reciting poetry before causing a degree of mayhem and or merriment among the inhabitants. Evans states that he was unable to discover the rationale of this tradition, and it is not the aim of this essay to do so. Much has been written about the putative origins of the Mari Lwyd and of other folk traditions which incorporate representations of “beasts”, often horses at least in name if not in appearance, citing ancient seasonal rites or religious practices to and from which links and descent may be attributed but not proved. Much continues to be written and debated (and argued) about the ongoing and evolving practice of the tradition in the context of a revival continuing from the second half of the 20th century and fuelled both by educational initiatives to revitalise and hand on the tradition and, in common with other traditions, by dissemination via social media.

²J.Evans, *A Tour Through Part Of North Wales In The Year 1798*, (London:J.White, 1800),p.403.

The title of this essay includes the phrase “a lively fossil” in relation to the Mari Lwyd. This is taken from Gillian Bennett’s 1994 article in *Folklore* and refers not to a particular custom but to the folkloristic theory of ‘cultural evolution’ which she describes as dominant ‘almost since the inception of the Folklore Society in 1878’³. She quotes William Bascom in 1953 as remarking that ‘cultural evolution was “a lively fossil that refuses to die”.’ The article examines how the theory of cultural evolution was used by Victorian folklorists to give legitimacy to their claim for folklore as a science on a par with the developments in the natural sciences of geology, biology, and palaeontology at the time -cultural evolution being analogous to the use of the fossil record in the theory of biological evolution. Bennett states that ‘even today, (1994) many or most popular writers of folklore books continue to “explain” folklore as remnants of ancient beliefs or rituals.’⁴

Having alluded to the theory of cultural evolution and the idea that modern cultural practices evolved over time from temporally distant origins we can turn to an author who, writing during the Victorian period about the origins of the Mari Lwyd tradition, could be thought of as a cultural eugenicist. In 1852 William Roberts, a Baptist minister, printer, author, and educationalist published his *Crefydd Yr Oesoedd Tywyll, neu Henafiaethau Defodol, Chwaraeyddol, a Choelgrefyddol*. This volume concerning “the religion of the Dark Ages or ritual, dramatic and superstitious antiquities” included his essay *Hanes Dechreuad “Mari Lwyd”* the history of the origins of the Mari Lwyd as well as essays on the influence of Sunday School and on superstitious and dramatic historical customs akin to the Mari Lwyd.⁵

William Roberts (Nefydd) opens his essay on the Mari Lwyd by quoting the Rev. P. Roberts writing in *Popular Antiquities* ‘Certain traditions....will be maintained hereditarily, without even a knowledge of, or respect to, their origin, but merely as customary by the lower order.’⁶ The reference to ‘the lower order’ appears condescending and perjorative in tone, as does the “merely customary”- is the performance and enjoyment of and engagement with a tradition in some way debased or invalidated if the participants are unaware of its putative origins, however distant or uncertain these may be? Nefydd certainly thinks that

³ Gillian Bennett, ‘Geologists And Folklorists : Cultural Evolution And “The Science Of Folklore”’, *Folklore*, 105(1994), 25-37(p.25) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1260626> [accessed 25th February 2024]

⁴ Bennett, ‘Geologists And Folklorists’, p. 5.

⁵ T.W. Roberts, *Crefydd Yr Oesoedd Tywyll, Neu Henafiaethau Defodol, Chwaraeuyddol A Choelgrefyddol*, (Caerfyrddin: Seren Gomer, 1852).

⁶ Roberts, *Crefydd Yr Oesoedd*, p.1.

understanding the origins of a custom is important for those engaging in it and writes his essay in the hope of dissuading people from continuing the tradition once they understand its origins. Nefydd describes the tradition as it was then practised in various parts of Wales- the horse's skull, the accompanying party and its characters the Ostler, the Sergeant, Merryman the fiddler, and Punch and Judy are all mentioned as is the exchange of verses at the door, the ensuing merriment once entry is gained and the song of farewell and good wishes. Nefydd gives examples of the verses as sung, in short recording a blueprint for the custom and how to perform it. His intention in describing it was to reinforce his assertion that the custom derived from earlier feasts and Mystery Plays of the Roman Catholic Church based around the Flight into Egypt, and The Festival of the Ass. He repeatedly states that Mari Lwyd is a reference to the Virgin Mary (Mair Forwyn) and that the adjective (l)lwyd means 'blessed' or 'holy. He also proposes that the Catholic Church- initiated feast days throughout the year 'mewn dynwardiad o'r Paganiaid'-in imitation of the Pagans, having described some rituals and customs of the ancient Greeks. His detailed and undoubtedly closely researched text is meant to educate those who follow the custom, not, so that they might continue it, 'with knowledge of or respect to their origin' as per his quote from Rev. P. Roberts above, but so that they might recognise it for what it is – a mixture of Papism and Paganism – and so stop engaging in it. It is worth noting that, in frequent references to Catholicism throughout the text, only once does Nefydd use the term 'Eglwys Rhufain' (the Church of Rome), otherwise, he uses the seemingly less respectful, if not derogatory, 'Pabyddol' and 'Pabyddion' ("Papish" and "Papists"). Nefydd makes his case to his own satisfaction and is confident that it will achieve his purpose. His final paragraph with its declamatory force deserves to be quoted in full:

Fel hynny,hyderaf na fydd neb mor *ffol* ac *annuwiol* yn Nghymru,ar ol deall o ba le mae yr arferiadau hyn wedi tarddu,ynghyd ag achau eraill perthynol iddynt,o roddi y gefnogaeth leiaf i henddefodau Paganaid a Phabaid yn gymysgedig â'u gilydd;ac wedi treiglo i ni oddiwrth yr oesoedd tywyllaf mewn dysg,moes,a chrefydd,a fu er dyddiau Adda hyd yn awr,yn ol pob tebygolïaeth. Dymunaf i'r ffolineb hwn (Mari Lwyd), a phob ffolinebau ereill,na chaffont le yn un man ond yn amgueddfa (*museum*) yr hanesydd a'r henafiaethydd.⁷

⁷ Roberts,*Crefydd Yr Oesoedd*,p.18

Nefydd's essay traces the cultural evolution of the Mari Lwyd while at the same time advocating a "survival of the suitable" in his fervent wish that the Pagan/Papist Mari Lwyd and all other such godless foolishness be consigned to museums and history, thus allowing the young to follow more wholesome pursuits such as preparing for the Eisteddfod.

Thirty- six years after Nefydd's publication, and sixteen years after his death, the 1888 volume of the Journal of the Cambrian Archaeological Society reports on the Society's Cowbridge meeting at which Mr. David Jones presented drawings and maps illustrating the antiquities of Glamorgan along with a Mari Lwyd and an account of the custom:

The rapid decay and disappearance of old customs which the latter half of the nineteenth century has witnessed is a matter of such common observation that it has become the merest of truisms to speak of it. Many old observances which this century had inherited from a long line of predecessors have now ceased to be found even as 'survivals'; if met with at all, I apprehend it would be only as 'revivals', produced as something strange and rare for the amusement of the curious. Thus, it has come to pass that the special local observances and rural pageantry which in Glamorganshire, on and about Twelfth Night, wound up the festivities of Christmastide, are no longer to be met with as part of the life of the people. 'Canu Gwassaila' and the going about with a 'Mari Lwyd'- customs common enough in the forties and fifties of the century- must now, I suspect, be classed with the things of the past.⁸

I have quoted this at length both because of its matter- of- fact elegiac quality in contrast to Nefydd's fervour and because it is far more prescient and speaks to the situation over 130 years later. I write this having been involved, as singer, musician/Merryman, and pwnawr with the Mari Lwyd since 2012, the year in which Trac Cymru, Folk Development for Wales launched its Mari Lwyd Project⁹ aimed at encouraging and supporting the already ongoing revival of the tradition by means of outreach to schools and interested groups, an explanatory booklet by

⁸ David Jones in 'Cowbridge Meeting Report. 389, *Archaeologia Cambrensis Journal Of The Cambrian Archaeological Association*, Vol 5, (1888)

<<https://archive.org/details/archaeologiacam19moorgoog/page/n5/mode/2up>>

⁹ <<https://trac.cymru/en/about-mari-lwyd>>

Rhiannon Ifans, an online video, presence at the National Eisteddfod and the production of the cardboard “Flat Pack Mari” kit developed by David Pitt.

The 1888 report above is one of many journal and newspaper articles written during the 19th and 20th centuries. The 20th century brought the work of Iorwerth Peate, Violet Alford, Ronald Hutton, Rhiannon Ifans, and Phyllis Kinney¹⁰ documenting the practice and history of the Mari Lwyd custom as a Welsh seasonal tradition in the context of widespread broadly similar practices with a solid body of scholarly research. There is much information therefore for those who wish to continue or to revive the tradition to incorporate into their interpretation, both in terms of how they enact it and what meaning it has for them. There is also, thanks to the internet and social media, a huge amount of easily accessible information in the form of articles, videos, images and blogs. Typing ‘Mari Lwyd’ into a search engine yields 22 pages of results, Facebook yields 23 individual pages and at least 4 groups including the private group ‘Mari Lwyd and Friends’ which acts as a forum and resource for its current 748 members, and ‘Mari Lwyd North America’ with 248 members. #Mari Lwyd on Instagram yields 12,025 posts. The custom is now active across Wales, to my knowledge at least in Carmarthenshire, Pembrokeshire, North and South Ceredigion, Swansea, Gower, and Swansea Valley, Cardiff and Vale, Brecon, Monmouthshire, Newport, Anglesey, Denbighshire, Flintshire, Rhondda Cynon Taf, and Neath Port Talbot. This list is not definitive.

The custom is very far from being relegated, as Nefydd advocated, to museums and historical interest, or being ‘classed with things of the past’ as David Jones predicted. Jones was nearer the mark in his apprehension that the tradition would continue, if at all, as a revival. ‘Going about with a Mari Lwyd’ though is no longer rare and Maris become more numerous with each year, providing ever increasing numbers of ‘the curious’ with amusement, amazement, wonder, and terror. Mari Lwyds are no longer solitary creatures visiting the houses and inns of their own locality only. It is common to see more than one Mari visiting at one time and Maris will travel some distance to participate in larger events such as wassails, the largest being the Chepstow Wassail and Mari Lwyd festival held in January since 2004 involving multiple Mari Lwyds and English ‘Osses.

¹⁰ Iorwerth Peate (1901-1982). Co-founder and Curator of St. Fagans National Museum of History. Anthropologist, poet and folklore scholar. Author of *Diwylliant Gwerin Cymru* (1942), *Tradition and Folk Life* (1972), *Mari Lwyd: A Suggested Explanation* (1943). Violet Alford (1881-1972). Researcher, author and expert in dancing and international folk customs and their common roots. Author of *The Hobby Horse And Other Animal Masks* (1978, posthumous). Ronald Hutton (1953-), historian, writer and researcher on British folklore, customs and origins, pre-Christian religion and modern paganism. Author of *The Stations Of The Sun* (1996). Rhiannon Ifans (1954-), Welsh academic, author of *Sers A Rybanu* (1983) and *Stars And Ribbons* (2022), both studies of Wassailing traditions, including the Mari Lwyd. Phyllis Kinney (1922-). American-born singer and song collector, author of *Welsh Traditional Music* (2011).

Increasing numbers eventually meant that there was no room for the Mari Lwyds in the pub originally used to enact the gaining of entry ritual and led to an attempt to set a world record for the number of Mari Lwyds in one place and eventually a hiatus of some years from 2019 (not helped by the Covid pandemic of 2020) because of the unwieldiness of the growing event which restarted with limited numbers of participating Maris, but large crowds of onlookers, in 2024.¹¹

In December 2023 the UK Government opened a consultation¹², to run from 23.12.23 to 29.02.24, on the initial implementation of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage.¹³

Article 2 of the Convention defines Intangible Cultural Heritage thus:

The ‘intangible cultural heritage’ means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts, and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals, recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.

Domains covered by the Convention which are pertinent to the Mari Lwyd include oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle; performing arts; social practices, rituals and festive events.

David Howell, in articles in 2013, 2018 and 2021, has written extensively on the ongoing revival of the Mari Lwyd custom, documenting the spread of revived and new Mari Lwyd enactments in and outside of Wales, the changes in practice, the effect of social media and the pandemic lockdown, while advocating for UK ratification of the UNESCO Convention:

Ultimately this will argue that Welsh intangible cultural heritage is an important, living component of contemporary Welsh culture, and that UK

¹¹<https://chepstowassailmari.co.uk>.

¹²< <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/2003-unesco-convention-for-the-safeguarding-of-the-intangible-cultural-heritage/>>. Access 5th September 2024

¹³ <[Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage - Legal Affairs \(unesco.org\)](#)>

ratification of the treaty, rather than something that might be desired in Wales, should in fact be considered as a necessity.¹⁴

Later in the same article, referring to the TracCymru Heritage Lottery funded Mari Lwyd project, Howell wonders whether the project, the advent of the flat pack Mari Lwyd and attendant increased ease of access to the tradition (compared to obtaining and preparing a real horse's skull) might mean 'this is no longer the same tradition that might be considered for safeguarding.'¹⁵ The UK Government consultation document proposes inventory criteria for any list or register of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) as follows: The ICH must be currently practised and reflect the current living ICH in the UK, including practices which have previously stopped and been revived; no 'minimum age' is required – contemporary as well as inherited practices may be included; the ICH can originate from anywhere 'ICH does not give rise to questions of whether or not certain practices are specific to a culture'.¹⁶ The criteria as proposed would certainly allow for any break or discontinuity in the tradition and also for future development, change, and evolution rather than imposing strict rules as inclusion criteria. The document states that customs included as ICH 'have evolved in response to their environment' and it is very difficult to define the recent and current environment as anything other than a potentially global one thanks to the internet and social media. Languages, it is noted, may be 'closely linked' to traditions but 'are not considered ICH on their own'. Use of the Welsh language varies among Mari Lwyds – some use no formal words or songs, just going round with the Mari either house or pub visiting or to events such as orchard wassails, maybe just with musical accompaniment. Some sing the traditional verses of *Cân y Fari*. Some sing and perform either a pre-written or, more rarely, an extemporised exchange. Community singing may be in Welsh, English, or both. The Mentrau Iaith are promoting the Mari Lwyd tradition with information packs in Welsh and English and educational videos. In this way the tradition is promoted as part of Welsh identity which is also an opportunity to use the Welsh language and maybe an encouragement to learn some Welsh.¹⁷

This then is an outline of the background of the Mari Lwyd tradition over the past two and a quarter- centuries, for several decades reviving, growing, and changing.

