



Cofiwch Dryweryn - graffiti made in honour of the flooded village.¹

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

It was the middle of the 20th century, when Liverpool, after about 75 years of the construction of its previous reservoir, started running out of water necessary to meet the demand on the supply. Just as before, surveyors were tasked with finding an appropriate place for a new reservoir. Such a place was shortly located in a remote area of Wales, near Bala. Taking into the account the geopolitical connotations of that time, the choice between monolingistic Welsh-speaking small village in Wales and supplying the enormous, industrial, English-speaking city of Liverpool with water appropriate to the demand at the time, the government deemed it an appropriate step and the flooding of the village a necessary evil for the “greater good”. Contrary to the approaches presented by the government these days, back then the Welsh language was of no concern to the government. The construction of the Tryweryn Reservoir, which led to the flooding of Capel Celyn, was authorized by the UK Parliament through the Liverpool Corporation Act of 1957. This Act was passed despite significant opposition from Welsh representatives. According to a BBC News article, "The reservoir

¹ Dafydd Tomos, The Wall In August 2017 with the *Cofiwch Aberfan* Addition 17/08/2017
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cofiwch_Dryweryn#/media/File:Cofiwch_Dryweryn_ac_Aberfan,_Awst_2017.jpg> [Accessed 23 March 2025].

plans were pushed through the Westminster Parliament in 1957—despite not one Welsh MP backing it.”² This then became a pivotal point in the history of Wales, prompting various changes, such as increase in nationalism and in people learning Welsh, as well as the creation of the famous Cofiwch Dryweryn graffiti. “Cofiwch Dryweryn,” translating to “Remember Tryweryn,” is a poignant slogan in Welsh history, symbolizing the collective memory of the flooding of Capel Celyn and its enduring impact on Welsh identity.

The Tryweryn Reservoir Bill

What initially started as a scheme concocted by the Liverpool council, aiming to find a place for the fresh water reservoir meant to meet the supply demand for the city and the area, quickly became voted to be forwarded to the Parliament, for the government to sign off on it as a bill. At the time, the growing urbanisation in England meant that the cities required more water for its residents. “The Liverpool Corporation involved the building of a dam to create an 800 acre reservoir (1.25 square miles) and would hold 81 000 000 cubic metres of water.”³

The 21st of November of 1956 marks the day when the changes began. As the members of Capel Celyn community rushed to Liverpool to protest in front of the city council, their desperate, pleading voices fell on deaf ears, with the scheme being voted to be forwarded to the parliament in a 94 to 1 vote.⁴ This gave a rise to increased nationalist movements in Wales, especially amongst students and nationalist parties.⁵ The rise in nationalism was building its momentum, the protests against the Tryweryn bill were not taken seriously, as Wales was divided, there were movements pushing for Anglicisation of Wales, including, but not limited to, the actions against the Eisteddfod in the aim of increasing the standing of the English language over Welsh.

There is another reason why the Government need not concern itself about Welsh-speaking Wales. It can leave that to the Welsh local authorities and to the political parties in Wales. It was some of the Welsh members of Parliament who pressed upon the Government that Welsh was not essential even in posts in Wales connected with Welsh culture.⁶

The above quote, from *Fate of the language*, sadly points towards the terrifying consequences of such a division, in addition potentially highlighting the reasons for lack of success in opposing the construction of the Tryweryn Reservoir. After all, the phrase “Divide and Conquer” is nothing more than a phrase set in the truth - if you want to defeat your enemy, disperse its strength by dispersing its members, whether by creating chaos, dissonance, disturbance or an opposing, easy ideology that would sit well with those that only aim to enrich themselves. The following words drive this point further across as they refer directly to the financing politics and their influence on the culture and in this case a language, during one of the most prominent Welsh events.

² BBC News, *Water Powers Agreement Signed By Welsh And UK Governments*, 2017, <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-politics-42001667>> [Accessed 23/03/2025].

³ Aled Eurig, “The Tories May Have Committed the Unforgivable”: Welsh Nationalism, Protest and the Tryweryn Dam Scheme’, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 32.4 (2019), 410–425 <https://doi.org/10.1111/johs.12186> [accessed 23 March 2025].

