

What happened at Capel Celyn? How has the creation of the Tryweryn reservoir and the response to this shaped Welsh history?



Photo by Hefin Owen from Wales - Cofiwch_Remembering, CC BY-SA 2.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=99726369>

Without doubt, the flooding of Cwm Tryweryn, in Merionethshire in 1965 with the associated loss of the village of Capel Celyn was a landmark event in modern Welsh history. To fully understand what happened at Capel Celyn, it is necessary to start at a time when Liverpool City Corporation was looking for a new source of clean drinking water for their growing city. The essay will then describe how a ten-year battle raged, that was both political and one of direct action, to save the valley, the village and the Welsh speaking community. This essay will further look at the history of events surrounding the flooding of Cwm Tryweryn, the impact that it had on Welsh politics and Welsh nationalism and the changes that came about as a result.

Capel Celyn was an unremarkable, rural Welsh village whose only real claim to fame was that it was that it was a totally Welsh-speaking village, one of very few remaining in the area.¹ The creation of the reservoir meant that 12 houses and farms were drowned, along with the school, the Post Office, the chapel and its cemetery, which left 48 people of the 67 who lived in the valley without a home.² The memories of the children who attended the school at the time just prior to its destruction describe a small village where everyone spoke Welsh and everyone knew everyone, a village in which you felt safe. They describe a small close-knit community whilst being without luxuries, provided enough for their daily needs to give them a secure and happy childhood.³ In contrast, life in the city of Liverpool at the same time was strikingly different. The city had long been battling with overcrowded slum dwellings, most of which were concentrated in the center of the city.⁴ The slum clearance which had been underway before World War II was put on hold during the hostilities and did not resume until 1950.⁵ Construction of new homes would mean that the city's need for clean water would increase.⁶ This is what led Liverpool setting its sights on the sparsely populated Cwm Tryweryn as a possible solution to its growing water needs. The geography of the valley, the close proximity to Liverpool plus a local source of material suitable for creating the dam, made this a prime location.⁷

There appears to be evidence from as far back as 1938 when Liverpool was actively engaged in slum clearance, to show that they had already considered Cwm Tryweryn as a possible site for a new reservoir.⁸ With the slum clearance halted due to World War II, this plan was also halted but not forgotten. By 1953 the issue of insufficient water supply for Liverpool once again became a priority topic for the Corporation.⁹ In March 1953 a series of surveys were carried out at Cwm Tryweryn on behalf of the Corporation, the people of the village not being told the true reason for the surveys.¹⁰ According to Martha Roberts, who taught at Ysgol Capel Celyn, the first that the villagers knew about the plan to flood the village was an article in the *Liverpool Daily Post* on December 22, 1955.¹¹ This idea was later countered by

¹ Dr. Wyn Thomas, *Tryweryn A New Dawn?* (Talybont: Y Lolfa Cyf, 2023), p50.

² Thomas Einion, *Capel Celyn, Ten Years of Destruction: 1955–1965* (Cyhoeddiadau Barddas and Gwynedd Council, 2007)

³ Episode 1: *Drowned* (Podcast) (London: BBC Sounds, 2023). < <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/brand/p0f245q6> > [7 March 2025]

⁴ Dr. Wyn Thomas, *Tryweryn A New Dawn?*, p22.

⁵ Ibid, p.26.

⁶ Episode 1: *Drowned* (Podcast) (London: BBC Sounds, 2023). < <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/brand/p0f245q6> > [7 March 2025]

⁷ Dr. Wyn Thomas, *Tryweryn A New Dawn?*, p33.

⁸ Ibid, p.17.

⁹ Ibid, p.32.

¹⁰ Ibid, p.33.

¹¹ Ibid, p.24.

Liverpool Corporation who stated that they had informed the relevant local councils and the residents themselves.¹² The announcement provoked a strong reaction with Paid Cymru retorting that the outcry showed how much Liverpool Corporation underestimated the strength of feeling in Wales.¹³ The issue was hugely publicised, debated and denounced throughout Wales in newspapers, television and radio. In 1956 the villagers twice took their protest to Liverpool, marching through the streets with placards asking for their homes to be spared.¹⁴ They received a poor reception from the people of Liverpool with reports of spitting, name calling and similar being directed at the protesters.¹⁵



Pic. 1 Eugain Prysor Jones' Protest in Liverpool (Credit Daily Herald)

There is a poignant irony to the above photograph, taken during the villager's protest in Liverpool in 1956. This child is carrying a placard written in English when undoubtedly she would have spoken Welsh for almost all of her young life.

