

MYSTERIOUS AFAN CUDD

THE MARI LWYD

by Tim Rees

For the past few hundred years the Welsh tradition of the Mari Lwyd has basically been the focus of singing and merry making around the festive period, in particular the New Year.

The Mari, which consists of a decorated horse's skull on the end of a large pole, is carried around the community by a group of revellers calling at homes and pubs singing to the occupants a distinctive form of Welsh rhyming called a 'Pwnco', inviting them to respond with a verse or a song back. In its purest form the group carrying the Mari Lwyd will enter into a battle of wits with the occupants of the pub/house which usually results in the Mari winning the contest, thereby entitling them to enter the building for a drink and some food.



The true origins linked to the ritual significance associated with the Mari Lwyd custom have long been lost in the mists of time, with some experts believing it to be a forgotten pre-Christian Celtic white horse ceremony linked to the goddess Epona, or possibly connected with the horse of Rhiannon from the Mabinogion.

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A lot of pagan customs were merged in some areas with later Christian and New Year celebrations; with the old Welsh word Lwyd meaning Holy hence Mari Lwyd = Holy Mary.

There are a few, however, who because of its mystical scary appearance interpret the Mari Lwyd as being literally a nightmare derived from a combination of the Welsh word for grey, (Llwyd) along with Mari, an English medieval word for a mare.

The former description seems a more plausible explanation given the time of year the custom is played out, with its decorated flowing white robes attached to the pen ceffyl, or horse's skull,

The Mari Lwyd tradition itself seems to have been associated in particular with rural communities across Glamorganshire Monmouthshire and Carmarthenshire with an almost unbroken tradition being linked to the village of Llangynwyd near Maesteg.



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CWMAFAN MARI LWYD



Cwmafan Mari Lwyd at the Gower Wassail event in 2018
Photograph: Tim Rees

The Cwmafan Mari Lwyd was re-established in the early 1990s by a group of players from Cwmafan RFC and some of their friends.

In line with the wider tradition, it is fair to say that their format of the Cwmafan Mari has evolved over the years, incorporating some of the more familiar regularly-used Pwnco verses, alongside some of their own local Pwnco and local Tribannau. Some of these are quite often made up on the night itself - in keeping with how the tradition would have been enacted in the various rural communities of Glamorgan and Gwent years ago.

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If you are interested in reviving this old Welsh tradition, and don't want to deal with a real horse's skull, there is a flat-pack version of the horse's skull available for sale from Swansea artist David Pitt:

<https://www.facebook.com/thecrowman.net/photos/a.320596968015262/320596971348595/?type=3>

The Chepstow Mari Lwyd
<https://chepstowwassailmari.co.uk/about/>

The Mari Llwyd at Llangynwyd in Glamorgan, led by Sianco'r Castell. The photograph was taken by Frederic Evans between 1904 and 1910.

Published in E. C. Cawte's *Ritual Animal Disguise: A Historical and Geographical Study of Animal Disguise in the British Isles* (1978), p. 97.

Cwmafan Mari Lwyd at the Gower Wassail event in 2018
Photograph: Tim Rees

Cwmafan Mari Lwyd visiting a house in Brynbryddan, Cwmafan
Courtesy of Tim Rees