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Question 6

With the emphasis on the Welsh language, culture or identity, choose a theme or focus on creative practitioners relevant to your field of studies and critically analyse your choices.

In response to Question 6, I would like to write about the importance of Welsh Culture and innovation in the modern day designer and also how traditionally, furniture and other items play such an important part in our lives. My family were makers and designers of the butter churn which was such an important part of many farms and small holdings. In this essay, I will evaluate its relevance in Welsh Culture and their strive, like many others in uncertain times, to succeed. I will also write about Cardiff born Bethan Gray, an inspiring Welsh furniture designer, who like myself, had relatives that were inspiring makers and designers, working also with wood.

I chose this subject as not only am I Welsh but preserving and understanding my family's culture and history is really important to me personally and as a maker. The act of looking back at design is just as important as looking forward and we are always learning and admiring people's successes.

I wanted to use my family's butter churn business as a case study and an example of innovation, determination and success in Welsh Culture. Part of my research has been collated by a bulletin written by family members (Williams, 2005).



Image 1 Llewellyn butter churn

'G Llewellyn and Sons' started so simply in the 1780's (Coflein, 2020) and continued for five generations. According to family research, Thomas Llewellyn was 'good with his hands' and much to the disapproval of his parents, did not want to farm. When the farm's water butt was leaking, he repaired it so well that soon word spread and neighbours were asking for Thomas' skills. A small stable was rented in Haverfordwest and soon Thomas was making butter churns which were in demand and so the business began (Richards, 1992). Many years later Llewellyn churns were recognised throughout the UK as a leading manufacturer of butter churns and separators. In 1854 with the

addition of the railway from Haverfordwest to Swansea (National Library of Wales 2020).

The Llewelin's started exhibiting at various shows and gaining great honours. Prizes were not only confined to the UK but Switzerland, South Africa, and other parts of the world.

In 1878, the Llewelin's were chosen to make a special butter to be used at the table of the Prince of Wales, thus gaining the name Royal to the company name. By 1912, the firm was the largest employer of labour in Haverfordwest and a visiting trader is quoted as saying "scampered work is unknown on the premises" (Dyfed County Council 1992 p.68).

So in the early 1930's, because of mechanism, the making of the butter churn declined and the company turned their hands to wooden made, electrically driven machines as well as wooden flower tubs, poultry and green houses. The second world war changed production a lot and agricultural machinery was sold. Sadly this was not successful and in 1966 through increased overheads and price cutting, the Llewelin Churnworks ceased operating.

Many drastic changes happened during this time especially in the nineteenth century when Wales felt the impact of industrialisation. "It should not be regarded as a period of decline in the history of our popular culture, despite the disappearance of many traditional customs" (Owen, 1991 p. 98). There were many positive outcomes because of the industrial revolution including higher wages, better standard of living, learning of new skills and the ability to travel more easily. But when one gains another loses and there is always a long-term effect because of this change. An interesting article from NMK.World quotes that "heavy industries and cottage industries must be complimentary to each other, so that sustained development would be

possible” (Kaihatsu, 2020). It is an easy option to employ machines and robots instead of humans but when you look at the big picture, where does that leave man? We have already proved that computers are capable of faster information retrieval and machines can work constantly faster than humans so we surely will be left with many skilled and unskilled helpless humans. Welsh working culture has traditionally been based in these skilled and unskilled manual professions, so removing these from Welsh working life drastically changes the working culture in Wales. In response to this change, we must endeavour to get the correct work balance by maintaining skills and looking after humans.

There are many important features of the Welsh farmhouse kitchen or dairy, such as the Welsh dresser. Of equal importance was the butter churn; a vital piece of craftsmanship, which was proudly cleaned, polished and displayed, and more importantly used on a daily and weekly basis. Communities were drawn together to talk, share and care for the goods they had carefully produced. They exchanged and bartered and genuinely helped one another to survive. We have seen that happen again recently during the lock down with people collecting food and prescriptions for those who needed help and people stopping to talk in the street. How sad that this has become apparent because of a global pandemic.



Image 2 The Welsh Dresser

As mentioned above, the Welsh dresser in particular was a great talking point for guests and an item that one was proud of. Various plates, cups and saucers which more often than not had been given or collected as wedding gifts, were displayed on the shelves and hooks and always kept clean and in order. Very often these beautifully made items are seen, not only in Welsh homes but around the world in the most random of places. In fact, a Llewellyn Butter Churn was spotted in Disneyland, Florida, in recent years, being used as part of a set display.

Throughout their time the Llewellyn's showed great innovation, adaptability and forward thinking which are essential ingredients for past, present and future businesses. Not only did they adapt to change but they were constantly designing and improving. The 'end over end' which was designed for the top of the butter churn was patented by the Llewellyn's and is still in use today (National Library of Wales 2020).

CHURNS. Made of Old Beer and Spirit Casks.
CHURNS. Made of Disused Oil Barrels.
CHURNS. Made of Unseasoned & Unsuitable Materials.

