

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

During the summer of 1955, a conflict began, which would last ten years. Although it could be argued that this conflict lasted significantly longer or even still happening 68 years later. Capel Celyn is a village situated in the Tryweryn Valley; during the summer of 1955, its residents first heard of the plans to drown the village by Liverpool's Water Committee.

Initially, the plans were to flood the village of Dolanog, which provoked an outcry as it was the birthplace of Ann Griffiths, a famous Welsh poet and methodist hymn author, and the location of her shrine. Along with Mary Jones, Ann became a national icon and was a notable figure for Welsh non-conformists.¹ The vicar of Dolanog, Reverend G. F. Hughes, argued that drowning the quaint and scenic valley of forests and farmland would not solely be a local misfortune but a national tragedy as the village had strong connections to Ann Griffiths. He explained that *'Every year many thousands of people came to the village on pilgrimages to her memory.'*² This view was also supported by Gwynfor Evans, the president of Plaid Cymru, who acknowledged that Ann Griffiths was *'credited with having done the most to enrich the Christian tradition of Wales.'*³

In the weeks following the announcement, a sense of outrage escalated. A letter from the Presbyterian Church of Wales advised the Liverpool Corporation that if Liverpool continued with its plan to flood Dolanog, it would be an action of sacrilege and exceedingly damaging to Wales and the Welsh people as the location was a national shrine.⁴ Liverpool responded to the outcry by changing their plans from flooding Dolanog to Capel Celyn.

¹ E. Wyn James, *Bala and the Bible: Thomas Charles, Anne Griffiths and Mary Jones* (2005) <<https://www.anmgriffiths.cardiff.ac.uk/bible.html>> [accessed on 20th January 2024]

² Wyn Thomas, *Tryweryn: A New Dawn*, (Wales: Y Lolfa, 2023), p.36.

³ Gwynfor Evans, *Welsh Nation Builders*, (Wales: Gomer, 1988), p.204

⁴ Liverpool Record Office, *Liverpool Corporation Water Committee Minutes*, 17th September 1955, p.586.

Liverpool's decision to scout for a water supply in rural Wales was not a new idea. The Tryweryn venture was the latest instalment of English dominance, where Welsh water was taken to supply English cities, which started in the 1700s. This can be seen in many cases, for example, the 1880s construction of Llyn Efyrynwy and the 1906 construction of Elan Valley reservoirs to provide water to the bustling cities of Birmingham and Liverpool.⁵

In 1923, the Warrington Corporation proposed drowning the Ceiriog Valley, destroying three villages: Tregeiriog, Llanarmon Dyffryn Ceiriog and Pentre. This was made up of 13,600 acres and would produce two reservoirs. Approximately 400 people would require relocation, and 82 houses, five chapels, six shops, two schools, and two cemeteries would be flooded. Fortunately for the residents of these villages, former Welsh Prime Minister David Lloyd George opposed the flooding and asserted that all the Welsh MPs would vote against the proposal; this, along with the mustering of local opposition, ultimately defeated the scheme.⁶

In March 1955, four men were sent to Tryweryn by the Liverpool Corporation to scope out the valley for eligibility as a viable site without informing the local residents, and undisclosed surveys were conducted. On the 22nd of December, the Liverpool Daily Post displayed the headline 'Big new dam near Bala planned'; the article outlined a plan to increase Liverpool's water stock by raising a Parliamentary Bill to obtain legal formal authority to construct a dam and flood the Tryweryn valley. To determine the drowning of the Tryweryn Valley, it was noted that in a report authorised by Liverpool Corporation in the last municipal year, Liverpool consumed 62,836,000,000 gallons of water every day.⁷

On the 23rd of March 1956, the Capel Celyn Defence Committee was established in response to the proposal. At the forefront were many of Wales' leading and distinguished characters; this included Megan Lloyd George, Thomas William Jones, Labour MP and Gwynfor Evans, Plaid Cymru president. Over time, the opposition movement grew rapidly; the

⁵ Hywel M. Griffiths, 'Water Under the Bridge? Nature, Memory and Hydropolitics', *Cultural Geographies*, 21.3 (2014), 449-474

⁶ Owen G. Roberts, 'Developing the untapped wealth of Britain's 'Celtic Fringe': Water engineering and the Welsh landscape, 1870 – 1960', *Landscape Research*, 31.2 (2006), 121-133

⁷ The Manchester Guardian, 'Liverpool Then Meeting votes for Tryweryn plan' 18th December 1956.