¹⁴ David Howell, 'The Intangible Cultural Heritage Of Wales: A Need For Safeguarding?', *International Journal Of Intangible Heritage*, Vol.8 (2013), 104-116 (p.104)
<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/290019691>.

¹⁵ Howell, 'The Intangible Cultural Heritage Of Wales', p.107.

¹⁶ ¹⁶< <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/2003-unesco-convention-for-the-safeguarding-of-the-intangible-cultural-heritage/>>. Access 5th September 2024

¹⁷<[Y Fari Lwyd \(The Mari Lwyd\)](#) | [Y Mentrau Iaith](#)> Accessed 6th September 2024

In the era of recognition of intangible cultural heritage, the aim of this essay is to enquire into its very intangibility, the intangible within the intangible. In the current living tradition what inspires people to continue it? How do they interpret and represent it? The Mari has inspired writers, musicians and artists whose works have in turn inspired others. The following will examine these questions by reviewing how aspects of the Mari Lwyd are represented in poetry, visual arts, theatre, and craft and by interviewing both Mari practitioners and artists as to their inspiration and expression for and of the Mari. A more general view of understanding, belief, and inspiration has been obtained from a brief attitudinal survey disseminated via social media.

Chapter One: Information gathering and method of enquiry.

The purpose of information gathering was to ascertain as far as possible attitudes to and thoughts and beliefs about the Mari Lwyd tradition and its expression. I wanted to capture the thoughts of those who actively participate in the tradition whether as members of the Mari entourage visiting houses, pubs, participating in orchard wassails either locally or at larger events; and those who, while not members of a Mari ‘team’, participate by joining in with singing, making noise, and responding to Mari’s horseplay. Some, if not most, of these will be attendees who have planned to visit an advertised event, but others may have been “ambushed” while enjoying an evening at the pub or walking through the evening streets. Then there are those who may be aware of the Mari Lwyd via literature, art, music, television or social media who may have their own response without having witnessed a Mari Lwyd “in the bone”.

The first means of enquiry was an attitudinal survey powered by Survey Monkey and disseminated on social media with posts on Facebook and Instagram. Individual postings were made on pages likely to have an interest, such as local history groups, groups interested in folklore, traditions and alternative religious practices, as well as ‘Mari Lwyd and Friends’ and ‘Mari Lwyd North America’.

Seven questions were asked, each with a series of check box options so that more than one response was possible. The questions were:

Q1 When and how did you first become aware of the Mari Lwyd?

Options were: Family or local tradition; Social media; Taught in school; Literature/music/film/art; T.V./newspaper; Gaming/cosplay; Witnessing a Mari Lwyd visit, or other event.

Q2 What is your relationship to the Mari Lwyd?

Spectator /attender at events; Owner/carrier of Mari; Member of Mari party (singer, musician, Ostler, Merryman, Punch, Judy, other); Member of dance team associated with Mari; Aware of /engage with Mari Lwyd via literature, art, gaming or other.

Q3 Do you have a connection to Wales?

Born in Wales and live in Wales; Live in Wales, born elsewhere; Born in Wales, live elsewhere; Of Welsh descent/diaspora; Interest in Welsh culture;

Prefer not to say. The question was intended to pick up some idea of spread and dissemination of the tradition but did not ask about location in Wales although some respondents volunteered this information.

Q4 What does the Mari Lwyd mean to you?

A midwinter wassailing tradition for fun, singing, food, and drink; A spiritual ceremony; A continuation of a Goddess tradition linked to Rhiannon or Epona.

Q5 Does the Mari Lwyd you are associated with have a name?

Simple locality name or name of accompanying dance team; A name with meaning to you-please comment on this meaning.

Q6 Which, if any, of the following have you heard of? Please mention your response to their work and any influence it may have had if you are familiar with it.

The Ballad of the Mari Lwyd- Vernon Watkins; *The Dark is Rising*- Susan Cooper; *Mari Lwyd*- Hugh Lupton/ Chris Woods; *The Mare's Tale* – Clive Hicks – Jenkins. This choice (Q6) of authors and artists who have produced work inspired by the Mari Lwyd covers poetry (*The Ballad of the Mari Lwyd* by Vernon Watkins); children's literature (*Silver on the Tree* from *The Dark is Rising* sequence by Susan Cooper); folk music (*Mari Lwyd* by Hugh Lupton, set to music by Chris Woods) and art, poetry, theatre and music in a body of work (*The Mare's Tale* by Clive Hicks- Jenkins. The works range from the 1940s (Watkins) through the 1970's (Cooper) to the 2000s (Lupton and Hicks-Jenkins). These ranges suggest possible points of contact with or introduction to the tradition via differing interests and at different stages of life as child and adult. Subsequent chapters will explore these works more fully in relation to inspiration by and interpretation of the Mari Lwyd.

It will be noted that all the suggested works, although most are by people who either are/ were Welsh or lived in Wales at some point, are in English. These are works that are commonly cited and mentioned in conversation about the Mari Lwyd. I am not aware of any works in Welsh that have similar penetration and searches in Welsh (via search engines and the UWTSD library site) yield only examples of the various verses and songs associated with the tradition or

academic books and articles about it. It is beyond the scope of this essay to speculate in any depth why this might be, but it could merit further study.

Q7 Please mention here anything not covered above – any other influences of any kind which have been important to you such as people, events, artists, authors, works etc. and any opinions or thoughts you would like to share.

Free text options were available in each of the first 6 questions as well as the open question Q7. Questions were chosen to give an idea of the spread of people who have some experience of and/ or involvement with the Mari Lwyd and how they became aware of the tradition. Graphic representations of the results to both the English and the Welsh surveys are available in the appendices. Some discussion of responses and comments made follows below and selected comments are discussed where relevant in subsequent sections.

Responses

45 responses were received of which 39 were in English and 6 in Welsh. The full results are available graphically presented in the appendices, but findings of note are outlined here. Results are presented as the numbers who responded to each checkbox option and as a percentage of the number of respondents to that question. No other statistical analysis was applied so no statistical significance can be claimed.

As predicted, given the ephemeral nature of posts on social media, the majority were received soon after the survey was posted. Responses were received between 22.08.24 and 13.09.24. Some respondents only used the check box options and left no further comments or explanations. Some people placed information pertinent to several question topics in one comment box.

Some questions were skipped – the question with fewest responses in both languages (22 in English and 1 in Welsh) was Q5 regarding the name of the Mari Lwyd understandably as it would only pertain to those who own or perform with a Mari as opposed to spectators. This is consistent with Q2 in which more respondents gave their relationship with the Mari as spectator or attendee at events. A total of 19 (18 English, 1 Welsh) described involvement as owner, singer, musician, dancer or other member of a Mari party. Of those who responded to Q5, 19 (including the sole respondent in Welsh) had a Mari with a simple locality identifying name while 4 claimed a name with meaning.

Q6 yielded only 24 responses in English, proportionally less than the 5 received in Welsh. In both languages Watkins was the most frequently cited (16 English, 3 Welsh), followed by Cooper (14 English, 2 Welsh). Hicks-Jenkins scored 8 English and 1 Welsh, Lupton 6 English and 1 Welsh. Several respondents had heard of more than one.

For Q1, regarding first awareness of the Mari Lwyd, a higher proportion of those responding in Welsh than in English had learned about the Mari Lwyd in school, both groups were aware of it as a local tradition. Only the respondents in English cited social media or witnessing an event as a first contact. Both groups cited literature, music, art etc. but neither cited T.V. or newspapers. One respondent had learnt of it while attending a Welsh Learners' group, one through Pagan studies.

Q3 The respondents in Welsh had a higher proportion who were born and still living in Wales. The largest group (though only by 1 more than those born and living in Wales) in the responders in English were those born elsewhere but living in Wales.⁷ Responses also came from the Welsh Diaspora.

Q4 on the meaning of the Mari Lwyd garnered 6 responses in Welsh and 37 in English. The Mari Lwyd as a midwinter wassailing tradition for seasonal enjoyment gained 5 Welsh responses and 33 English with one Welsh response and 13 English considering it a continuation of a Goddess tradition.¹² English respondents, but no Welsh, felt it was a spiritual ceremony.

Summary of Comments.

As stated above, most respondents did not use the free-text boxes to comment, but there were some contributions. The increased visibility of the tradition was mentioned as a good thing but with a caveat about fear of it becoming 'disneyfied like the Loch Ness Monster'. One person felt it has already become 'disneyesque', comparing it with Hallowe'en and calling it a tradition which has lost its culture. One of the Welsh respondents regretted the absence of the Pwnco and *Cân y Fari* in events they had witnessed. One person described being perturbed and made to feel uncomfortable by the Mari, while another loved seeing the Mari Lwyd, finding her presence 'fun but also very moving and slightly intimidating though not in a bad way'. She was described as a cultural icon of Cymru, and one person made a snap decision to return to live in Wales at a Mari visit to a pub and subsequently tries to see Mari Lwyds as often as possible.

The total number of respondents is a tiny fraction of those who participate in the tradition or attend events at which Mari Lwyds appear (or who aware of it but do

not attend) but there is a spread of responses which may be some reflection of the range of responses to the Mari Lwyd in that larger cohort.

The aim of this essay is to look at meaning and interpretation of the Mari Lwyd today. Is this tradition one which has lost its culture and become ‘disneyesque’? Is it just fun or something deeper— moving, intimidating, perturbing, discomfoting, or all the above? The essay will also look at how artists in various media have responded to the Mari Lwyd, how their work has influenced and inspired others and how this helps us consider the many conflicting aspects of the Mari Lwyd.

Chapter Two: Ekphrasis – art, influence, and inspiration.

The following chapters will look more deeply into some of the best known literary and artistic works inspired and influenced by the Mari Lwyd tradition -those cited in Chapter One above and, in turn, their influence on contemporary artists and creators. I will consider aspects and themes of the Mari in these works and draw on interviews with seven art practitioners, all of whom either own and “go about with” Mari Lwyds, or who produce Mari Lwyd related art, or both. In this context I will also consider the Mari Lwyd itself, both skull and sheet, as an artistic object and the aesthetics and significance of its decoration.

Ekphrasis (ἐκφρασις) is a word dating from Ancient Greek rhetorical training, in use from the first century CE. Michael Squire in the Oxford Classical Dictionary defines it as ‘the literary and rhetorical trope of summoning up-through words-an impression of a visual stimulus, object, or scene’.¹⁸ Squire proposes a distinction between modern usage which define ekphrasis almost exclusively as ‘a verbal mediation of a visual work of art’ and ancient rhetorical discussions in which the rhetorical effect achieved by the ekphrasis was more important than the choice of subject. Diverse subjects as mentioned in the Greek *Progymnasmatata* and quoted by Squire include ‘deeds’, ‘persons’, ‘places’, ‘speechless animals and plants’, ‘times’, and ‘festivals’, as well as ‘statues, paintings and the like’.¹⁹ This broadening of the definition of ekphrasis beyond that of a piece of writing related to a piece of art such as painting, sculpture or ceramic- Keats’ *Ode on a Grecian Urn* being one of the most well-known examples, lends itself to an examination of the Mari Lwyd as an ekphrastic subject by considering both the ‘festival’ or the performative, ceremonial aspect and the physical object and its varying degrees of art and artistry.

Vernon Watkins’ 1941 *Ballad of the Mari Lwyd* can be read as an ekphrastic poem in these terms, the broader definition lending credence to this against any claims that the Mari Lwyd is not a work of art. That is not her primary purpose but more and more she is becoming an object of beauty and artistic expression. The *Ballad* portrays a time and a festival -the turning of the year and in particular the oft repeated refrain ‘Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.’ – as well as the haunting visual:

And our Mari is white in her starry reins

Starved through flesh and skin.

¹⁸ Michael Squire, ‘ekphrasis’, in *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (online, 2017), pp. 1-10, p. 1, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199333381.135.013.2365>.

¹⁹ Squire, ‘ekphrasis’ p. 2.

It is a skull we carry

In the ribbons of a bride.²⁰

Brosch (2018) refers to two forms of ekphrasis: actual ekphrasis which ‘references the real’ and notional ekphrasis which ‘belongs to the category of the imaginary’ with its ‘invention of an image to be visualised in the reader’s mind’.²¹

Later in the same article Brosch states:

Most ekphrastic passages do not tell us so much what an image looks like exactly as describe its affective impact in order to provide tinted lenses that may colour our own visualisation of it.....This goal of ekphrasis aims at creating emotional effects that would be difficult to replicate by purely visual means.²²

The Ballad of the Mari Lwyd exemplifies this. Watkin’s imagery is rich in affective impact. The work is written to allow, indeed encourage, performance, with its exchanges between the ‘Living’ and the ‘Dead’ and the voice of the ‘Announcer’. The affective tone is set in the short prose Prologue, spoken by the Announcer, which introduces the tension between the Living, cringing inside in the warmth in fear of the Dead who are straining to get in. This is no light-hearted festive merriment, but fear, terror, loneliness, exile and rejection. Mari is not described visually but named: ‘Horse of Frost, Star- Horse, and white Horse of the Sea’²³, evoking the season, the night and the wildness of nature as well as suggesting the epithet of the Virgin Mary, Star of the Sea. Watkins’ notionally ekphrastic Mari is an imagined one- hearing the singers at his father’s door, as he writes in his note following the poem, he found himself ‘imagining a skull, a horse’s skull decked with ribbons’²⁴. This imaginary image has fuelled in turn the imagination of generations of readers, providing a dark tinted, fearful lens to temper the dazzling whiteness. The vividness of Watkins’ layered verbal imagery, in both affect and effect, accords with Simonides’ aphorism as quoted by Squire: ‘painting is silent poetry, poetry is talking painting.’²⁵

In her article on ekphrasis in the digital age, Brosch comments that the multiplicity of and ease of access to visual images digitally might have been expected to make description superfluous and that redundancy of ekphrasis had

²⁰ Vernon Watkins, *The Ballad Of The Mari Lwyd*, 2nd edn. (London: Faber and Faber, 1947), p.87.