⁴Ewan Bains, *The Tryweryn Reservoir Bill: The Flooding of a Welsh Language Village*, Wales Since 1945 (11 November 2020) <https://walessince1945.wordpress.com/2020/11/11/the-tryweryn-reservoir-bill-the-flooding-of-a-welsh-language-village/> [accessed 23 March 2025].

⁵Ewan Bains, *The Tryweryn Reservoir Bill*.

⁶ Saunders Lewis, *The Fate Of The Language* (1962), Morris Cymru <https://morris.cymru/testun/saunders-lewis-fate-of-the-language.html> [accessed 23 March 2025].

The attacks made on the National Eisteddfod by several Welsh local authorities in South Wales are extremely significant. They refuse to contribute towards it or to give a grant towards it because it is a Welsh language institution. They demand that one out of its five days should be turned into an English day before they will contribute towards its maintenance in an honourable fashion.⁷

Considering the English nature of South Wales and the comparison of the English to Wales speakers in both North and South Wales, it is not a surprise that the politicians and citizens of South Wales were not that disturbed by what the English-speaking Liverpool wished to do to Welsh-speaking Capel Celyn.

Before the flooding

Capel Celyn imprinted itself on the pages of the history as one of the last monolingualistic Welsh-speaking villages in Wales, almost like a monument, a relic of the past in some ways, a fall of which could be considered an end of a certain era.

The village itself was not too big, as we can read in the article, the protest against the Tryweryn bill consisted of 40 people from Capel Celyn, which amounted to nearly the entire population. The village was known to be a tight-knitted community, eager to help one another, with a post office, a shop, a chapel and a school dedicated to teaching 9 children from the village. Unfortunately, the government did not care for a Welsh-speaking community and decided to move forward with its plans, displacing all of the villagers and destroying the ties that bound them. The village was a house to old Welsh tradition, still alive thanks to the community of this village keeping them alive, with the displacement of its members, the traditions dispersed as well, absorbed by the traditions and cultures of the places where the residents ended up moving to.

Construction of the reservoir and its impact

The construction of the reservoir was a big undertaking, utilising the natural terrain as well as modifying it. After it was approved through the Tryweryn Reservoir Act of 1957, the Liverpool Council was free to purchase the Welsh land without any fear of legal repercussions, disregarding the desires of the locals, their culture and traditions. The construction, which began in the late 1950s included demolition of the farms, houses and other buildings cherished by the community. This included the graveyard, which was not completely emptied and caused untold grief to the families that already had to leave their land, their homes, behind. It was the destruction of not only their traditions and their lifestyles, their bonds, but also their ancestral connections. All for the sake of a big city which needed to supply water to its citizens, without a care of where it came from.

The works were completed in 1965, leaving a bitter taste in the mouths of the community members nearby, who had to watch their neighbours being displaced, yet the structure was of no benefit to them. It was yet another example of English colonialism and the government's attitude to the Welsh (not the only example as well). On the other hand, one has to look at the bigger picture, from the grander perspective, it cannot be diminished that people required drinking water, and the uproar that leaves a lasting echo until today, is only of this magnitude due to the additional factors of this

⁷ Saunders Lewis, *The Fate Of The Language*.

being Wales, rather than England, and the fact of Capel Celyn being mono linguistically Welsh. Had it been done in England, the unrest would still be great, but it wouldn't have such a lasting cultural and historical impact. Nevertheless for the people living in Capel Celyn and for the Welsh populace, it was a hard pill to swallow, as would be for any country that had its own language and culture and would be used by a country that, in reality, occupied their territories.

Cultural Legacy

One of the most significant cultural outcomes to emerge would be the creation of the Cofiwch Dryweryn murals. A simple in its form murals emerged through Wales. Originally written as 'Cofiwch Tryweryn' on a wall of an abandoned cottage, which was grammatically incorrect, as the mutation required the T to become D in Welsh.⁸ This was later on changed during various stages of repainting.⁹ The mural itself was quite simple, it was a message stripped of any grandeur artistic expressions, instead focusing on the raw emotions and need for passing a message, a protest. The message itself did not require any analysis or artistic knowledge to be understood - "Remember Tryweryn" - a simple, straight to the point message, understood by anyone, clearly directed to the Welshmen, not to forget what happened in the past, to always remember the emotions associated with the tragedy. As Capel Celyn gave rise to nationalism in Wales, this mural can be treated as a reminder not to forget that spirit, the will to fight for the culture that was in decline. As for people who do not speak Welsh it is still something that makes them stop and think, especially now, after many years past the creation of the Tryweryn Reservoir, people travelling through Wales take notice of the murals, and think, try to find out what it means and from one thing to another, sooner or later they find out about Capel Celyn, read the story of people who lost their homes, their land and wonder what they would do if they found themselves in similar situation.