Capel Celyn Defence Committee wrote and dispatched numerous letters to churches, trade unions, societies, organisations and councils to gather support.⁸ The Welsh resistance quickly evolved into a national issue. The defence committee garnered 1,055 public bodies to convey their opposition to the flooding of Tryweryn Valley; this included 125 public authorities.⁹ Only 15 Welsh authorities refused to report their objection to the scheme to Liverpool. Additionally, support was garnered from the Western Mail and all Welsh language publications.¹⁰

On September 29th, four thousand people attended a rally using the banner 'Hands Off Tryweryn' Plaid Cymru conducted a procession through the streets of Bala and speeches were heard calling for opposition against the Liverpool Corporation. The three hour rally concluded with a speech calling on the corporation to rescind its proposal. Gwilym Lloyd-George, the former Home Secretary and Minister of Wales, received hundreds of letters of opposition. Following the rally, the Capel Celyn Defence Committee requested that the Liverpool City Council accept a Welsh delegation. The request was rejected because it was the council's policy to never receive delegations. Before the opposition campaign ended, it was proven that this statement was untrue; *'it was later revealed that a delegation had been received by the Lord Mayor of Liverpool in order to protest at the presence of British troops in Egypt'*.¹¹

Eventually, Liverpool City Council met with a delegation made up of Dafydd Roberts, Dr Robert Tudur Jones, and Gwynfor Evans; they believed that they had no other option but to accept a visit from a Welsh delegation. On all accounts, the meeting was an outright failure, with Liverpool councillors booing, shouting, and catcalling the Welsh delegation.

On the 4th of December, a copy of the Tryweryn Reservoir Bill created by the Liverpool Corporation was presented in Westminster. Liverpool City Council supported the Private Bill. The council knew that if they obtained authority to drown Tryweryn Valley by an Act of Parliament,

⁸ Gwynfor Evans, *For The Sake of Wales*, (Wales: Welsh Academic Press, 1996) p.128

⁹ Griffiths, 2013

¹⁰ Gwynfor Evans, *Fighting For Wales*, (Wales: Y Lolfa, 1991) p.90.

¹¹ Evans, 1991

they would not need to obtain the consent of the Welsh planning authorities, who they predicted would be antagonistic to the proposal. On the 17th of December, the Liverpool Corporation held a meeting where they voted in favour of constructing a dam in the Tryweryn River, with 262 votes in favour and 161 against. The Liverpool Corporation took stern measures to guarantee that only Liverpool taxpayers were allowed to be present at the meeting. This resulted in the prohibition of the Capel Celyn residents from the decision. It was later speculated by the legal representation for Capel Celyn, Gerald Thesiger Q.C., that the meeting was attended by countless city employees, who were allowed the day off to be present at the meeting and to vote in favour of the proposal at the directive of their employers.¹²

By the 15th of February 1957, news of the proposed drowning of Tryweryn Valley started to gain international exposure following a supportive statement from the National Union of Mineworkers and nineteen petitions from public bodies who opposed the Bill. The third and final reading of the Tryweryn Bill in the House of Commons took place on the 31st of July 1957 at 7pm.

*'To an eerie silence within the chamber, and incredulous cries beyond, 175 voted in favour of the motion and 79 opposed meaning the Tryweryn Reservoir Bill was passed by Parliament with a majority of 96.'*¹³

The following night, after the Bill was passed in the House of Commons, it returned to the House of Lords, after which it secured its Royal Assent and became law. After the Tryweryn Bill became law, it was plain to see to those who opposed the Bill that the Welsh people's opinions held no legal or political weight.