²¹ Renate Brosch, ‘Ekphrasis In The Digital Age: Responses To Image’, *Poetics Today*, 39:2, (June 2018), 225-243, (p.235) <DOI 10.1215/03335372-4324420>.

²² Brosch, ‘Ekphrasis In The Digital Age: Responses To Image’, p238.

²³ Watkins, *The Ballad Of The Mari Lwyd*, p.69.

²⁴ Watkins, *The Ballad Of The Mari Lwyd*, p.89.

²⁵ Squire, ‘ekphrasis’, p.2.

been predicted with the advent of virtual reality, but notes an increase rather than a decrease in the frequency of ekphrasis over the past 25 years.²⁶ We can certainly contrast the plethora of online images, whether photographic, painted, or digitally produced, of the Mari Lwyd available globally at a click with how strange and powerful Watkins' imagery might have appeared over 80 years ago to those with no awareness or experience of the tradition. We could also argue that an increased availability of images simply gives greater opportunity for responses, in whatever medium, by a greater number of people.

Brosch also proposes, rather than a narrow view of dichotomous works in either verbal or visual art, an approach which: 'understands culture not as a container of works and texts but as a fluid network of processes and events made up of embodied practices that impact on society.'²⁷ Kennedy (2020), writing about musical ekphrasis (an example being Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*) calls ekphrasis 'a highly creative circular process that allows an artist to see the possibilities and varying directions that the creation of an artwork can be approached from, and lead to.'²⁸ This circularity and variety of possibilities in the creative process will be illustrated in the discussion of inspiration, expression and representation in relation to the Mari Lwyd which follows. This includes emotional responses -see Brosch above- both to visual and verbal art and to seeing the Mari Lwyd 'performing'.

No meaningful discussion of ekphrasis and creativity related to the Mari Lwyd is possible without reference to the early 21st century body of work by Clive Hicks-Jenkins *The Mare's Tale*, encompassing painting, poetry, and a "chamber work with narrator".²⁹ Hicks-Jenkins' father died in 1998, having had a lifelong terror of the Mari Lwyd which he had seen in early childhood. In 2000 the artist produced a series of drawings based around this which were exhibited in Newport Museum and Art gallery in 2001 under the title *The Mare's Tale*. Accompanying poems written in response by Catriona Urquhart, poet and friend of both the artist and his father were published in a volume, illustrated by Hicks-Jenkins, also entitled *The Mare's Tale*.³⁰ There is a circularity here in Urquhart's writing in response to Hicks-Jenkins' drawings and his subsequent production of drawings

²⁶ Brosch, 'Ekphrasis In The Digital Age', p228.

²⁷ Brosch, 'Ekphrasis In The Digital Age', p.226.

²⁸ Rob Kennedy, 'A Short Image Of A Musical Ekphrasis', *Interlude* (May 22nd, 2020), <https://interlude.hk/a-short-image-of-a-musical-ekphrasis>. Accessed 20th September 2024.

²⁹ Clive Hicks-Jenkins, 'Damian Lays Down A Challenge', *Clive Hicks-Jenkins Artlog*, 21 February 2013. <https://clivehicksjenkins.wordpress.com/2013/02/21/damian-lays-down-a-challenge-part-1/>, accessed 21 September 2024.

³⁰ Clive Hicks-Jenkins, 'Making The Mare', in *The Mare's Tale, A Libretto*, by Damian Walford Davies, (Grey Mare Press, 2019), p.7.

to illustrate her published text. The artist describes *The Mare's Tale* as 'a small masterpiece'.³¹

A decade after *The Mare's Tale* exhibition a performance piece was commissioned inspired by the drawings and 'what lay behind them'³², designed and directed by Hicks- Jenkins with libretto by Damian Walford Davies and music by Mark Bowden. Bowden writes, in his note on composing *The Mare's Tale* at the end of the published libretto, of how he would usually either instigate his own projects or be given freedom to use his own sources of inspiration when working on a commission. In this case he was sufficiently impressed by Hicks-Jenkins' drawings and Walford Davies' poetry to participate with the given subject matter. Once given the libretto he then based his composition around the melody of the Cân y Fari Lwyd. He speaks of wanting to bring together the poetry and music so that each enriched the other, and his description of how he used music throughout the piece highlights contrasting aspects of the Mari Lwyd – at once dark and fearful and a bringer of merriment:

At times the music turns in on itself in winding, cyclical, harmonic progressions which reflect the inner turmoil of the central character. At other points, it opens out into punchy, folk-inspired evocations of revellers who attempt to drink and dance away the winter darkness.³³

The Mare's Tale exemplifies a 'highly creative process' with the creation of visual art, poetry, prose, drama, stage design, puppetry, and music all stemming from one inspiration. Hicks-Jenkins writes about the process in his Artlog:

I never thought a time would come when I'd combine what I am today with what I once was. But in the chamber-orchestra work of *The Mare's Tale*, I'm bringing all the old skills from my theatre years to newly mint the theme that I first expressed in the Mari Lwyd drawings of over a decade ago. Drawings are being re-configured and given new life as maquettes and puppets, as I'm inspired afresh by the music of Mark Bowden and the words of Damian Walford Davies.³⁴

Clive Hicks-Jenkins' paintings have resulted in many ekphrastic literary works, both poetry and prose, either through active collaboration with writers or through

³¹ Clive Hicks-Jenkins, 'On The Eve Of May Day', *Clive Hicks-Jenkins Artlog*, 30 April 2024.
<https://clivehicksjenkins.wordpress.com/2024/04/30/on-the-eve-of-may-day/>.

³² Clive Hicks-Jenkins, 'Making The Mare', in *The Mare's Tale, A Libretto*, by Damian Walford Davies, (Grey Mare Press, 2019), p.8.

³³ Mark Bowden, 'Composing The Mare's Tale', in *The Mare's Tale, A Libretto* by Damian Walford Davies, (Grey Mare Press, 2019), p.49.

³⁴ Clive Hicks-Jenkins, 'The Mari Rises', *Clive Hicks-Jenkins Artlog*, 3 April 2013.
<https://clivehicksjenkins.wordpress.com/2013/04/03/the-mari-rises/>.

inspiration. *The Book Of Ystwyth*, pairing his paintings with poems by six authors inspired by them (including Catriona Urquhart's *Poem About The Mari Lwyd*), was published in 2011, marking his 60th birthday. In his introduction to the book, Peter Wakelin writes of how this juxtaposition 'allows each to illuminate the other', and 'helps the eye to travel further through the imagery, helps bring forth richer thoughts' which may help the reader/viewer 'begin a new ekphrastic journey into his or her own experience and imagination'.³⁵

"A Horse's Head In The Frost", an exhibition of artwork inspired by the Mari Lwyd tradition opened in Chepstow Museum and Art Gallery in December 2019. It was conceived and curated by John and Susan Exton, Monmouth based artists who have made and go out with several Mari Lwyds, exhibiting interpretations of the Mari Lwyd by 30 invited artists in various media including painting, photography, sculpture, glass, textiles, scrimshaw and decoupage. Intended also to raise awareness of the tradition, Chepstow was chosen as it had, since 2004, been the venue for the increasingly popular Chepstow Wassail and Mari Lwyd event which year on year attracted larger crowds of onlookers and inspired the making and procuring of Mari Lwyds by those newly keen to participate in their own expression of the tradition. The opening night of the exhibition was attended by several Mari Lwyds and their attendants, only gaining entry to the museum after winning the Pwnco exchange of verses made for the event. The exhibition was meant to run until the Spring of 2020, but the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic meant that most of exhibits remained in the museum for many months, including, no doubt to William Roberts, Nefydd's, posthumous satisfaction, at least one of the Mari Lwyds.

The pandemic, together with online communication, also mediated and modified another exhibition organised by John and Susan Exton which came to focus on the process of artistic stimulation, transmission, and creativity. Originally planned to be an exhibition in response to the image of the Mari Lwyd following a visit to an Abergavenny art group by the Extons and some of their stable of Maris, participants found the isolation and lack of contact during the various stages of Lockdown uncondusive to creation. This led to 'Track and Trace' – a project in which each of the eight participants (6 visual artists and 2 poets) produced a piece of work and sent it to one other person. Works were then created in response to the received pieces and sent on in turn and so on – with a sending and receiving every three weeks and regular Zoom meetings. The Mari Lwyd featured in several pieces. At the final exhibition in the Abergavenny Art Shop the lines of inspiration

³⁵ Peter Wakelin, 'Introduction', in *The Book Of Ystwyth Six Poets On The Art Of Clive Hicks-Jenkins*, (Aberystwyth: Carolina Wren Press and Grey Mare Press in association with Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru The National Library Of Wales, 2011), p.8.

could be traced by following numbered threads linking the exhibits. Allison Neal, writing about the exhibition on the Art Shop website, which shows the exhibits, explains how the project had tried to compensate for ‘all the moments when an idea might grow’, lost because of the pandemic.³⁶

Having considered ekphrasis, artistic inspiration and collaboration as it relates to the image of the Mari Lwyd, the following sections will look at the various energies and meanings associated with or attributed to the Mari Lwyd and how they are expressed, both in art and literature and in the presentation, decoration and characterisation of various contemporary Mari Lwyds.

³⁶ Alison Neal, *Track And Trace*, (2021), <https://artshopandgallery.co.uk/exhibitions/track-trace/>. [Accessed 22 September 2024].

Chapter Three: Mari Lwyd- Energy, Interpretation, Expression.

The Mari Lwyd is a creature of paradox, ambiguity, and contradiction. A ghastly apparition, a ribbon bedecked death's head coming in out of the darkness to instigate merriment while snapping at and terrifying children. A demanding beggar offering luck, blessing and fruitfulness. A sweeper away of bad fortune and a bringer of chaos. A feminine presence, whether mare, goddess or virgin whose pursuit of girls borders on aggression. Catriona Urquhart, in *Poem about the Mari Lwyd*, describes the arrival of the Mari Lwyd and her entourage as experienced by a terrified child who would be traumatised by it for life:

The argy-bargy Punch and Judy-show;
the fiddle, laying down a quaint refrain,
insouciant, rustic, artless, winding, slow,
terrifies
by seeming less
while meaning more.³⁷

And, later, 'There's more than horseplay that its sights are on.'³⁸

Any spectral element of terror aside, the physical eruption of a party of revellers led by a sheet- draped man wielding several pounds of bone on a pole intent on food, drink and flirtation was not always welcome. Eric Gibbs of Llangennith, Gower, recorded in 1995 by Mick Tams, related an occasion when residents bolted the door against the party who then pushed in and badly damaged the door and frame.

Most of the girls and children were on the receiving end and were glad when this old custom died out... This custom ceased with the 1914-1918 war, thank the Lord. People were terrified of it.³⁹

The fervour of that 'Thank the Lord' about an effect of the 'Great War', and the fear which must have accompanied the splintering of the door is echoed by the young Trevor Hicks-Jenkins as given voice by Catriona Urquhart:

³⁷ Catriona Urquhart, 'Poem About The Mari Lwyd', in *The Book Of Ystwyth, Six Poets On The Art Of Clive Hicks-Jenkins* (Wales: Gomer, 2011), p.37.

³⁸ Urquhart, 'Poem About The Mari Lwyd', *The Book Of Ystwyth*, p.42. The phrase 'More than horseplay', taken from Urquhart's poem, is used in the title of this essay.

³⁹ Mick Tams, 'Gower Animal Head Customs', *Folk Wales*, <https://www.folkwales.co.uk/gower-animal-head-customs-llangennith>. [Accessed 28 August 2024].

But it is never welcome,

not to me.

I would forbid it entry if I could.

I'd lock the door and swallow down the key.⁴⁰

Violet Alford, prolific writer and researcher on folklore, describes the development of what she calls the 'sophisticated' hobby (horse) which appeared in masques and processions from the 15th century:

Leaving behind the rough and ready country type, more especially that strange and alarming horse made of a real horse- skull fixed on a pole, the man carrying it entirely hidden under a white sheet... the horse-skull creature, inspiring both fear and awe...⁴¹

The Mari Lwyd is definitely a 'horse-skull creature', albeit now with a skull made from cardboard or resin, but most contemporary Maris are far from 'rough and ready' with much thought and symbolism going into their decoration and adornment.

Ronnie Kerswell-O'Hara, a member of the West Wales-based Mari Lwyd Annwn group⁴², a collective with two Maris which attends events at the local National Trust property and orchard at Dinefwr Park, described their version of the Mari as 'a device of chaos', naughty, drinking, stealing hats, 'collecting chaos like a magnet and then sweeping it away'. The collective Mari party, described as 'the polar opposite of the Victorian tradition' is made up exclusively of women, also identified as anarchists and artists apart from one man who plays a 'Green Man/Holly King' character. In contrast to the door-battering party described above, this group refuse to enter unless the occupants participate in some form of verbal exchange, not necessarily a traditional pwnco. Once inside they dance to their musicians and indulge in 'chaos and sweeping out' but at the same time behaving respectfully as people often do not know how to respond. They do not chase. They offer a poem, and, instead of asking for money, they invite people to write down thoughts and hopes for the coming year which are then placed in a bowl from which the Maris then 'eat' them. Sometimes, the Maris 'are sick' during this process. Whether this is due to the nature of some of the thoughts they

⁴⁰ Urquhart, 'Poem About The Mari Lwyd' *The Book Of Ystwyth*, p.38.

⁴¹ Violet Alford, *The Hobby Horse And Other Animal Masks*, (London: The Merlin Press, 1978), p.2.

⁴² <https://www.facebook.com/marilwydanwn>.

have consumed, or mechanical jaw-based difficulties is not specified. Despite the team's efforts to maintain a safe and respectful atmosphere, this is not always reciprocated with crowds becoming overwhelming at some events with attendance at the Dinefwr Orchard Wassail increasing from 30 to 300 over a few years. On one occasion both Maris were mobbed.