Sadly, the Cofiwch Dryweryn had its own fair share of misfortunes through the years, as it was at times painted over, particularly in 2019, when the mural was painted over with just the word "ELVIS" painted instead.¹⁰ The Elvis murals aren't something unusual in Wales, but painting over the Cofiwch mural was significant for the Welsh. It was met with public opposition and led to Bethan Sayed, a member of the Senedd to call for the state to extend its protections to it officially.¹¹ Before that could happen, the locals took it upon themselves to restore the mural to its former glory within a single evening, showcasing the connection between the graffiti and the community and the fact that people did indeed not forget Tryweryn.

Formal Apology

In 2005, the Liverpool Council has officially apologised for the actions they took back in the 1950s. The Liverpool Council has admitted their mistakes, blaming their predecessors and acknowledging their shortcomings.

⁸Mari Elin Wiliam, *Cofiwch Dryweryn: The Frontiers of Contemporary Welsh Nationalism as Seen through the Creation of Contested Heritage Murals* (2021), ResearchGate https://www.researchgate.net/publication/354168945_Cofiwch_Dryweryn_The_Frontiers_of_Contemporary_Welsh_Nationalism_as_seen_through_the_Creation_of_Contested_Heritage_Murals [accessed 23 March 2025].

⁹Mari Elin Wiliam, *Cofiwch Dryweryn*.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *ibid.*

Councillor Mike Storey, the Liberal Democrat Leader of the council, said: "Apologising is the first step towards reconciliation. I hope people don't see it as gesturing because it's not - it's a recognition that mistakes were made."

This could be considered a partial closure to the subject, at least for some people. Even though the apologies will not fix what has happened, it, at least, provides certain closure, an acknowledgement of wrongdoing.

Long term effect of Capel Celyn flooding

The long term effect of Capel Celyn can still be felt throughout Wales. Every event like this sends ripples through a pond of reality, those ripples causing a chain of events that otherwise would not occur. By causing a rise in nationalism, Capel Celyn helped bring focus to the Welsh language and culture, making people appreciate it. Human psychology works in a way that if we are being denied something, even if we did not pay any attention to it before, it suddenly becomes a focal point for us, something important to hold on to. The same psychological process occurred as a result of Capel Celyn. People were content to disregard the Welsh language and culture, until it became threatened, in their minds, suddenly giving it more value. People realised what they may lose, and therefore how important it was. It is sad. People could have organised themselves before, seeing as Capel Celyn gave rise to nationalism and people were able to organise themselves means that they were always able to, they simply felt there was no reason to, they chose to live their lives in a way that ignored underlying issues until those issues gave rise to bitterness and anger. It was those issues and those feelings that then shifted the focus towards nationalism, but, perhaps, if the focus shifted earlier there would be no Capel Celyn flooding, people would be willing to fight more openly, to hold their ground, to organise themselves in a way that could not be ignored. It should not be in a way that a devastating event has to occur for people to wake up and realise that their culture, their way of life is being threatened or that it is important. Therefore, even though Capel Celyn flooding is considered a turning point in the rise of nationalism, it should be considered more of an eye opener.

To summarise, the Capel Celyn incident serves as a poignant reminder that people should never be idle bystanders, disregarding their culture and language. Our identity is based on the language we speak and the traditions we follow, without it a person simply drifts through life, absorbing whatever may come their way until such a time when they realise that the pursuit of something new left them without their roots. There should be no need for a catastrophe, mistreatment or tragedy to give rise to nationalistic feelings or sentiments. Capel Celyn was a tragic point in history that resulted in a chain of events forever reshaping Welsh history. A few positive changes can be attributed to that sad moment in history and perhaps without it Welsh history would go a different way, but at the same time, just as mentioned previously, do people really need tragic events to realise the worth of their culture? Capel Celyn was completely unnecessary, yet as we cannot change the past, we should use it as a lesson to never forget where we come from and how important our identity and culture are.

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