In November, work began to build the reservoir, starting with laying the tarmac for a new road which replaced the railway line that Liverpool Corporation had closed. The new road was built by Tarmac Civil Engineering Ltd, and was also the contractor for the reservoir. On the 2nd of August 1960, work commenced to prepare the Tryweryn Valley for submerging while the worksite became operational. With the construction of the dam underway, the first residents of Tryweryn Valley

¹² Ed Atkins, 'Building a dam, constructing a nation: The 'drowning' of Capel Celyn, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 31.4 (2018), p.455-468.

¹³ Wyn Thomas, *Tryweryn: A New Dawn*, (Wales: Y Lolfa, 2023), p.217.

left, and their farmhouse was demolished to construct the dam wall. As tension rose between the Liverpool Corporation and the Welsh opposition, on the 22nd of September 1962, two Welshmen, David Walters and David Pritchard, unloaded a thousand gallons of oil from an electrical generator onto the reservoir worksite. They were ordered to pay £26 within three months; generous supporters of the opposition paid the fines. In the early hours of the 10th of February 1963, the Movement to Defend Wales, which consisted of Emyr Llywelyn Jones, Owain Williams, and John Albert Jones, partook in a militant demonstration at the Tryweryn worksite. They detonated explosives that demolished an electrical transformer which supplied power at the worksite; within weeks, they were all arrested.¹⁴

With the construction complete, water was dammed for the first time on the 1st of September 1964. A week later, Elizabeth Mrowiec, secretary of the Capel Celyn Defence Committee, dispatched a final letter imploring the Liverpool Corporation to call the newly constructed reservoir Llyn Celyn and not Llyn Mawr Tryweryn, as they had planned. Llyn Celyn was full and complete by August 1965, just five years after work commenced at the site and eleven months since water was released.

Liverpool Corporation reported on the 1st of September that the reservoir would be officially unveiled on the 21st of September. It was announced by the Liverpool Daily Post that Frank Cain, chairman of the Liverpool Corporation, would be performing the opening ceremony; following Prince Philip, Prime Minister Harold Wilson, and the Secretary of State for Wales, James Griffiths declining who stated they were unavailable. It had been almost ten years since the Liverpool Corporation proposal had been made public. However, for many Welsh people, the flooding of Tryweryn Valley had not been forgotten or forgiven. Welsh protesters were readying for the official opening as they were intent on ruining Liverpool's plan for an opening ceremony.¹⁵

Tryweryn Reservoir was formally declared open on the 21st of October 1965. There were police present on site as they expected protests. The day descended into chaos as there were barracking protests from 500

¹⁴ Thomas, 2023

¹⁵ Thomas, 2023

demonstrators from all over Wales. As the convoy of cars appeared, they were met with a wall of protesters, who rocked cars, banged windows, and shouted that Liverpool had taken what did not belong to them. Protesters were moved out of the way by police officers; however, they did damage the vehicles. The constant bombardment of booing and taunting became louder as speeches were being given, and protesters threw rocks at the Lord Mayor of Liverpool as he attempted to deliver his speech. The Lord Mayor asserted that the Liverpool Authority had no reason to feel guilty and that they had put their case to Parliament and the Welsh population. He pushed a button, and a vast flow of water was released from the reservoir into the Tryweryn River. More rocks were thrown at the guests, and consequently, the Lord Mayor and the guests made a swift exit. The scheduled 45-minute ceremony continued for just 3 minutes.¹⁶

The opposition towards the Tryweryn project represents a critical point in Welsh nationalism in the 20th century. The drowning of a small Welsh village for the profit of an English town left a permanent and enduring stain on the relationship between Wales and England that continues today. This project became a symbol for Welsh nationalist politics, concurrently representing the dedication of a generation of Welsh nationalists to preserve the Welsh language and customs and the difficult relations between the two countries.