The costumes of the group, and decoration of the Mari, are symbolic and reflect the group belief and ethos. The group name, 'Annwn' references otherworldliness, intangibility and liminality. Rather than any of the traditional characters such as Punch, Judy, or Merryman, the women dress in white, symbolising purity, as a group of attendant maidens, one of whom does carry a broom like Judy for sweeping out the old. Ronnie Kerswell-O'Hara commented on Judy, (who is not characterised in the group) as another aspect of the female in the form of the mistreated wife. This aspect has, of course, been linked to the Mari Lwyd herself through the postulated connection of the Mari Lwyd figure with Rhiannon, the calumniated wife and queen in the First and Third branches of the *Mabinogi* whose punishment for being falsely accused of infanticide is to offer to bear visitors on her back like a horse and later to wear a horse collar.⁴³

They wear greenery for fertility, typically holly, ivy, and mistletoe, noting their connection with both Christian symbolism and Druidry. They see the skull as symbolic of re-birth and new hope. Mari Lwyd Dinefwr is adorned with gold and green, the colours of Dinefwr and with apples and mistletoe, symbolic of Druidic belief and fertility. The group, whose statement on their Facebook page reads: 'Folklore. Tradition. Custom. Belief. (Def. not a performance.)' and who, as well as attending public events arrange their own private events, have met with some disapproval from traditionalists. Their position is: 'If you're doing it, it should mean something special to you. It's different for different groups and different people'.⁴⁴

Phil Larcher and Vivien Morgan-Larcher live in woodland near the Tywi estuary where they run ecotherapy groups and workshops based on Welsh folklore and legend for those with mental health difficulties. Both have had an awareness of the Mari Lwyd since childhood- Phil remembers being taught about it in Nottage primary school in Glamorgan and vividly recalls the bright ribbons on the drawing he made of it which was hung on the classroom wall. Vivien had a family connection – her grandfather used to be part of a Mari Lwyd party near Llangynwyd in his youth but was not allowed to talk much about his experiences

⁴³ Juliette Wood, 'The Horse In Welsh Folklore', in *The Horse In Celtic Culture*, ed. by Sioned Davies and Nerys Ann Jones, (Cardiff: University Of Wales Press, 1997), p.168.

⁴⁴ Ronnie Kerswell-O'Hara, Personal Communication, 7 September 2024.

because of the disapproval of his chapel-going wife. Both artists, in 2003 they came across a horse's skull in a tree in an artists' commune which they were involved with. Phil had always been interested in skulls and bones in the school biology laboratory and in collecting found bones. The horse's skull stayed in the tree as a sculpture with some decorations added for about five years. They were advised by a dowser that the skull was 'unhappy' in the tree, so they took it with them when they moved to West Wales having gradually, inspired by the skull, learned more about the tradition, going out with the Llantrisant and other Cardiff area Mari Lwyds. Their Mari had her first outing in the Three Salmons in Carmarthen in January 2008. In 2012 they were involved in the Trac Mari Lwyd Project, appearing on the Maes at the National Eisteddfod in conjunction with the launch of the Flat Pack Mari Lwyd, and then in January 2013 they were interviewed and filmed on a Mari tour around Llandeilo as part of the educational/promotional film for the Mari Lwyd resource page on the Trac Cymru website.⁴⁵

Their Mari, carried by Phil and led by Vivien, is Mari Troellog, named for the spiral patterns representing journeys, the cycle of the year and the cycle of life, death, and rebirth, with which her skull is decorated. Her sheet is white, embroidered in red and green with holly leaves and berries. On the underside of the sheet is embroidered a curse on anyone who might try to get underneath it uninvited and carry her other than her owner. These two extracts taken from Phil's illustrated diary, which lists every outing Mari Troellog has had since 2008, puts into verse her spirit and persona as he sees it:

Fi yw'r Gaseg Fawr wedi f'addurno mewn coch a gwyrdd

Yn goleuo'r nosweithiau duaf.

Celyn, iorwg, uchelwydd

Naw troell mewn ffurf driphlyg.

Y Fari Troellog.

Y Cyfathrebydd

Y Ddawnswraig

Y Brancwraig

Y Gaseg

⁴⁵ <https://trac.cymru/en/about-mari-lwyd>.

Y Herfeiddwraig

Yr Unig Un

Yr Un Unig

Yr Anogwraig

Y Dderbynwraig

Cludydd y Golau O'r Tywyllwch.

The 'Bringer of Light out of Darkness' is Mari Troellog's most defining attribute. She appears between the (notional) Epona Day, 18th December and around Hen Galan, 13th January.

Phil, who is very aware that the name Philip comes from philohippus, lover of horses, has always felt an affinity with the animal, finding that horses will approach him. He also writes that he did not plan to be a bearer of a Mari Lwyd but that 'the skull came to him'. He describes 'becoming the Horse' when he dances as he carries the Mari, entering a trance, a frenzy of movement. However tired or even unwell he might feel before putting the Mari on he feels much better and energised afterwards. Again, the paradox – man becoming horse, who dances uninhibitedly and flirts with women but is also a mare, Y Gaseg Fawr, representing Maiden, Mother and Crone in another illustration in the diary. 'The Horse has a life of its own-a horse bearer will tell you.' 'The Mari always loves to be around musicians.'⁴⁶

The energising and healing power of the Mari is mentioned in the following two examples- one as lived experience and creative inspiration and one as a poetic re-framing of an episode in the Second Branch of the *Mabinogi* inspired by the Mari Lwyd. One interviewee, who is a prolific creator of Mari Lwyd artwork, describes the image of the Mari Lwyd being crucially important in her recovery after leaving a longstanding abusive relationship. As a symbol of life, death, rebirth ('which comes in many forms'), she found in the Mari 'a somewhat strange muse who became part of me'. Previously fond of drawing and painting but prevented from doing so for years she started painting and experimenting digitally with images of the Mari, undertaking to produce one every day, in design either seasonally appropriate or inspired by the style of various artists or genres and posted every day on Instagram. She organises an annual online auction of submitted Mari inspired artworks with the proceeds going to women's and

⁴⁶ Philip Larcher, Personal Communication and Personal Mari Lwyd Diary.

children's charities. She also acknowledges a lifelong fascination with skulls and bones and a taste for the gruesome (her father made her a 'My Little Pony Slaughterhouse') prior to discovering the Mari.⁴⁷

Ann Drysdale, one of the artists involved in the 'Track and Trace' project wrote several poems inspired by the Mari Lwyd. In *Mari Lwyd Mends The Horses Of Matholwch*⁴⁸ she introduces the Mari as a healing presence into the episode in the Second Branch of the *Mabinogi* where the jealous, quarrelsome Efnisien horribly mutilates the horses of his sister's suitor in rage at being left out of the wedding negotiations. The first verse describes the mutilation from a horse's point of view, then the Mari asks to be let in and in the second verse the horse, now healed sees Nisien, Efnisien's peacemaker brother waiting to feed it. The mutilation involved excising the horses' eyes, ears, and lips, reducing it to 'something less than horse'. Mended by the Mari, sight and hearing restored, the horse plans to 'use my new lips to kiss chaff from his flat palm'. Mari Lwyds, of course, have no lips and only eyes and ears made of glass and fabric.

John and Susan Exton, mentioned above, have 4 Maris of differing character, named and decorated accordingly and symbolically. They were drawn to make their own Mari after seeing them appear in Chepstow.

Their first Mari, Celeste, is decorated in a 'Victorian' style with brass embellishments, a crown of greenery and lights and has a drawing of the Uffington Horse on her cheek. Her name is a pun on the 'empty vessel' of the skull and the abandoned ship Mary Celeste. The name evolved 'listen to the skull'. In keeping with her name, her sheet or 'shroud' was changed from white to a 'celestial' blue.

Mari Seren, a smaller lighter skull, was painted with a pearlescent finish so became Seren, the Star Horse from *The Ballad Of The Mari Lwyd* with a white sheet and lights.

Mari Sol was worked on in the summer and so became the light-bringer, the 'Sunshine Girl' with a golden cape. Susan sees echoes of the Santa Lucia tradition of lights in her. Because of her association with summer Mari Sol may appear out of season.

In contrast Diamwnt Ddu was painted black when they obtained her as an unfinished project, and they have kept this theme with a view to appearance at the Dark Gathering at Calan Gaeaf.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Personal Communication, 26 August 2024.

⁴⁸ Ann Drysdale, *Feeling Unusual*, (Nottingham: Shoestring Press, 2022), p. 22.

⁴⁹ Personal Communication, 6 September 2024

Eleanor Greenwood from the Swansea Valley has Mari Arianrhod, found on Mynydd y Drum whose summit holds a cairn legendarily covering faerie treasure. Arianrhod is all silver and white ‘the colours of winter and of animals who can traverse from Anwn to our world’. She has silver eyes described as ‘blind and all seeing’. Her name is not directly inspired by the character of Arianrhod in the Fourth Branch of the *Mabinogi* but by its meaning of ‘silver wheel’ relating to the moon and the turning of the year.⁵⁰

One interesting choice of name from a survey respondent was Fauvel, from the 14th century French satirical poem *Le Roman de Fauvel*. An interesting name for a Mari Lwyd, as Fauvel (whose name is variously said to be derived either from ‘fauve’ meaning fawn in colour or from faus - false) is a male horse, a representative of evil who ruthlessly tries to climb the social ladder and become king, satirising the corruption of the times. The figure of Fauvel is depicted not only in verse, but by illustration of the manuscript and a musical accompaniment, both of which employ musical and artistic techniques and figures to enhance the portrayal of the subtext.⁵¹

The character of Fauvel holds an unflattering mirror up to society, as, in a way, the Mari Lwyd party and their hosts trade uncomplimentary verses. Fauvel is an intruder, trying to gain entry to the higher ranks of society. His name, like the Mari Lwyd’s, is open to interpretation and is possibly based on colour – fauve, lwyd. Fauvel as a name for a Mari Lwyd does fit with the ambiguity of the Mari Lwyd as a mare who chases and torments females. Dean- Smith says of *The Hobby Horse And Other Animal Masks*:

The whole of this book expresses Miss Alford’s conviction that *les devoirs sexuels* are the raison d’être of the hobby horse. They dictate his behaviour, and, in many instances, his form. (It is never self- evident why some ‘horses’ are mares).⁵²

That question has never been definitively answered. Fertility as an element in horse rituals has been postulated by many authors. Today’s Mari, with her flowing, often embroidered sheet, her ribbons, crowned with lights and flowers can appear very feminine while demonstrating (to a degree dependent on the whim, energy, and humour of her bearer) mischief rather than delicacy, and

⁵⁰Personal Communication, 30 August 2024.

⁵¹Augustana Digital Commons Citation Coulter, Maria; Loitz, Jake; and Duffy, Cait. "Allegory, Symbolism, and Metaphor in le Roman de Fauvel" (2021). 2021 Festschrift: *The Interpolated Roman de Fauvel in Context* < <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/muscfest2021/6>>. [Accessed 27 September 2024]

⁵² Dean-Smith, *The Hobby Horse And Other Animal Masks*, p.xxxiii.

flirtatious, even ‘laddish’ behaviour, could be seen as embodying both sides of a ‘courtship’ ritual. Hutton, examining the evidence for hobby horses and animal head customs as bringers of fertility, says that, while the theory cannot be disproved and ‘has nothing inherently unattractive about it’, there are grounds for reasonable doubt:

All the features noted may owe their widespread and long-lived popularity to functional value, because two of the simplest ways of expressing festive licence and signalling the existence of legitimate misrule have always been for the sexes to cross-dress or for people to put on animal skins or masks. Both indicate the suspension of the normal. Likewise, in societies in which most of this formalised misbehaviour is carried on by young men, young women are always going to be the favoured objects of attention.⁵³

Hutton is writing in 1996, and referring to customs enacted for many years before then. In the third decade of the 21st century, discussing this subject in purely binary male/female terms may be simplistic and exclusionary. Mari Lwyd bearers are no longer exclusively male. The Judy character, if included, is not necessarily be ‘personated by the tallest man the party are able to procure.’⁵⁴ Cwmni Gwerin Pontypwl accompany their Mari Afon Lwyd with a female Judy, dressed as a woman, and a female Punch and Merryman, both dressed as men. Ifans writes:

The prime function of Pwnsh and Siwan is to promote fertility, with or without Mari’s assistance. The horse is a long-recognised symbol of fecundity and abundance: ‘the sexual vigour of the horse endowed it with symbolism associated with fertility and prosperity.’⁵⁵

The gender boundaries in the tradition have always been blurred and can be seen as part of the transgressive nature of the Mari, but the perception of the Mari as bringing luck, prosperity, fertility and blessing persists. Where does the Mari Lwyd tradition sit in the non-binary context of LGBTQIA, gender fluidity and Pride? Rainbow ribbon- bedecked Maris feature on pride badges and stickers. A couple of ‘Mari Lwyd Lesbians’ smile on a ‘Balchder a Llawenydd’ print. A Mari in a rainbow sheet against a blue, pink, and white trans flag background proclaims ‘Mari Lwyd Says Trans Rights’ on a sticker. The Etsy seller comments ‘Best support the LGBTQIA or Mari Lwyd will drink all your beer’. Tumbler user llyfrenfys, who is working on a Welsh LGBT+ dictionary, has made Mari Lliwgar

⁵³ Ronald Hutton, *The Stations Of The Sun A History Of The Ritual Year In Britain*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.93.

⁵⁴ Rhiannon Ifans, *Stars And Ribbons Winter Wassailing In Wales*, (Cardiff: University Of Wales Press, 2022), p.111.

⁵⁵ Ifans, *Stars And Ribbons*, p.112.

whose sheet is patterned and multicoloured and whose pronouns are they and them. Their skull is thought to be from a male horse. Mari Lliwgar features in a video as part of the creator's queer Mari Lwyd project. The premise of the video is that the Mari, instead of asking for beer or money from houses, gathers 'lesbians, gays, bisexuals, trans people and queer people as she (sic) goes along (thereby creating a pride parade). It's just a bit of fun and nothing too serious.' This is a creative use of the Mari and certainly, given the unclear gender boundaries as discussed inherent in the tradition, collecting an assorted Pride procession made up of people of all genders and orientations does not seem incompatible with the tradition. It does sound 'fun' and is in keeping with the transgressive aspect of the Mari as a boundary figure, who in this case rather than trying to get in is asking people to come out (possibly in both senses of the phrase, although this is not specified) and join the parade.