From which it is impossible to obtain Butter of a Fine Flavour, and such Churns are frequently palmed off on the unwary farmer as genuine articles which is an insult to the intelligent Dairy Farmer of the present day.

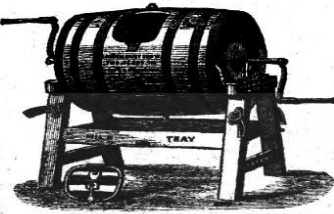
Throughout the whole of Wales and Western Part of England,
LLEWELLIN AND SON
Are the only Makers of the Genuine and Improved BARREL CHURNS, made of Specially Prepared and thoroughly New Seasoned Oak.
Llewellyn & Son Are the Only Makers and Original Improvers of their famous
PRIZE BARREL CHURNS.

Llewellyn & Son Are the Original Inventors of the End-Over-End NEW SYSTEM BARREL CHURN, and have obtained Her Majesty's Royal Letters "Patent" for Improvements in Churns, and the Public are cautioned against Worthless Imitations by some Unprincipled Makers who, having no design of their own, attempt to imitate, as far as they can and dare, the famous Prize Barrel Churns, of which Messrs Llewellyn & Son are the Sole Manufacturers, and which they are now sending in large numbers to all parts of the world, as well as being used and recommended by Hundreds of our well known Farmers of this and adjoining Counties, and by most of the leading Dairy Associations of the United Kingdom including:—

The Aylesbury Dairy Company, London; Messrs J. Welford and Son, London;
The Berkeley Vale Dairy Company; The Dairy Associations of Ireland;
The Jenkinstown Park Dairy Company; and The Dairy School of Cork;

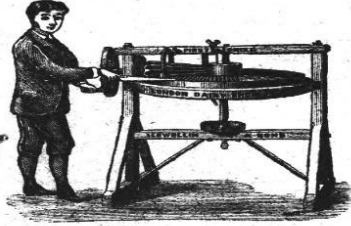
WHICH IS SUFFICIENT GUARANTEE OF THEIR EXCELLENCE.

Llewellyn & Son Would caution the Public to beware of Spurious and Worthless Imitations, and would respectfully invite all intending purchasers to an inspection of their great variety of



PRIZE CHURNS

AND



BUTTER WORKERS.

MILK PANS OF ALL VARIETIES.
Complete Dairy Sets to suit all classes of Farmers.
CURD MILLS AND CHEESE PRESSES
Of the very best Manufacture, at their
NEW SHOW ROOMS in BRIDGE STREET,
Or a Call at their Works at NORTH GATE, where hundreds of Churns, &c., may be seen in course of preparation, and which they are now selling at such Low Prices as will defy any competition in the World.
Further particulars may be obtained of **Messrs LLEWELLIN & SON,**
Churn Works, Haverfordwest.

Image 3 Newspaper article from 1883

This story amongst others shows the incredible craftsmanship of the Welsh people who, most of the time, went unnoticed with their talent. Their resilience, forward thinking and attention to detail in their craftsmanship allowed the business to progress and be a success. Many beautiful pieces of Welsh furniture, as well as the Llewellyn butter churn are still circulating and

being passed down to another generation. In fact, "isolated churches still contain a wealth of carpentry from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the carved motifs often showing clear Celtic antecedents" (Bebb, 1998 p.3). This is great testimony to the craftsmen who cleverly adapted their skills in using various types of local wood.

Traditional Welsh crafts and furniture including the butter churn, the Welsh dresser and the love spoon were so beautifully and thoughtfully made and it makes one realise that the introduction of the industrial revolution changed so many of these workshop based crafts and skills. "The creation of machinery for large scale production gradually threatened the standing of the most skilled laborers and increased the number of semi or unskilled workers" (Sennett, p.106)

As discussed above, the Industrial revolution had many positives including new opportunities, new skills, amazing changes and wealth, but looking back now it is easy to feel maybe slightly nostalgic whilst thinking about the skills that have been lost and forgotten from our former Craftsmen (Schaefer, 1958). Tim Bowen Antiques echoes this by suggesting " ...Welsh vernacular furniture will outlive the minimalist style but how clever are those who embrace both, recognising the skill in design of the 200 year old linen press or coffer which sits happily in a contemporary room of a traditional Welsh house"(2006). This suggests that the 'flat pack generation' are changing and choosing quality products which have a story and design thought included. Industrialisation was partly to blame for these flat packed designs, which over the years have seemed so convenient, easy to transport and fairly fool proof to build. But being made of cheaper material, being put together incorrectly and just the fact that we live in a throw away society means they are moved on, usually

taken to the tip and replaced with something of equal quality. We have ended up with quite soulless, similar looking houses with no character. "Our Grandparents homes had soul, we don't have soul, we have blue prints for style and it feels empty" (Brown, 2012). The social media impact has enhanced this by people showing off their homes on-line and the ideas are then copied and before you know it everyone has a grey painted living room. Yet despite this, "while certain aspects of traditional decorating may have changed since the 1980s, one thing has remained the same: Charm and elegance never go out of style" (Bowles, 2019).