Despite the campaigns, demonstrations and a heartfelt address from Gwynfor Evans, the then leader of Plaid Cymru, Liverpool Corporation decided to go ahead with the scheme.¹⁶

¹² Ibid, p.34.

¹³ Dr. Wyn Thomas, *Hands off Wales Nationhood and Militancy* (Talybont: Y Lolfa Cyf, 2022), p1.

¹⁴ Dr. Wyn Thomas, *Tryweryn A New Dawn?*, p76.

¹⁵ Ibid, p.83.

¹⁶ Ibid, p.87.

In 1957 Liverpool Corporation brought a Private Members Bill before Parliament to dam the valley and create a reservoir in Cwm Tryweryn.¹⁷ Although a completely legal route, this approach meant that the Corporation could avoid obtaining planning consent from local Welsh authorities and thereby eliminating the need for a planning inquiry which would have shown the strength of objections to the plan. This happened at a time when Wales was politically very vulnerable, the Welsh Office did not yet exist (it was created in 1965¹⁸), and there was no devolution (this happened in 1999).¹⁹ As Dr Wyn Thomas says in his book, *Tryweryn A New Dawn?*:

As the Tryweryn Bill became law, it was clear to those that opposed it that the voice of Wales carried no political, legal or persuasive weight.²⁰

It was obvious that Liverpool Corporation failed to see Wales as a separate nation and had long since viewed it to be part of England with resources that could be taken as they wished.²¹ This may have been partly because of a precedent that had set in the previous century when the first reservoir in Wales, Lake Vyrnwy, was created to supply the City of Liverpool as a result of The Liverpool Corporation Act of 1880.²² Just as was to happen at Tryweryn, an entire community (much larger than Capel Celyn) was sacrificed to meet Liverpool's needs. (In fact, the precedent of Lake Vyrnwy was used by the Earl of Woolton, who presented the Tryweryn Bill, during its second reading.)²³ Just two years later in 1882, Birmingham Corporation submitted a Bill to Parliament that resulted in the construction of a reservoir at Cwm Elan near Rhyader, Powys that again displaced many families so that the city of Birmingham could be supplied with water.²⁴ The 20th century battle with Liverpool Corporation came at a time when there was a growing sense of Welsh national awareness and of an awakening by the people of Wales, from all walks of life to the fact that their language and their culture was under threat. Three decades before the fight for Tryweryn, Saunders Lewis who was a lecturer in the Department of Welsh at University College Swansea, founded Plaid Genedlaethol Cymru, the National Party of Wales, in 1925.²⁵ In

¹⁷ Ibid, p.145.

¹⁸ The National Archive <<https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C26>> [accessed 13 March 2025]

¹⁹ Senedd Cymraeg <<https://senedd.wales/how-we-work/history-of-devolution/>> [accessed 14 March 2025]

²⁰ Dr. Wyn Thomas, *Tryweryn A New Dawn?*, p219.

²¹ Sir Victor Raikes, a Liverpool Conservative MP, stated:

...I say it with all the emphasis at my command, is that if it is decided that it is in the interests of a large number of people the rights of a small number of people are affected, then, subject to proper safeguards for the minority, the right of the majority must prevail.

Oxford Academic <<https://academic.oup.com/pa/article-abstract/60/4/625/1581149?redirectedFrom=fulltext&login=false>> [accessed 13 March 2025]

²² Dr. Wyn Thomas, *Tryweryn A New Dawn?*, p127.

²³ Oxford Academic <<https://academic.oup.com/pa/article-abstract/60/4/625/1581149?redirectedFrom=fulltext&login=false>> [accessed 13 March 2025]

²⁴ Dr. Wyn Thomas, *Tryweryn A New Dawn?*, p129.

²⁵ Dictionary of Welsh Biography of Saunders Lewis <<https://biography.wales/article/s10-LEWI-SAU-1893>> [accessed 13 March 2025]

1935 Saunders led a political campaign to stop the RAF from building a training camp on the Llŷn peninsular, which he saw as English oppression over the Welsh and which others saw as the peaceful Welsh countryside being subjected to English warmongering and violence.²⁶ Similar plans in Northumberland and Dorset were successfully objected to by naturalist and historians but Baldwin, the then Prime Minister, refused to hear a deputation that represented over half a million Welsh people.²⁷ No doubt frustrated by the outcome of the political campaign Saunders, along with two fellow members of the National Party, David John Williams²⁸ and Lewis Edward Valentine²⁹ took the unprecedented step of engaging in direct action and on 8 September 1936 the three men set fire to workers' huts on the proposed 'Bombing School' development site³⁰ Thus the 'fire in Llŷn' or 'Penyberth' (the ancient and culturally significant house demolished by the RAF as part of the project) took its place in the history of Welsh nationalism, later to be joined by the battle for Tryweryn.³¹ Lewis, Williams and Valentine turned themselves into the Pwllheli police station and following a second hearing at the Old Bailey (the jury at the first hearing in Caernarfon failed to reach a verdict) all three were sentenced to nine months in Wormwood Scrubs Prison. Upon their release in 1937, a large crowd of approximately 12,000 people greeted them in Caernarfon as returning heroes.³² Little did these men know that their example of direct action when political campaigning failed would be replicated some twenty years later during the battle for Tryweryn.