In his post llyfrenfys describes his misgivings about releasing the project, fearing both a homophobic response and that it would be thought disrespectful of the tradition:

I was genuinely afraid to post about my gay Mari at first- because there's a certain type of nationalist in every country who believes everything gay is an outside threat to their culture (rather than something that's been there the whole time)- people have suggested to me before that the LGBT+ movement is an English invention which is eroding Welsh culture. Which would be hilarious if not for the sincerity in which the people saying it believed what they were saying was true.⁵⁶

He talks about 'outsider misinterpretation' of a tradition, which he feels can be legitimately criticised by those with knowledge of or connections to the tradition but says this can be conflated with 'Mari policing' by those who 'resent any popularisation of the tradition'. Those who might fall into this group have indeed been challenged by the differing interpretations (and indeed misinterpretations) associated with the increased uptake and dissemination of the tradition in recent decades.

The feminine energy of the Mari Lwyd has been interpreted and expressed in some unconventional ways in recent years. The Chepstow Wassail and Mari Lwyd event incorporated for a couple of years a 'Beauty Pageant' involving Maris being led across a stage and being interviewed to win rosettes.

⁵⁶ <https://llyfrenfys.tumblr.com/post/739971439965470720/last-year-i-made-a-take-on-a-gay-mari-lwyd/>.

The Mari figure, or an interpretation, has also appeared in completely different contexts, unrelated to house or pub visiting, or wassailing. A Gothic Fusion Belly Dance class in Australia⁵⁷, wearing rubber horse masks and dressed in traditional belly dance costumes performed a Mari Lwyd belly dance to the accompaniment of *Mari Lwyd*⁵⁸ by Los Angeles-based band 'House Made of Dawn', described as a 'Dark Electro-Industrial band focussing on Gothic themes of human foibles, sin, Hallowe'en, and the veil between life and death'. The song is based on a pwnco exchange, and the Mari announces her arrival, commenting 'and none too soon, given the state your house is in.

She has also provided inspiration for a Cardiff-based Burlesque act performing solo on stage in sparkling white.⁵⁹ The video 'A Day In The Life Of Y Fari Lwyd' depicts exactly that- a Mari getting up, going to the office, spending a riotous evening drinking 'with the boys' and finally vomiting into a toilet.⁶⁰

These examples take the figure, or, more accurately the character, out of the tradition while being inspired by it. The belly dancers in rubber horse masks would not be recognised as Mari Lwyds yet perform to a song recognisably based on the pwnco. The Mari Lwyd in the 'Day in the Life' video is a 'real' skull, pole and sheet Mari. There is a distinction to be made here between the Mari Lwyd as the traditional visiting ritual and how this is enacted (and 'guarded'), with variations from the perceived 'right way' being seen as disrespectful, and the Mari Lwyd figure or character being taken out of this context and used as inspiration for performance in other spheres. In terms of the Mari Lwyd ritual one respondent to the survey felt the omission of the Pwnco and the Cân y Fari by some groups shows disrespect for the tradition:

Traddodiad canu yw'r Fari i mi, ac mae gweld nhw'n dod heb unrhyw syniad am y gân arbennig yn teimlo fel amharch i'r traddodiad. C6

We return to boundaries -where are they drawn between adaptation, disrespect, appreciation, appropriation, inspiration and impertinence? All we can be sure of is that some will say the Mari has crossed them: the doors are open!

⁵⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/bellydanceamethyst>.

⁵⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TVqAS3pm5E4>.

⁵⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tevRlzT06nw>.

⁶⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sHMcIGIPm0g>.

Chapter Four: Darkness and Death, Light and Liminality.

Watkins, in *The Ballad Of The Mari Lwyd*, depicts⁶¹ a dreadful struggle between the dead trying to gain entry and the living within, as does Urquhart in *Poem About The Mari Lwyd* where the child attributes a malign intent on ‘more than horseplay’ to the Mari to which he desperately wants to deny entry. Urquhart’s imagery reflects this desperation which is so easily empathised with once we realise that the Mari gained entry, not just to the house, but to the child’s heart and mind where it took up lifelong malignant residence:

I’d lock the door and swallow down the key

I’d be good forever,

If only God would strike it dead;⁶²

We have the account from Gower of the fear of the custom and the relief when it died out. Violet Alford in 1939 quotes the decree of Priminus in CE 750: ‘Do not process with Hobby-Horses or Calves on the Kalends’, and Caesarius of Arles some two centuries earlier ‘If you do not wish to be a participator in their sins, do not allow a Cervulus nor a heifer or any other portent to come before your house.’⁶³ So not only were these antecedents of the Mari Lwyd forbidden from engaging in their activities- responsibility was also laid upon householders to prevent their approach and entry or be seen as complicit. The urge to keep the fearsome, disruptive, and potentially destructive entity out could thus have been reinforced by the fear of personal transgression. Caesarius clearly states that to participate in these rites or to permit them at your door is to sin. Contrast this with the ambiguity running through *The Ballad Of The Mari Lwyd*:

Sinner and saint, sinner and saint;

A horse’s head in the frost.

Dread and quiet, evil and good:

Frost in the night has mixed their blood

Thieving and giving, good and evil;

⁶¹ This is a conscious use of ‘depict’, rather than ‘describe’. ‘To represent by or as if by a picture’ rather than ‘to represent or give an account of in words’. From *pingere*- to paint, and *scribere*- to write, this usage of the words in English dates to the 15th century. The ‘as if by a picture’ echoes the notion of ekphrasis. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/depict>. (/describe). Accessed 25 September 2024.

⁶² Urquhart, ‘Poem About The Mari Lwyd’, *The Book Of Ystwyth*, p. 38.

⁶³ Violet Alford, ‘Some Hobby Horses Of Great Britain’, *Journal Of The English Folk Dance And Song Society*, 3.4(1939),221-240, (p.240),<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4521156> .[Accessed 24 February 2024]

The beggar's a saint, and the saint a devil.

Although the living struggle with and against the dead, the distinctions between them are blurred; 'All are confused by a horse's head'.⁶⁴

Margaret Dean- Smith (1977), in her introduction to Alford's book, writes of the ancient Greek tradition of people dressing and behaving as animals during the 12 days of the Kalends of January spanning the New Year 'represent demons who during that time are permitted to emerge from the underworld and are known as καλλικάντσαροι. People believed in and feared the demons represented in this tradition, as during their seasonal stay on Earth: 'every night they destroyed any person or thing lying in their path'.⁶⁵ That ancient fear is surely replicated in the degree of terror experienced by the child in Urquhart's poem. The Mari Lwyd is only one of many similar traditions in many countries continuing (if with interruptions) and evolving over many years. The element of Other- or Underworldly terror is vividly portrayed in the works considered and has persisted into the 20th and 21st centuries. This can be seen in the lifelong trauma witnessed to by Urquhart, and the mild thrill of quite enjoyable fear as experienced by an elderly man in a pub in Llandeilo in 2013, meeting for the first time the fearsome but never-seen creature used by his grandmother as a threat to make him behave as a little boy: 'be good or the Mari Lwyd will come and get you'. He was delighted to finally meet her.

Other shades of reaction come from two respondents to the survey: 'I find her perturbing and it makes me feel very uncomfortable.' E8. 'I love seeing the Mari Lwyd and find her presence fun but also very moving and slightly intimidating though not in a bad way.' E3. Children may shy away and cling to a parent or run screaming; others will be fascinated and smile with delight and awe as the Mari bends for them to stroke her cold, bony nose. Adults may shudder or, as one member of staff during a pub visit, back away against the wall, genuinely near to tears 'No, no, go away, I don't like it'.

Susan Cooper's *Silver On The Tree*, the fifth book in her *The Dark Is Rising* sequence, contains a horrific characterisation of the Mari Lwyd which has been some people's first awareness of the Mari as cited by some respondents to the survey. 16 people cited *The Dark Is Rising* with one calling it 'my favourite children's book ever. Very magical'.

⁶⁴Watkins, *The Ballad Of The Mari Lwyd*, pp.81-82.

⁶⁵ Margaret Dean-Smith, 'Introduction', in *The Hobby Horse And Other Animal Masks* by Violet Alford, (London: The Merlin Press, 1978), p.xiv.

The books are concerned with a battle between Good (The Light) and Evil (The Dark) and many characters from Welsh myth and legend are woven through the narrative. The Mari Lwyd appears as a full, fast-moving, skeleton horse, who pursues Will and Bran, two of the characters on the side of the Light, as they ride through the 'Lost Land). Appearing in bright daylight, it terrifies their golden horses who bolt. The effect is such that Will is 'too frightened even to think of fear'. The ghastly creature is 'an impossible horror' with a 'dreadful silent head' from which red ribbons dangle. They take refuge in an abandoned building with no hope that the door will keep the 'dead and yet alive' creature out. They are magically saved by a shower of May petals which fall from a tree on the roof onto the Mari as it prepares to charge the door, causing it to collapse in a heap of disarticulated bones. Bran, who knows about the Mari Lwyd, having seen and been terrified by it as a child then tells Will about the tradition and explains its effect on him as he had been paralysed with fear:

The original Nightmare, that thing... one Christmas when I was very small... I saw the Mari Lwyd and it frightened the lights out of me. Terrible. Screaming nightmares for weeks... If anyone had really wanted to put me out of my head, they couldn't have chosen a better way.⁶⁶

It is interesting that although Will, who has no idea about the Mari Lwyd, is truly terrified, he is still able to function to get them to shelter while Bran is paralysed or 'hypnotised' with fear and that this fear stems, not just from this fully articulated skeletal horse capable of purposeful movement with evil intent, but equally if not more, from his encounter with an 'ordinary' skull on a pole and sheet Mari at a childhood Christmas.

In the same way, after his childhood encounter, Trevor Hicks-Jenkins believed in his terror that he had seen the Devil and that if he ever spoke about it the Devil would come and take him away. He did not know that he only saw a skull on a stick carried by a sheet-draped man.⁶⁷ By building on this power of the Mari to terrify Cooper has produced a truly horrifying fictional creature which really does try to 'come and get them'.

One of the works mentioned in the survey and known to several respondents has a different take on the Mari's desperation to get in. In *Mari Lwyd*, best known through the singing of Chris Wood, Hugh Lupton's Mari, begs for and generates

⁶⁶ Susan Cooper, *Silver On The Tree*, (London: Puffin Books, 2019), pp.252-253. Read in ebook format.

⁶⁷ Clive Hicks-Jenkins, 'Mares' Tails', *Artlog Mares' Tails*, 1 May

2023, <https://clivehicksjenkins.wordpress.com/2023/05/01/mares-tales>. [Accessed 22 September 2024].

sympathy for her plight. This is the Mari turned out of the stable to make way for Mary and the infant Jesus:

With ropes I was dragged from the birthing straw,

Aching with foal I was heaved to the door

This Mari does not just want to come in – she wants to come **back** in, having been evicted two thousand years ago. In her voice we learn of her ten thousand years as Goddess and Queen whose foals:

Bridled with starlight,

Saddled with gold,

Leapt the divide between living and dead,

Quickened the year with each toss of the head.⁶⁸

Her eviction to make room for ‘Mother of God, the Mary Mild’ ushers in the ‘birth of a rival creed’. No longer ‘The Mare-headed Queen, the Mari Lwyd’ the mare has become ‘Old Bone-face the deathless, nightmare, rattling womb, the Uffington Wraith’. But she was originally none of those things – she has, she says, been forced into darkness, and ‘you’ve made me a fiend’. For this Mari, forced across the threshold from light into darkness, from fecund deity to homeless wraith, entry is hers by right, but she is still denied. ‘Let me in once again. Let me in!’ Lupton’s verses, which do much to mediate the horror of the Mari in contrast to Watkins, Urquhart and Cooper, who all intensify it, really emphasise the liminality – birth of child, foal, birth leading to a transition to a new religion, the loss of rank, and, as ever with the Mari, the threshold between interior light and warmth and exterior cold and darkness.

Wood, (1997), summarises academic views of the custom – a survival of pre-Christian fertility rites, suppression by Christian culture, the 19th century view of: ‘primitive cultural understanding of phenomena as magical rather than rational and necessitates rituals of sympathetic magic rather than complex symbolic systems’, and 20th century criticism and questioning of this model, particularly the Christian versus pagan mindset and the evidence for a link from pre-Christian to modern periods. Noting the custom’s association with the Christmas-New Year- Twelfth Night season (what might be termed Y Gwyliau in Wales) she states:

This link with a seasonal transition, together with other aspects of practice, suggests that it might be possible to see the custom not as a

⁶⁸ <https://mudcat.org/thread.cfm?threadid=73326>. [Accessed 20 September 2024].

survival depending on tenuous connections with antiquity, but as a ritual associated with a liminal period which is fully functional in a more modern context.⁶⁹

I am not certain that these two views are mutually exclusive. The connections may well be (are) tenuous but acknowledging the possibility of a link between more modern Mari Lwyd and other similar traditional practices around the liminal period of the 'Twelve Days of Christmas' with activities around the Kalends of January in antiquity would not seem to preclude the more modern rite being 'fully functional'.

The liminality of the practice itself is witnessed above in the struggle to cross or defend the threshold. The season of liminality may have been and certainly is becoming wider than the period around Christmas and New Year up to 12th Night on January 5th.

It is not unusual for Maris to be active both at New Year (December 31st – January 1st) and at Hen Galan, the Old New Year of the Julian calendar on January 13th. The calendar approved by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582 was introduced to re-align with the seasons and amend miscalculations in the Julian solar calendar. Residents in the Gwaun Valley in North Pembrokeshire preferred to mark the New Year on the old date. Hen Galan is now an occasion for Mari Lwyd activity outside the Gwaun Valley, extending the season.

There are now instances of the Mari Lwyd becoming established as a practice around Calan Gaeaf, the Calends of winter on November 1st, most often on Noson Calan Gaeaf, October 31st or Hallowe'en. One response to the survey on the meaning of the Mari Lwyd reads: 'A tradition that has lost its culture and is now Disneyesque (like Hallowe'en in UK)'. (E 38). The respondent does not enlarge on their comment that the Mari is 'a tradition that has lost its culture' - they could be referring to the spread of the tradition outside of Wales, to the plethora of commercially available Mari Lwyd artefacts – Christmas decorations, T-shirts, jewellery, models, puppets, masks, card, stickers and more as revealed by a quick online search- but as yet nothing like the mountain of plastic Hallowe'en merchandise, or something else.