The Tryweryn Reservoir development displayed the Welsh people's lack of power and authority against English demands; this occurred simultaneously with a shift in the Welsh political landscape. This conflict has shaped Welsh history as it resulted in Plaid Cymru gaining electoral victory in the years that followed. In the 1951 general election, they put forward four parliamentary candidates, gaining zero votes. In the 1959 election, Plaid Cymru had twenty parliamentary candidates and gained 77,571 votes. The party's rise was partly due to the emotional appeal of the drowning of Capel Celyn, with people from the party being involved in protests opposing the Tryweryn scheme. The project gave an opportunity for a time of 'rare unanimity in Welsh politics' and raised Gwynfor Evans to an unparalleled degree of fame.¹⁷

¹⁶ Thomas, 2023

¹⁷ Philip Jenkins, *A History of Modern Wales 1536-1990*, (London: Pearson Longman, 1991) p.399.

Whilst the village of Capel Celyn represented the necessity to safeguard the Welsh language and customs, its drowning to supply Liverpool with water indicted the powerlessness of Welsh protest. Gwynfor Evans stated (in 1959), 'However it ends, the fight for Tryweryn will have taught the Welsh some hard lessons. If they are learnt properly the protracted struggler this Merioneth valley may prove to be one of the most important happenings in modern Welsh history.'¹⁸

In the decades following Capel Celyn being flooded, the expression 'Remember Tryweryn' developed as a vital terminology of Welsh nationalism, ending up representing a simple way to recount the appropriation of Welsh assets for English causes.¹⁹ Tryweryn is often referred to when discussing projects in other places in Great Britain, such as the positioning of Trident nuclear submarines in Scotland. It was reported as referring to a 'Scottish Tryweryn', in which the wishes of Westminster countermanded the wants of the native people.²⁰

On the 11th of October 2005, Liverpool City Council announced that they were going to give a formal apology for the drowning of Capel Celyn fifty years prior. On the 19th of October 2005, they released their apology statement. It stated:

*'We realise they hurt of 50 years ago, when the Tryweryn Valley was transformed into a reservoir to help meet the water needs of Liverpool. For any insensitivity by our predecessor council at that time we apologise, and hope that the historic and sound relationship between Liverpool and Wales can be completely restored.'*²¹

The apology was not well received; while some people in Wales believed that the apology was sincere and should be accepted, many remained adamant that the wording of the apology applied only to the

¹⁸ Ed Atkins, 'Building a dam, constructing a nation: The 'drowning' of Capel Celyn, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 31.4 (2018), p.455-468.

¹⁹ Hywel M. Griffiths, 'Water Under the Bridge? Nature, Memory and Hydropolitics', *Cultural Geographies*, 21.3 (2014), 449-474

²⁰ David Williamson, *The scene is set for a 'Scottish Tryweryn' if Scots vote for anti-nuclear MPs but the missile system in Faslane is renewed, Plaid Cymru claims* (2015) <<https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/scene-set-scottish-tryweryn-scots-8936755>> [accessed 3 February 2024]

²¹ Rhodri Clark, 'Liverpool says sorry 40 years too late', *Wales Online*, 20th October 2005. <<https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/liverpool-says-sorry-40-years-2373381>> [accessed 26th January 2024]

way in which the position was managed instead of a specified apology for flooding the valley, along with the town.²²

There were mixed opinions from people who played a role in the flooding and campaigned to stop it. Emyr Llwelyn Jones, who in 1963 was charged with creating an explosion at the Tryweryn reservoir worksite and sentenced to 12 months incarceration, stated:

*'You can't apologise for things like that; individuals can apologise, can't they? Because they have a conscience. Institutions and countries can't apologise because it's not in their vocabulary; it's not something that belongs to the mechanisms of how they work and think. They don't do consciences. It's just a verbal thing; it doesn't mean anything.'*²³

Another man who was imprisoned for protesting Liverpool's drowning of the valley and shared Jones' view was Owain Williams; he asserted that: *'The people who were involved in the drowning aren't apologising. Some of them are still alive. The people who suffered the most in Wales are either buried or are too old to appreciate it.'*²⁴

He also noted the timing of the apology, believing the Liverpool City Council's decision to release a formal apology was due to political correctness.

²² Thomas, 2023

²³ Thomas, 2023

²⁴ Thomas, 2023

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