Saunders Lewis also gained further prominence in February 1962, at a time when the dam at Tryweryn was being constructed and when the world was changing. People in Wales were starting to question what they saw as English colonialism and oppression, seeing parallels with the civil rights movements in South Africa and southern United States and how they were being treated and governed.³³ Lewis gave his famous radio lecture on the *Tynged yr Iaith* ('The Fate of the Language') in which he predicted the death of the Welsh Language if the current situation remained unchanged and no action was taken. Lewis had intended to motivate or shame Plaid Cymru into direct action but what it did achieve was the creation of

²⁶ Peoples Collection Wales <<https://www.peoplescollection.wales/story/378207>> [accessed 13 March 2025]

²⁷ Peoples Collection Wales <<https://www.peoplescollection.wales/story/378207>> [accessed 13 March 2025]

²⁸ Dictionary of Welsh Biography of David John William <<https://biography.wales/article/s2-WILL-JOH-1885#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0&manifest=https%3A%2F%2Fdamsssl.llgc.org.uk%2Fiiif%2F2.0%2F1455275%2Fmanifest.json&xywh=62%2C-714%2C5550%2C4566>> [accessed 13 March 2025]

²⁹ Dictionary of Welsh Biography of Lewis Edward Valentine <<https://biography.wales/article/s11-VALE-EDW-1893>> [accessed 13 March 2025]

³⁰ Dictionary of Welsh Biography of Saunders Lewis <<https://biography.wales/article/s10-LEWI-SAU-1893>> [accessed 13 March 2025]

³¹ Peoples Collection Wales <<https://www.peoplescollection.wales/story/378207>> [accessed 13 March 2025]

³² Peoples Collection Wales <<https://www.peoplescollection.wales/story/378207>> [accessed 13 March 2025]

³³ Dictionary of Welsh Biography of Saunders Lewis <<https://biography.wales/article/s10-LEWI-SAU-1893>> [accessed 13 March 2025]

Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg (Welsh Language Society) and enshrine him as a symbol of Welsh revolution.³⁴

The 1936 direct action by Saunders Lewis et al., Liverpool Corporation's 1957 Private Members Bill to allow them to dam Cwm Tryweryn and Saunders Lewis address in 1962 are all linked and play a role in the development and history of Welsh Nationalism. When it became obvious that peaceful protest and campaigning at Tryweryn would not change the outcome, just as happened at Penyberth in 1936, some individuals decided it was time for direct action. There was much condemnation of Plaid Cymru at the time, especially of its leader Gwynfor Evans who many believed could have done more, with Saunders Lewis himself calling for the party to adopt a policy of 'direct action'.³⁵ It was into this vacuum that a more radical generation of nationalist began to appear. The first episode of direct action at Tryweryn took place in September 1962 when two young men, David Barnard Walters and David Glyn Pritchard, were found to have drained thousands of gallons of oil from an electrical transformer at the Tryweryn site to disrupt the site's electricity supply.³⁶ The following month, in Bala Shire Hall Assizes, both men were let off with a fine but what is noteworthy, and showed how the perceived cohort of Welsh nationalist was changing, is that neither man was Welsh speaking, and both came from industrial south-east Wales.³⁷ This was followed in December 1962 by an attempted arson attack at the construction site that caused minimal damage, by two students who have always remained anonymous.³⁸ The following year, Mudiad Amddiffyn Cymru (MAC) (The Movement for the Defense of Wales) was formed and for only the second time in the history of Welsh nationalism, direct action involved the use of explosives.³⁹ On February 8, 1963, as part of a well-researched plan, three MAC members, Emyr Llewelyn Jones, Owain Williams and John Albert Jones placed a timed explosive device underneath an oil tank by a large transformer at the Tryweryn construction site. The device was timed to explode six and a half hours later, which it did leaving a badly damaged transformer.^{40 41} The first to be arrested was Emyr Llewelyn Jones who received a one-year custodial sentence.⁴² Whilst avoiding capture Williams and Jones continued with the MAC offensive and in March 1963 they damaged an electricity pylon carrying power to the Tryweryn site.⁴³ Jones was later to receive three years' probation

³⁴ Dictionary of Welsh Biography of Saunders Lewis <<https://biography.wales/article/s10-LEWI-SAU-1893>> [accessed 13 March 2025]

³⁵ Dr. Wyn Thomas, *Hands off Wales Nationhood and Militancy* (Talybont: Y Lolfa Cyf, 2022), p14.

