

MYSTERIOUS AFAN CUDD

THE STRANGE STORY OF THE CHRISTMAS HORSE

by Sally Roberts Jones

What do you like about Christmas? Special things, like Christmas cards and Christmas presents? Then there are special events, like Nativity plays at school and carol singing perhaps. And in some places there are special Christmas customs, like the Mari Lwyd in Cwmafan and Llangynwyd. Do you know about that? Mari Lwyd is a mysterious name – some people think it means Grey Mare, for others it is `grey Mary`, but what that means, no-one really knows.

It's good fun, though. There's a group of people, some dressed up in fancy clothes, and in the middle of the group is the Mari Lwyd itself, a man with a horse's skull on his head and a sheet covering him. The skull is decorated with ribbons, and the Mari is led along by a man in a top hat and a frock coat.



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The party walk from farm to farm, or house to house if they are in a village, and they stop at each place and sing a rhyme asking to be let in out of the cold. The people inside the house, who are expecting them, sing back an answer: `No, you can't come in.` Then the party outside asks again if they can come in, and are refused again, until in the end they are told, `Yes, come in, here are cakes and wine, all ready for you.`

Now this is a very very old custom, perhaps even older than Christmas, and it is said that to touch the Mari brings good fortune for the year ahead. But there is a special story about the Mari Lwyd in Cwmafan. Gather round and I'll tell you about it.

Once upon a time, almost seven hundred years ago, things were very different. There was no Senedd in Cardiff, just the Earl of Gloucester living in Cardiff Castle. He was Lord of Glamorgan and one of his duties was to collect taxes and send them to the king in London. Here in Afan we had Welsh princes, and they were in charge, but every so often the Earl would send his men to try to get taxes from us as well, though we didn't really belong to him.

Now one day the Earl sent one of his household, a young man called Herbert FitzMatthew, with a party of soldiers, to see what they could collect from the local people in the lordship of Afan. Of course the local people were not at all happy at being asked to send money to the Earl, let alone to the king far away in London, and that was why young FitzMatthew had soldiers with him.

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Herbert FitzMatthew was an esquire – that meant that he was not yet a fully-fledged knight, but he knew that if he did well in this important errand, he could expect to be knighted and become Sir Herbert. So now he rode along, feeling very important, in his shiny new armour, on his fine new war horse, at the head of his little army. He was particularly proud of his horse, and he had named it Pegasus after the flying horse in the old legends, because when it went at a gallop it was as fast as the wind, almost taking off as it went.



They had marched past the little village of Aberafan, then up into the valley alongside the river and up into the hills, and so far there had been no sign of any enemy. It was hot in the sun with just a little breeze and Herbert pushed up the visor of his helmet to feel the fresh air on his face. He looked around and then saw a little band of Welshmen on the slope above him. They were shouting and brandishing sticks and clubs.

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“Let’s chase those ragged rascals away,” he cried, and began to loosen his sword, ready for battle. But just then one of the Welshmen, a giant of a man with muscles like Hercules, hurled a great boulder at him. It hit FitzMatthew on the head and knocked him out of his saddle, down onto a rocky outcrop where he lay as still as a stone. His men rushed to save him, but it was too late. Herbert FitzMatthew was dead.

The men were so busy looking to see what had happened to their leader that no-one thought to make sure that Pegasus was safe. The horse had been startled by his master falling onto the ground and he had run off into the valley. By the time they remembered to look for him, Pegasus was far away, out of sight, and though they did search for a while, in the end they gave up and went back to Cardiff to report to the Earl, taking FitzMatthew with them.

A farmer found Pegasus the next day. He took the grand trappings off the horse – saddle and bridle and the rest – and put him in the stable along with his own cart horse, and there Pegasus stayed.



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In due time he fathered a number of handsome sons, and the story of how their ancestor had come to Cwmclais farm was handed down in the family of the farmer who had found him. At last, as a way of remembering the story, the skull of one of Pegasus's descendants was used for the Mari Lwyd .

The Earl of Gloucester was no doubt very sad to learn what had happened to his young esquire. Perhaps it was the Earl on one of his trips to the King's Court in London who passed on the story of the ambush on Mynydd Dinas so that it could be recorded and we could read about it so many centuries later. In those days, of course, there were no newspapers, let alone radio or television or social media, and even very few books because everything had to be copied out by hand. Instead monks in monasteries like Margam Abbey would write chronicles, diaries of all the events, big and small, that happened in the world. And monasteries were often like a kind of Premier Inn or Holiday Inn for distinguished travellers, so the monks could collect all sorts of remarkable stories from their visitors.



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It was Matthew Paris, a monk at St. Albans Abbey, who heard the story of the sad fate of Herbert FitzMatthew and recorded it in his chronicle. He was an artist too, and he added a sketch of how he thought it had happened, showing Herbert falling off his horse and the ragged Welshman throwing the rock. He probably made it sound much grander and more dramatic than it really was, but at least now we can remember the young esquire and his horse.

And when Christmas comes, who knows? You may be one of those visited by the Mari Lwyd, so don't forget to have some mince pies and squash waiting for your guests.



Images:

The Mari Lwyd at Llangynwyd in Glamorgan, led by Sianco'r Castell.
Frederic Evans - Published in E. C. Cawte's *Ritual Animal Disguise: A Historical and Geographical Study of Animal Disguise in the British Isles* (1978), p. 97.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mari_Lwyd#/media/File:Mari_Lwyd_at_Llangynwyd.jpg

[Knight_of_Anjou,_ \(Regia_Carina,_ Florence\).jpg](#) (300 × 349 pixels, file size: 168 KB, MIME type: image/jpeg)

Painting by Matthew Paris 1245
Matthaei Paris *Chronica Maiora II*, Parker Library, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. <https://parker.stanford.edu/parker/catalog/qt808nj0703>
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