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Cymru

by Jeremy Quinton



White-sand beaches, mountains and majestic music. Three things that not many people probably associate with Britain. In this article I'd like to introduce you to a country that's often overlooked when we talk about Britain. In their own language, Cymru. In English, Wales.

After the Romans left Britain around 410, much of the lowlands were invaded by different Germanic tribes. Many parts of what is present-day Wales, however, were able to resist the invasion. In part because of favourable geographical features such as uplands, mountains and rivers. But also because of a resilient society that did not collapse with the end of the Roman era. The survival of the Romano-Britons and their descendants in the western kingdoms was to become the foundation of what we now know as Wales.

Much of Wales' beautiful landscape is mountainous. The highest mountain range in Wales is Snowdonia (Eryri), and it includes Snowdon (Yr Wyddfa), which, at 1,085 meters (3,560 feet), is the highest peak in Wales. Guess where a certain Sir George Everest was from.

From the 19th century on much of Wales became heavily industrialised, supplying the British Empire and its colonies with vast quantities of coal and steel

and establishing a large manufacturing base which has only recently been overtaken by the service sector.

The official languages in Wales are English and Welsh. While English is spoken by almost everyone, Wales is officially bilingual, with 21.7% of the population able to speak Welsh and a larger proportion having some knowledge of the Welsh language, according to a 2004 language survey.

During the 20th century several small communities of speakers of languages other than English or Welsh, such as Bengali or Cantonese, have established themselves in Wales as a result of immigration. The Italian government funds the teaching of Italian to Welsh residents of Italian ancestry. The Welsh, like many, have migrated too. There's a Welsh immigrant colony in the Chubut Valley of Patagonia, Argentina.

The principal Welsh festival of music and poetry is the National Eisteddfod, which takes place annually in a different town or city. Wales also regularly obtains high rankings in world culinary competitions.

Why talk about Wales now? Well, last week, on the 1st of March, it was St David's Day. St David is the patron saint of Wales. Children take part in school concerts or *eisteddfodau*, where poetry recitals and singing are the main activities. Many Welsh people wear either or both of the national symbols, the daffodil (see photo) or the leek, and many schoolgirls wear the national costume.

Although I first went there as a child in the 1970s (when I picked up my first-ever foreign phrase!), if you asked me now what comes to mind when I think of Wales, I'd say the sport of rugby ("a game for ruffians played by gentlemen"), but above all, I think of the power of Welsh music and singing. I had a number of charismatic Welsh teachers at my school in England, none more so than the music teacher Mr Pasque whose passion for music and drama was incredible.

There are many world-famous singers and actors from Wales whose music and films have been around for years, but to get a real flavour of what Mr Pasque was about, listen sometime to 80,000 people singing traditional Welsh anthems before a rugby match in Cardiff.

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