³⁶ Ibid, p.33.

³⁷ Ibid, p.34.

³⁸ Ibid, p.42-43.

³⁹ Ibid, p.50.

⁴⁰ Owain Williams, *Tryweryn A Nation Awakes*, p79.

⁴¹ Owain Williams, *Tryweryn A Nation Awakes*, p82.

⁴² Dr. Wyn Thomas, *Hands off Wales Nationhood and Militancy*, p67.

⁴³ Ibid, p.68.

and Williams a one-year custodial sentence (the same as Jones had received previously).⁴⁴ When the reservoir opened on Thursday, 21 October 1965 it was clear that Liverpool Corporation remained ignorant of, or didn't want to admit that they had delivered a huge injustice upon the people of Wales. They planned a formal opening ceremony at the dam with David Cowley, the Lord Mayor of Liverpool, Frank H. Cain, the chairman of Liverpool Corporation and John Stilgoe, Liverpool's water engineer along with many other civic dignitaries.⁴⁵ From the outset the demonstrators, who numbered in the region of 500, set about trying to stop or damage the cars of the arriving dignitaries, other demonstrators left the group and made their way to the platform from which the opening speeches were to be made but the heckling and stone throwing and the fact that the microphone cable was cut meant that the planned 45 minute opening ceremony was cut short to just three minutes.⁴⁶ Steve Binns, Liverpool City Council Historian later summed it up very well when he said:

It was a bit crass of us (Liverpool City Council) to do that wasn't it? I mean, we should probably have not. In the annals of PR disasters it would stand as a pretty insensitive thing to do.⁴⁷

In the words of Auther Morris Jenkins who had farmed in Cwm Tryweryn and attended the opening ceremony:

And I think that it (the protests) helped to stop it from happening again. Because the Welsh people from that point became strong. They came together; they closed ranks. And they were ready to fight anything then.⁴⁸

Jenkin's view lives on in the slogan 'Cofiwch Dryweryn' which first appeared on the wall of a derelict cottage near Llanrhystud, Ceredigion and was the work of author Meic Stephens.⁴⁹ Stephens painted it in the early 1960s in response to the plan to flood Cwm Tryweryn. In addition to serving as a memorial to the drowned village of Capel Celyn, these two simple words took on additional meaning for Welsh Nationalism and were copied in many sites around Wales. In the years and decades that followed the drowning of Cwm Tryweryn the cause of Welsh nationalism, the preservation of the Welsh Language and culture continued

⁴⁴ Ibid, p.80

⁴⁵ Dr. Wyn Thomas, *Tryweryn A New Dawn?*, p303.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p.301-311.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p308.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p.309.

⁴⁹ Howell, David. (2021). *Cofiwch Dryweryn: The Frontiers of Contemporary Welsh Nationalism, as seen through the Creation of Contested Heritage Murals*. 10.2307/j.ctv1zckxmq.12.

<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/354168945_Cofiwch_Dryweryn_The_Frontiers_of_Contemporary_Welsh_Nationalism_as_seen_through_the_Creation_of_Contested_Heritage_Murals/citation/download> [access 13 March 2025]

both as a political fight and with various campaigns of ‘direct action’. The investiture of Prince Charles as Prince of Wales in 1969 caused a huge amount of protest. There were those in Wales that strongly believed that no English prince should hold that title.⁵⁰ However, strength of feeling was so strong in some quarters that it triggered a series of bombing attacks prior to, and on the day of the actual investiture. During these bombings, two young men from MAC were killed when an explosive device they were carrying detonated. Five days after the investiture, 10-year-old schoolboy Ian Cox stepped on an unexploded device at Caernarvon castle that had been planted as part of the bombing campaign and received life changing injuries.⁵¹ Just one month after the investiture, in August 1969, Prince Charles attended the Welsh National Eisteddfod where he won the chair with his composition ‘Fy Ngwlad’. It was a poem charged with emotion that spoke directly to Llywelyn the last true Prince of Wales.⁵²