But there is a question to consider around Mari Lwyd and Calan Gaeaf. Peate, (1943), writes a 'suggested explanation' for the Mari Lwyd which discusses the custom and its variants as practised in different areas of Wales. His focus is on the meaning and derivation of both parts of the name 'Mari Lwyd'. He does not reach a definite conclusion as to whether 'Mari' is derived from the English

⁶⁹ Wood, p.p.164-165.

‘mare’ or the name ‘Mary’. He is drawn to the ‘mare’, as in ‘nightmare’ option as ‘the consistent feature of the Mari Lwyd, was that it was meant to frighten and horrify’ and cites a report from Pembrokeshire of a sudden death from fright at the sight of the head of the Cynfas-farch, cited as a local Mari Lwyd variant, consisting of a stuffed sackcloth head manipulated via a pitchfork by a man draped in the excess cloth, coming through his upstairs window.⁷⁰ He is unpersuaded of evidence for ‘Lwyd’ definitively meaning either ‘grey’ or ‘holy’. Whatever the true meaning, he does think that the custom became associated with festivals of Mary, in particular Gwyl Fair y Canhwyllau or Candlemas celebrated on the 2nd of February in relation to the Feast of the Purification of Mary. He says that this was associated with light, drinking, and singing and could start from the 25th of December, and compares the songs accompanying the Mari Lwyd to verses from ‘Mary’ or ‘Mair’ wassail songs, both asking for doors and windows to be opened, and admittance granted:

Agorwch chwi y ffenestri,

Fal dyma Fair a’i goleuni.

Agorwch chwi y drws caud

Fal dyma Fair a’i goleuad⁷¹

The transitional or liminal time here would be from late winter to the start of spring in early February.

Ettlinger, (1943) acknowledges Peate’s ‘masterly exposure’ in his above article and takes it as inspiration for her own article, an ‘attempt to determine to determine the pagan festival on which that ‘pre-Christian horse-ceremony’ was performed. Ettinger looks towards another feast- Hallowe’en, or the Irish ‘Samhain’s Eve’ on the 31st of October and refers to the pagan year beginning in winter on ‘November Eve’ and feels that ‘similarities between the ideas underlying the Samhain-rites and the various Mari Lwyd traditions are ‘too profound and too numerous to be accidental’. She cites the dual aspects of celebrating beginnings and ‘a gloomy commemoration of the dead’ at a time when the dead were thought to return to earth. She claims sees the Mari Lwyd as a ‘death horse’ because of the white shroud, the skull, and a report that the custom had previously been known as the ‘Marw Llwyd’ or ‘Grey Death’ in some parts of Wales.⁷²

⁷⁰ Iorwerth C. Peate, ‘Mari Lwyd: A Suggested Explanation’, *Man*, 43 (May- Jun., 1943), pp. 53-58.

⁷¹ Peate, ‘Mari Lwyd: A Suggested Explanation’, p.57.

⁷² Ellen Ettinger, ‘The Occasion And Purpose Of The Mari Lwyd Ceremony’, *Man*, 44, (Jul-Aug., 1944), pp.89-93 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2791738>.

Ettinger's arguments are persuasive- not to conclusively state that the Mari Lwyd did appear at Noson Calan Gaeaf, more that it would not have been out of place. Noson Calan Gaeaf is an ysbrydnos when the dead were said to walk the earth so a spectral horse trying to get into a house would have been terrifying, and its appearance on a night when various means were used to predict the future, possibly a portent of doom. All of which is very much in keeping with the atmosphere created by Watkins, Urquhart and Cooper, certainly a night for nightmares, liminality, and an alternative New Year.

This compatibility of the Mari Lwyd with Calan Gaeaf has led to at least two 'new traditions.' The Dark Gathering⁷³ has been held in Cornwall on the Saturday nearest to the 31st of October since 2014 (with a hiatus over Covid 19). The event, based around the tradition of honouring ancestors at this time, involves Morris dancers, Cornish 'Osses and invited Mari Lwyds. As darkness falls the Mari Lwyd party approaches the enclosure where the dancing is taking place, with a pwnco exchange in Welsh and Cornish. Once 'allowed in' the Maris greet the 'Osses, dancing ensues to the accompaniment of Merryman with antics from Punch and Judy and finally the traditional 'Washael' song of thanks, farewell and blessing. The evening continues with a shift to more solemn and sombre territory with songs to the ancestors and a remembrance ritual. This year will include a visit from a Mexican group performing traditional rituals from El Día de Los Muertos. The Dark Gathering was first conceived as an interaction between Mari Lwyds and Cornish 'Osses after an encounter at the Chepstow Wassail but has grown over the years and had to change location to accommodate increasing numbers of spectators. Although not traditional, the verses in Welsh and Cornish reflect a spirit of common purpose in the use of the languages and the 'inter-Celtic' nature of the cooperation seems positive. The presence of the Maris, not only out of Wales, but out of season does not jar for the reasons above- Calan Gaeaf does seem to suit the Mari.

The Mari has also been appearing in recent years at Calan Gaeaf on Ynys Môn, Anglesey. Members of Urdd Derwyddion Môn, the Anglesey Druid Order, hold a Mari Lwyd Awakening Ceremony, again on the Saturday nearest to the 31st of October. The ceremony involves repetition of Watkin's stanzas:

⁷³ <https://thedarkgathering.co.uk>.

Mari Lwyd, Lwyd Mari:

A sacred thing through the night we carry.

Betrayed are the living, betrayed the dead:

All are confused by a horse's head.⁷⁴

The event page on Facebook invites attendees to 'Sing the Mari from her coffin as she is raised in her undead glory to rule the winter months'. The Mari 'reflects the qualities of our Goddess of sovereignty in her winter guise, she awakens on the first day of winter and returns to her grave at Calennig.'⁷⁵

Again, while not traditional, this role for the Mari seems quite apt and in keeping with the spirit of the tradition. In this case she is awake and active from one Calan to the next, Calan Gaeaf to Dydd Galan, from the start to the middle of winter. The awakening ceremony is followed by an ancestor remembrance ritual, again a seemingly fitting context for the 'undead' horse. The close association with ancestor remembrance in both the Dark Gathering and the Urdd Derwyddion Môn ritual highlights the liminal aspect of the Mari. The Mari Lwyd Awakening ritual has become established for this group of modern Druids and references their belief system with the Mari being identified as the winter embodiment of their Goddess. For the adherents there is clearly deep meaning and belief here.

It might not be surprising if appearances by the Mari around Calan Gaeaf became more widespread, for the reasons just outlined, which could be used to justify an earlier start to the season in the same way that Maris now tend to continue appearing into February because of the increasing frequency with which they attend orchard wassails. The increasing popularity of these events has extended the season as they are often held on successive weekends to avoid clashing with other events in the area.

⁷⁴ Watkins, *The Ballad Of The Mari Lwyd*, p.82.

⁷⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/angleseydruidorder>.

Conclusions.

The introduction to this essay presented the 1852 view of William Roberts, Nefydd that the Mari Lwyd should be confined forthwith to the museum and become the province solely of historians and antiquarians and that of David Jones in 1888. Jones feared that it was, in contrast to its prevalence during the 1840s and 1850s, one of the ‘old observances’ which were then no longer found even as survivals and would in future only be found as revivals and had become things of the past. Fifty years before Nefydd, Edward Jones, *Bardd y Brenin*, vehemently laments ‘The sudden decline of the Customs of Wales’. For this he blames:

the fanatick imposters, or illiterate plebeian preachers, who have too often been suffered to over-run the country... the consequence is, Wales, which was formerly one of the merriest, and happiest countries in the world, is now become one of the dullest.⁷⁶

Williams, after quoting Jones, remarks that Jones’ writing on Welsh music was instrumental in turning Welsh culture ‘from being one of decaying but unselfconscious survival into self-aware revival, and the result, though often bogus, was never dull’.⁷⁷

Had Jones still been alive in 1852, he would no doubt have turned his fervour on Nefydd, equalling his against the Mari Lwyd. Nefydd might be accused of a degree of fanaticism but was by no means ‘illiterate.’ Nefydd marshalled his research into a well-argued piece. His detailed documentation provided a blueprint for subsequent enactments of the tradition. Nearly 1500 years earlier, after an attempt to stamp out the practice of men disguising themselves as stags, Pacianus, Bishop of Barcelona laments in 370 CE: ‘Oh! What have I committed? I think they would not have known how to act the stag play if I had not shown them by criticising them’.⁷⁸

The above reflect (not necessarily successful) attempts to curtail cultural practises, anger at these attempts, and regret at their passing for whatever reason.

In her paper on cultural evolution and the science of folklore as compared to other developing 19th century scientific disciplines, Bennett, while discussing the premise that surviving folkloric customs could be used to chart the evolution of a race through different time periods, cites Gomme (1892). Gomme maintains that

⁷⁶ Edward Jones, *The Bardic Museum*, (London, 1802), cited by Prys Morgan, ‘The Hunt For The Welsh Past In The Romantic Period’, in *The Invention Of Tradition*, ed. by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p.44.

⁷⁷ Prys Williams, p.44.

⁷⁸ Alford, *The Hobby Horse And Other Masks*, p.19.

if ‘peasant’ customs and beliefs are the remnants of a primitive and ancient culture then:

They cannot by any possibility develop. Having been arrested in their progress by some outside force, their development ceases. They continue, generation after generation, either in a state of absolute crystallization or they decay and split up into fragments.⁷⁹

We have seen attempts to ‘arrest their progress’ by Pacianus, Nefydd, and the objects of Edward Jones’ wrath and can consider these as ‘outside forces’ along with social changes such as population movement for example. Nefydd of course advocates the ‘absolute crystallization’ of consignment to a museum if any continued existence must be countenanced but might not be averse to decay and fragmentation.

In the face of the considerable body of writing, research, opinion, discussion and argument around the origins and history of the Mari Lwyd it might be helpful to consider Howell’s (2018) premise that:

We can today consider two distinct versions, or phases of the Mari Lwyd tradition- one ‘living’ example to have taken its form in the last two decades, and another ‘lost’ version identified in the 19th century.⁸⁰

This is consistent with the criteria for recognition as Intangible Cultural Heritage allowing for traditions that have stopped and restarted or been revived.

It is not known whether any attempts to get the Mari Lwyd recognised and registered as Welsh ICH will succeed, (other possible candidates include the arts of lovespoon carving, making welshcakes on a bakestone, and the traditional poetic discipline of Cerdd Dafod), or what impact, if any, this might have on the contemporary tradition.

What is certain is that there is an active and growing presence of the Mari Lwyd in contemporary cultural and social life in Wales (and elsewhere) in the third decade of the 21st century – the ‘living’ phase of the tradition as proposed by Howell, with some substantial changes from that practised in the 19th century (bearing in mind local variations in enactment were also noted then).

Whereas Nefydd criticised any performance of the ritual and wanted to stop it completely, criticism today is levelled at enactments which are felt by some to be untraditional and therefore inappropriate or disrespectful. This is voiced in this

⁷⁹ Bennett, ‘Geologists And Folklorists: Cultural Evolution And The Science Of Folklore’, p.33.

⁸⁰ David Howell, ‘Contemporising Custom: The Re-Imagining Of The Mari Lwyd’, *International Journal Of Intangible Heritage*, 13 (2018), pp.66-78 (p.70)

essay by the survey respondent, writing in Welsh, who felt that not singing the traditional song was disrespectful and something lacking in what is, for them, a singing- based tradition. More might criticise the lack of Welsh used by some groups, but the tradition is used as a teaching tool by the Mentrau Iaith both for the language and as an introduction to Welsh culture. Llyfrenfys voiced their hesitancy about their Gay Mari Lwyd project and spoke of ‘Mari policing’ by those who resent any popularisation of the tradition. The all-female, explicitly feminine, group of Mari Lwyd Annwn have faced criticism from those with more traditional views.

One of the aims of this paper is to assess the meaning of and beliefs about the Mari Lwyd as experienced by those involved with it today, and it seems that meanings and beliefs can be deeply felt and firmly held, still in the context of an enjoyable Winter tradition involving fun, mischief, music, colour, wit, drink and dancing. Both are encompassed by the Mari and held in such a way that the more spiritual or emotional aspect can be experienced, sometimes by those who least expect it, amid the revelry. Whether we consider a Mari bearer ‘becoming the horse’ or the Druid order seeing the Mari as the winter guise of their goddess, a Welsh expatriate deciding to return to Wales while attending a Mari visit and describing her as having a significant place in their heart, or a woman for whom the Mari became a talisman through transition out of trauma, these beliefs are personal. Everyone has their own Mari. When circulating the survey, I specified that in this context there were no right or wrong answers (in the full knowledge that there are many who have very firm views on right and wrong ways of doing things), hoping to encourage people who might worry about ‘saying the wrong thing’. A definitive answer on the origins and evolution of the Mari Lwyd and other similar traditions will never be found, but that does not hinder the enthusiasm for the tradition today, lively, growing, adapting and evolving. Of course, this adaptation and evolution may be seen as tantamount to decay and fragmentation in some quarters.

Alongside the enactment of the tradition there is a growing body of art in various media inspired by the Mari Lwyd as outlined above. There are no boundaries to artistic expression, but even if there were, it is likely that the Mari would cross them. As an ekphrastic subject par excellence for both traditional and contemporary disciplines, aided by digital technology (including as a subject in online gaming⁸¹) and social media dissemination, there is no reason to expect any

⁸¹ An online video, ‘Mari Lwyd expert plays as the Mari Lwyd in Assassins’ Creed Valhalla’ David Howell comments as he plays as the Mari Lwyd in this game (which includes some Welsh).
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VwEVM6h5cQM>.