It could be argued that nostalgia that has caused a change in design recently as contemporary design has held its own for so long, but this is less likely for the younger generation. It is true that our taste for good design never falters and good quality design will always have a place in the modern home.

For years, the Welsh craftsmen and women have been so resilient and adaptable. Wales still has vast areas of remote, mountainous, isolated land and in some ways this may have been the reason why these traditions kept going through each generation. There was limited movement and communication before the railways were introduced and this was possibly another reason why the Welsh language and identity survived and is still so strong and important in our present day. Through their isolation and lack of travel they did not have the vast input of change and so the skills continued and were passed on to the younger generation. They used what was around them whether it was slate, wood, stone or any available material to produce, sell and survive. This is not to say that Wales was behind in any way as far as design and skill was concerned. In Richard Bebb's book (2007) he goes to great efforts to argue that "certain people in Wales are familiar with European

design and culture trends... and not a place of quiet backwardness and peasant quaintness” (p.117). On the contrary, Wales is quite the opposite with its diverse culture Wales has embraced many changes and has a wonderful forward thinking, multi-cultural community that continues to build and from original routes (bbc.co.uk). Many young Welsh designers that they are continuing to merge old traditions in their work, proving that the deep rooted culture is so important to our future.

Like the Llewellyn churns, many long lasting businesses started from such humble beginnings and through knowledge and skill have been able to continue to make and supply world wide. An example of this is Melin Tregwynt who produce timeless blankets and textiles at their Mill in Pembrokeshire. They have continued for over a hundred years and each generation has “reinvented the tradition to suit its market” (Business Wales). One of their blankets was even spotted in *Doctor Who’s* Tardis.

The whole idea of ‘suited the market’ is so important in today’s economy. It is essential to change with time and fashion but keeping your expert knowledge and experience is also the key to success. In some ways our current Covid situation has highlighted the fact that, with time and isolation, we become more creative. Recent social media news shows many people turning their hands to sewing, DIY and cooking because of more time and also to relieve any anxieties or worries. An example is Liberty in London, reporting a rise of 380% on their sewing accessories (Fairley, 2020).

The Welsh Government (2020) have in fact put funds aside to enable people to “work closer to home, considering accessibility and safety whilst maintaining a sense of community and connection”. This surely will promote better living standards and well being with so many people. Before the pandemic, many of

our society were in the 'hamster wheel' situation without any time to connect with their communities or surroundings and it has become apparent that we all, at times, need to stop, think and reevaluate our lives in order to progress.

There have been many Welsh designers whose work shows aspects of Welsh culture. One admirable designer is Cardiff based Bethan Gray (McCrum, 2013). Her Grandfather was a forester and her Great Grandmother was a cabinet-maker and she was always encouraged as a child to be creative. Gray uses very natural products in her designs such as leather, marble and wood and creates the most beautiful pieces of contemporary furniture. Gray, like so many designers and makers, is inspired by her upbringing and roots. It is something that is embedded in us and what better way to inspire and express yourself than to go back to the beginning where your vivid memories and homely thoughts and inspiration remain. Gray is a great example of a modern day designer. She has explored the world, worked with some of the best, she has chosen what materials work for her and gained expert knowledge.



Image 4 Bethan Gray

“Design is an elusive notion. What it means and how it appears has changed over time. Before the term was coined, many people exhibited the traits, attitudes and skills that are associated to a ‘designer’. They were curious minds, crafts people, problem solvers, collaborators, facilitators of ideas”... (Lu Vinh, 2018).

To sum up, as a designer or maker I agree it is a difficult role to define but one thing that is a common trait in designers is that they are problem solvers and very adaptable and open to change. Marketing specialist, Milo Goodman writes that “rather than letting challenging circumstances control you, a flexible world view is fundamental for designers” (2020). This makes me even

more aware of the difficulties and problems our forebearers had many years ago when materials were not so readily available, and their resources were so limited. They found solutions and pushed through any barriers that stood in their way to carve a fantastic path and depth of knowledge for us to follow.

In design, you have to adapt and change with life and its needs. You may enjoy making a particular piece but if you are the only one who enjoys it, it is time to change and ask why and be open to different methods and ideas.

Welsh Culture for the modern day and historic designer seems very deep routed. Wales has created some deeply passionate, skilful and profoundly inspiring makers over the years and it seems it is embedded in us to be passionate about what we produce. "The word culture derives from a French term, which in turn derives from the Latin 'colere' which means to tend to the earth and grow" (Abdelrasheed, 2020). What lovely words to not only sum up Wales and its culture but make us realise that Wales, although small in size, has grown beyond recognition, is full of many multi-talented people and embraces change in every area.

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