In the late 1960s and into the 1970s, the Welsh language and way of life was still under threat. This time not by a large corporation but by a large influx of ‘outsiders’. People, mostly from England, came to live in Wales for what they saw was a better way of life, made even more attractive by the low cost of properties in Wales.⁵³ For similar reasons, Wales also started to attract many English second homeowners. At the end of 1979 this resulted in a prolonged campaign of arson attacks against English second home that were carried out by Meibion Glyndŵr (Sons of Glyndŵr), a group of Welsh nationalists.⁵⁴ The arson campaign lasted between 12 – 14 years during which 228 properties were attacked. Despite the size and duration of the campaign, no arrests were made. So common place had the attacks become that they phrase ‘Come home to a real fire, buy a cottage in Wales’ was used in a mainstream English comedy television program in 1980.⁵⁵ Still on the theme of television programs, both the Labour and Conservative parties had promised a full-time Wales language channel if they gained power in the 1979 General Election. After winning, the Conservatives reneged on their election promise (citing high costs) causing the former Plaid Cymru MP for Carmarthen, Gwynfor Evans, to threaten to go on hunger strike until death if the Tories did not honour their election promise.⁵⁶ The threat was not carried out as the Tories backed down, leading to the

⁵⁰ Biography of Wales of LLYWELYN ap GRUFFYDD <<https://biography.wales/article/s-LLYW-APG-1200>> [access 17 March 2025]

⁵¹ Ian Cox <<https://www.topfoto.co.uk/asset/1506536/>> [accessed 13 March 2025]

⁵² Biography of Wales of LLYWELYN ap GRUFFYDD <<https://biography.wales/article/s-LLYW-APG-1200>> [access 17 March 2025]

⁵³ Richard King, *Brittle with Relics* (Croydon: Faber & Faber, 2022), p152.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p.209.

⁵⁵ Facebook <<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=966889406716055>> [accessed 13 March 2025]

⁵⁶ Richard King, *Brittle with Relics*, p198.

creation of S4C in November 1982 which was seen by its supporters as vital to the goal of saving Welsh as a living language.⁵⁷

It is impossible to say definitively to what extent the flooding of Cwm Tryweryn changed the course of modern Welsh history, but it does appear to have marked the renaissance of Welsh nationalism in a country that was ready for change. Since the dam was built there have been significant changes in Welsh politics and the creation of new laws designed to give the country a greater say in its own running and to better protect the future of the Welsh language.⁵⁸ What this means for the future of Wales only time will tell, but it can safely be argued that that without the flooding of Cwm Tryweryn and the loss of Capel Celyn, Wales and its language might have found itself in a far worse situation than it does today. In October 2005, Liverpool City Council published a statement in which it apologized for any 'insensitivity shown by its predecessor council....'.⁵⁹ That statement did not apologize for flooding Cwm Tryweryn.....

⁵⁷ S4C Welsh Affairs Committee Contents <<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmwelaf/614/61404.htm>> [accessed 17 March 2025]

⁵⁸

- 1967, 27 July, Parts of the Wales and Berwick Act 1746 that relate to the "dominion of Wales" are repealed by the Welsh Language Act 1967, allowing free use of the Welsh language in some political and legal proceedings
- 1993, 21 October, Welsh Language Act 1993 (c. 38) (Welsh: Deddf Yr Iaith Gymraeg 1993) is an Act of the Parliament of the United Kingdom, which put the Welsh language on an equal footing with the English language in Wales
- 1997, 18 September, The second Welsh devolution referendum results in a small majority in favour of forming a devolved assembly for Wales
- 1998, 31 July, The Government of Wales Act receives royal assent and becomes law, allowing a National Assembly for Wales to be established following elections to be held in May 1999
- 1999 27 May, Queen Elizabeth II and Charles, Prince of Wales, officially open the Welsh National Assembly at Crickhowell House in Cardiff Bay, a symbolic transfer of legislative powers from Westminster to Wales
- 2006, 1 March, The new National Assembly building opens in Cardiff Bay; designed by Richard Rogers and costing £67m, it is known as the Senedd (the Welsh word for "parliament").[294]
- 2006 25 July, Government of Wales Act 2006 comes into effect, conferring additional law-making powers on the National Assembly for Wales.[335]
- 2012 12 November, The National Assembly for Wales (Official Languages) Act 2012 receives royal assent; the first bill to be passed under the assembly's new legislative powers, it gives the Welsh and English languages equal status in the assembly
- 2020 6 May, The National Assembly for Wales becomes "Senedd Cymru – Welsh Parliament" and its members become "Members of the Senedd" (MS) (Aelodau o'r Senedd (AS) in Welsh

⁵⁹ Dr. Wyn Thomas, *Tryweryn A New Dawn?*, p366.

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