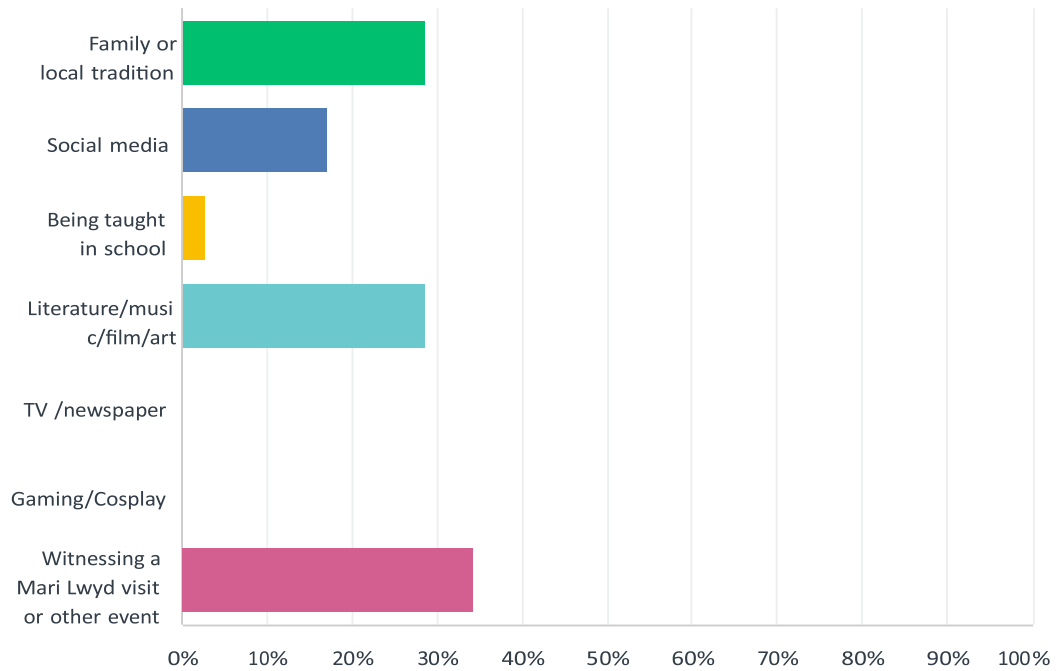
imminent diminution in her presence and visibility. The Mari Lwyd is indeed very lively for a(n) (un)dead horse, if not a fossil.

This will suggest areas of further study such as ongoing monitoring of the spread of the tradition in Wales and beyond; the Mari Lwyd tradition and the Welsh language – the use of Welsh by groups enacting the tradition, the use of the Mari Lwyd in teaching the language to Welsh learners and any influence of either of these on the other, written or spoken word in Welsh inspired by the Mari Lwyd; Mari Lwyd and LGBTQIA – given the assertion cited above that the LGBTQ+ movement is part of an English plot to undermine Welsh culture- there is a need for research into attitudes (both from the LGBTQ+ community and others) towards LGBTQ + involvement with the Mari Lwyd.

No tradition which continues to change and evolve, while holding on to its own basic and unique identity, can be said to have crystallized. Any essay which views the contemporary expression of a tradition can only ever be a snapshot of its subject at the time of writing and that is what this essay has attempted to achieve.

Q1 When and how did you first become aware of the Mari Lwyd?

Answered: 35 Skipped: 4

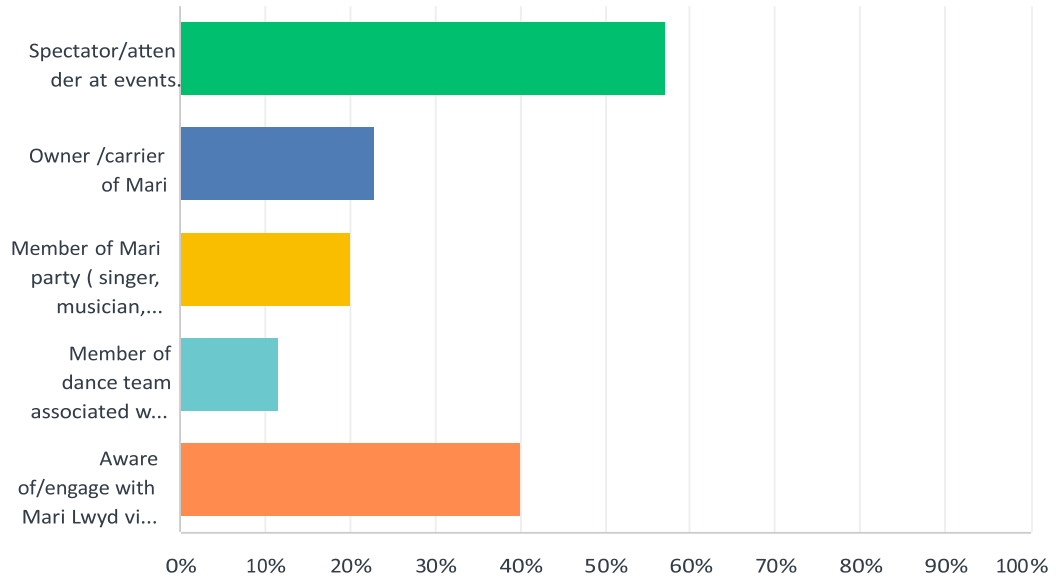


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Family or local tradition	28.57%	10
Social media	17.14%	6
Being taught in school	2.86%	1
Literature/music/film/art	28.57%	10
TV /newspaper	0.00%	0
Gaming/Cosplay	0.00%	0
Witnessing a Mari Lwyd visit or other event	34.29%	12
Total Respondents: 35		

Q2 What is your relationship to the Mari Lwyd?

Answered: 35

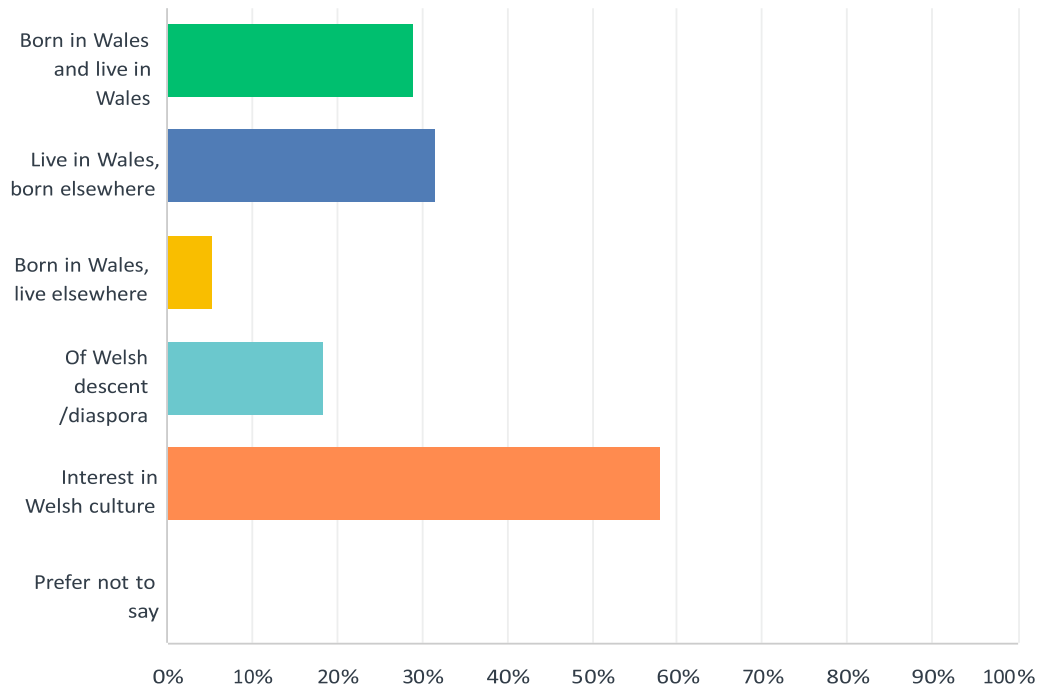
Skipped: 4



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Spectator/attender at events.	57.14%	20
Owner /carrier of Mari	22.86%	8
Member of Mari party (singer, musician, Ostler, Merryman, Punch, Judy, other)	20.00%	7
Member of dance team associated with Mari	11.43%	4
Aware of/engage with Mari Lwyd via literature, art, gaming or other.	40.00%	14
Total Respondents: 35		

Q3 Do you have a connection to Wales?

Answered: 38 Skipped: 1

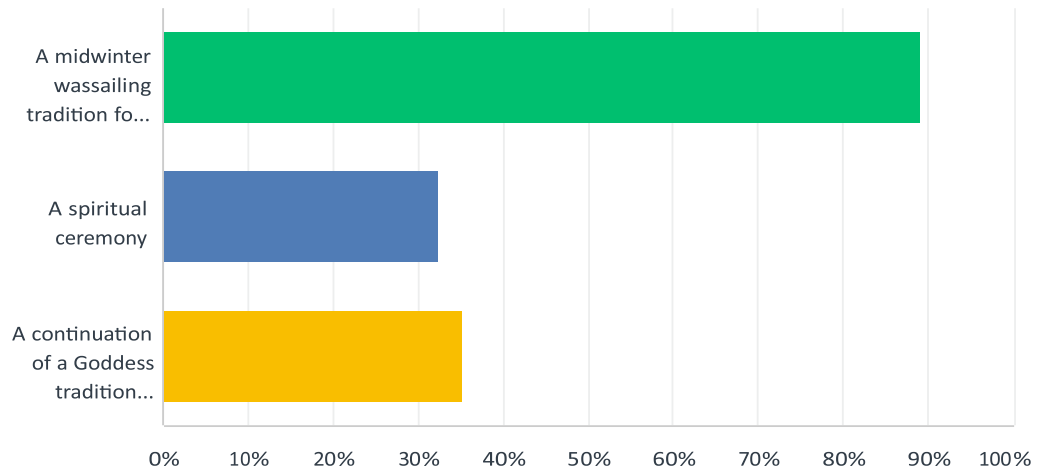


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Born in Wales and live in Wales	28.95%	11
Live in Wales, born elsewhere	31.58%	12
Born in Wales, live elsewhere	5.26%	2
Of Welsh descent /diaspora	18.42%	7
Interest in Welsh culture	57.89%	22
Prefer not to say	0.00%	0
Total Respondents: 38		

Q4 What does the Mari Lwyd mean to you?

Answered: 37

Skipped: 2

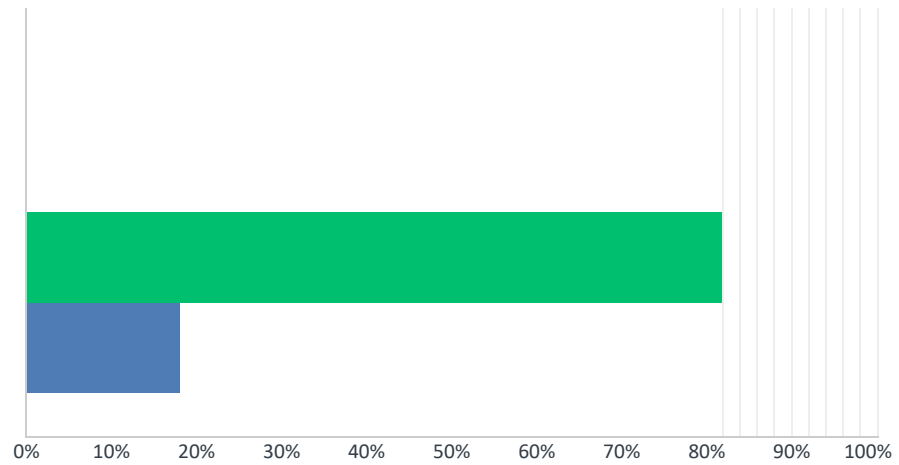


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
A midwinter wassailing tradition for fun, singing, food and drink	89.19%	33
A spiritual ceremony	32.43%	12
A continuation of a Goddess tradition linked to Rhiannon or Epona	35.14%	13
Total Respondents: 37		

Q5 Does the Mari Lwyd you are associated with have a name?

Answered: 22

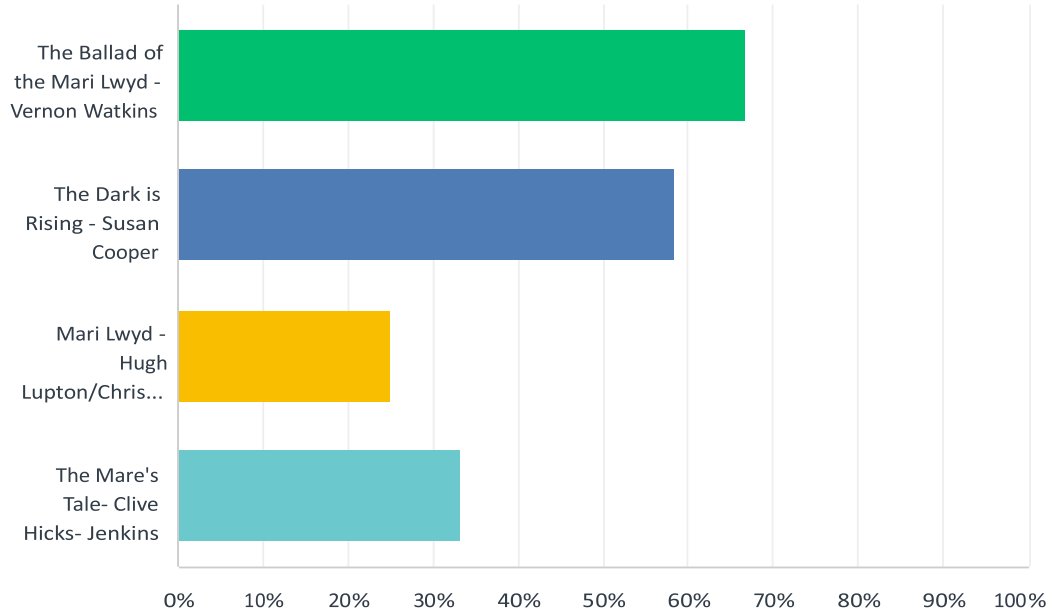
Skipped: 17



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Simple locality name or name of accompanying dance team.	81.82%	18
A name with particular meaning for you - please comment on this meaning.	18.18%	4
Total Respondents: 22		

Q6 Which, if any, of the following have you heard of? Please mention your response to their work and any influence it may have had if you are familiar with it.

Answered: 24 Skipped: 15



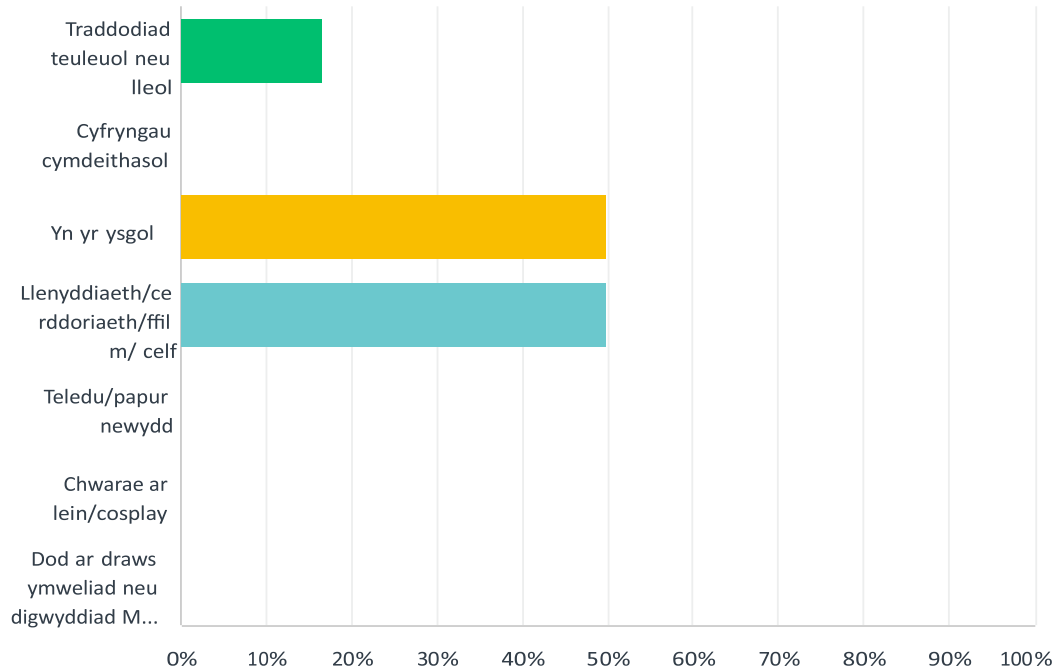
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
The Ballad of the Mari Lwyd - Vernon Watkins	66.67%	16
The Dark is Rising - Susan Cooper	58.33%	14
Mari Lwyd - Hugh Lupton/Chris Wood	25.00%	6
The Mare's Tale- Clive Hicks- Jenkins	33.33%	8
Total Respondents: 24		

Q7 Please mention here anything not covered above- any other influences of any kind which have been important to you such as people, events, artists, authors, works etc. and any opinions or thoughts you would like to share. Thank you.

Answered: 14 Skipped: 25

Q1 Pryd a sut daethoch chi yn ymwybodol o'r Fari Lwyd am y tro cyntaf?

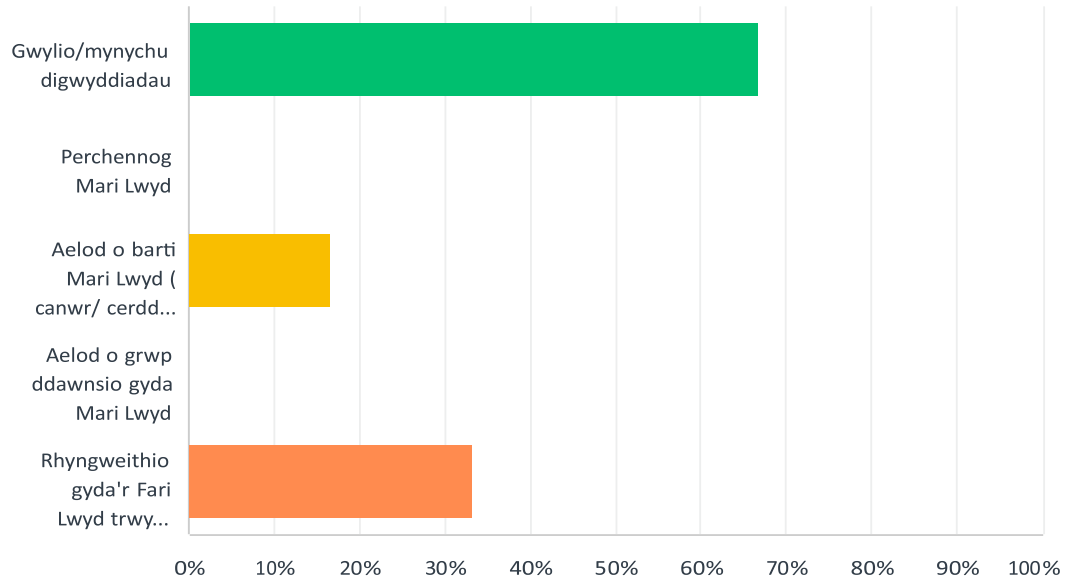
Answered: 6 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Traddodiad teuleuol neu lleol	16.67%	1
Cyfryngau cymdeithasol	0.00%	0
Yn yr ysgol	50.00%	3
Llenyddiaeth/cerddoriaeth/ffilm/ celf	50.00%	3
Teledu/papur newydd	0.00%	0
Chwarae ar lein/cosplay	0.00%	0
Dod ar draws ymweliad neu digwyddiad Mari Lwyd	0.00%	0
Total Respondents: 6		

Q2 Beth yw eich perthynas i'r Fari Lwyd?

Answered: 6 Skipped: 0

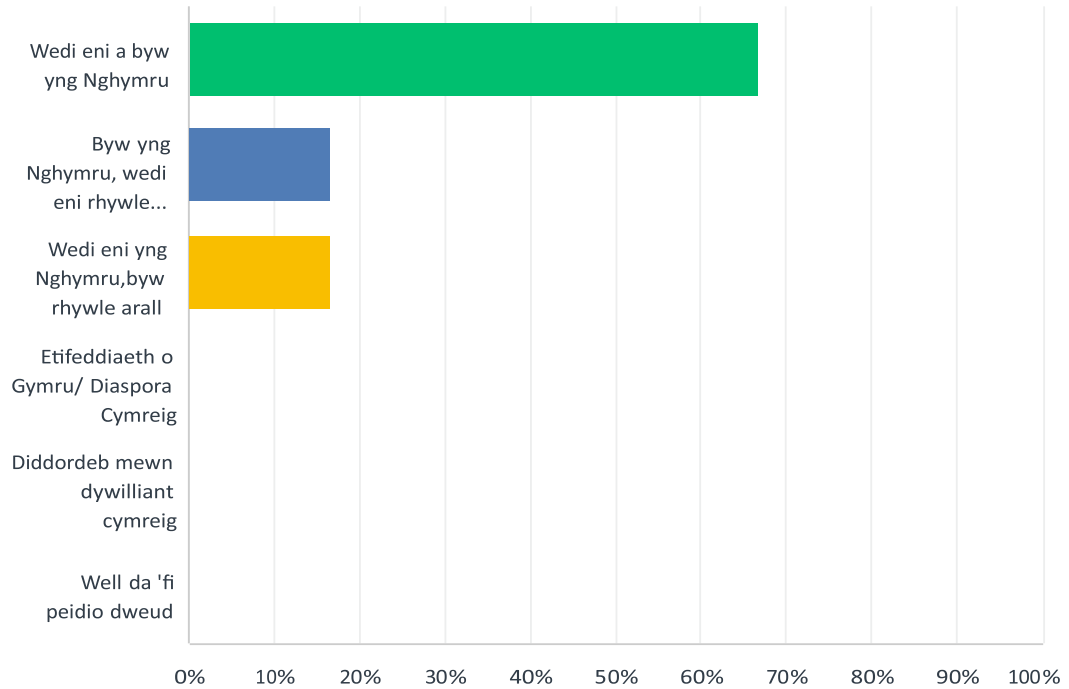


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Gwyllo/mynychu digwyddiadau	66.67%	4
Perchennog Mari Lwyd	0.00%	0
Aelod o barti Mari Lwyd (canwr/ cerddor/ Pwnsh/Siwan/Ostler ayyb)	16.67%	1
Aelod o grwp ddawnsio gyda Mari Lwyd	0.00%	0
Rhyngweithio gyda'r Fari Lwyd trwy llenyddiaeth, celf, cerddoriaeth neu rhywbeth arall	33.33%	2
Total Respondents: 6		

Q3 Beth yw cysylltiad chi i Gymru?

Answered: 6

Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Wedi eni a byw yng Nghymru	66.67%	4
Byw yng Nghymru, wedi eni rhywle arall	16.67%	1
Wedi eni yng Nghymru, byw rhywle arall	16.67%	1
Etifeddiaeth o Gymru/ Diaspora Cymreig	0.00%	0
Diddordeb mewn dywilliant cymreig	0.00%	0
Well da 'fi peidio dweud	0.00%	0
Total Respondents: 6		

Q4 Beth mae'r Fari Lwyd yn meddwl i chi?

Answered: 6

Skipped: 0



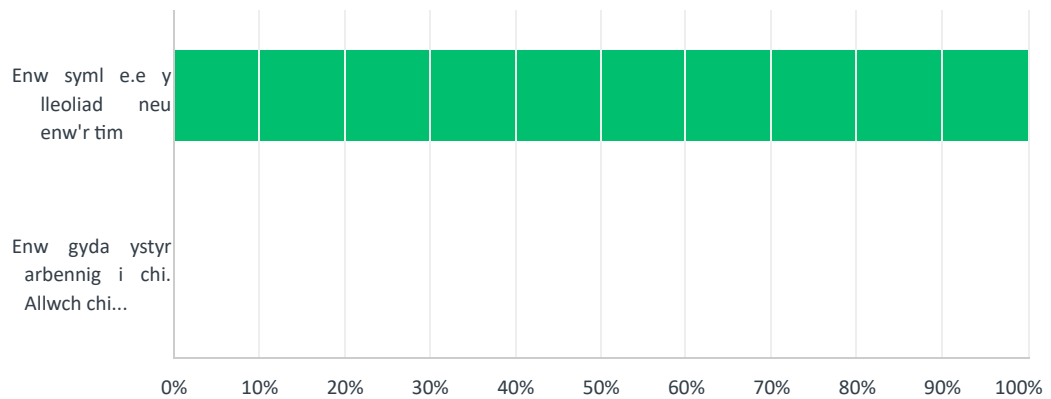
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Traddodiad canol Gaeaf - wassail, bach o sport, canu, bwyd a diod.	83.33%	5
Defod neu seremoni ysbrydolaidd	0.00%	0
Parhad traddodiad duwies cysylltiedig a Rhiannon neu Epona e.e.	16.67%	1
Total Respondents: 6		

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Traddodiad canol Gaeaf - wassail, bach o sport, canu, bwyd a diod.	83.33%	5
Defod neu seremoni ysbrydolaidd	0.00%	0
Parhad traddodiad duwies cysylltiedig a Rhiannon neu Epona e.e.	16.67%	1
Total Respondents: 6		

Q5 Oes enw gyda'ch Mari Lwyd chi?

Answered: 1

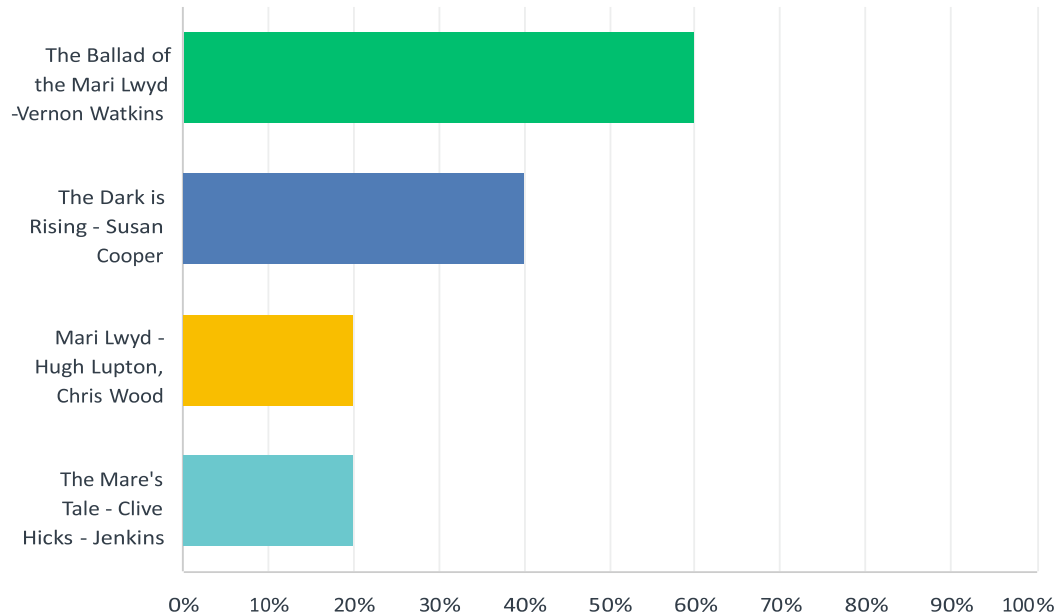
Skipped: 5



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Enw syml e.e y lleoliad neu enw'r tim	100.00%	1
Enw gyda ystyr arbennig i chi. Allwch chi esbonio'r arwyddhad os gwelwch yn dda.	0.00%	0
Total Respondents: 1		

Q6 Pa un (os o gwawl) o'r rhain hyn ydych chi'n adnabod? Allwch chi nodio'ch ymateb at gwaith nhw? Nodiwch hefyd dylanwad unrhyw unigolyn, awdur, cerddor, celfwr neu digwyddiad/profiad arall.

Answered: 5 Skipped: 1



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
The Ballad of the Mari Lwyd -Vernon Watkins	60.00%	3
The Dark is Rising - Susan Cooper	40.00%	2
Mari Lwyd - Hugh Lupton, Chris Wood	20.00%	1
The Mare's Tale - Clive Hicks - Jenkins	20.00%	1
Total Respondents: 5		

~ 60 ~

Q7 Unrhywbeth arall? Meddyliau,syniadau,barnau,cwestiynau sy'n
bwysig i chi?

Answered: 1

Skipped: 5

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