

Translation of 'Ceisio Ffortiwn yn y Ddinas Bell' news article in
'Golwg' national Welsh media magazine

Seeking Their Fortune in the distant city

They left their homes at the end of the last century to seek their fortune in the City of London...the story of the 'Cardis' who made the journey to London has since become a legend in our folklore. Approximately eighteen months ago, Manon Rhys and Richard Lewis both with roots in Aberteifi, realized there was potential for a television series following the lives of these pioneers.

There were frequent departures during the 20's 30's and 40's, people leaving their small farms and their large families as they could no longer make ends meet. "Usually one member of the family would go to London first, with a brother or sister following later or being invited later." explained Manon Rhys who has spent a lot of time researching the project before starting to write. "Usually the Welsh would run a store, but the milking parlors were important to them also. It was as if they transported their work from Wales to England, doing what they had done in the country in the city.

In reality, the people who went to London did not go 'to make it rich', but they were individuals who were willing to work hard, although, some did accumulate a substantial amount of money. There was no choice but to leave Wales to go to London, as there was so little work available there. Everyone from that era knew someone who went to work in the capital city, not only to sell milk, but the girls also went as housekeepers, nannies, and to teach the craft of sewing and sell hats.

The city needed milk, so from the outset the Welsh strangers literally produced milk on their front, or back doorsteps by keeping a couple of cows in their back yard. Often they would hire a cow and then hire another one once the first had become dry. Everything was literally produced on the doorstep – milking and producing milk, butter and cheese.

So the industry grew, all the milk sellers decided on their 'own patch' or their 'milk walk'. Originally a wheelbarrow would transport the milk, followed by the popular horse and cart. The milk was kept in enormous jugs, and as they traveled the streets of London their customers would also bring along their own jugs, which held a pint, to be filled up with milk.

Life was not an easy one – it was as difficult as being in Wales – but at least there was work. It was a tiresome life, getting up at 4am, milking, followed by a long milk round, and work in the store until very late at night.

As Manon Rhys investigated the history of the period it became apparent that the Welsh had kept their language and culture although they lived in London. All the children were raised speaking Welsh as they would in their native Wales, and in addition to maintaining their language they also kept their dialect as it was spoken in Aberteifi, but spoke English as the 'Cockneys' would.

One reason for this phenomenon was the chapel, and its extensive influence over the community of the era. The chapels became the heart of the Welsh community, not only would it be a centre of worship, but they would also organize regular cultural and music festivals and other various activities there, in the Welsh language. So for many years the young people in the city maintained their language that could have otherwise died.

At the start of the century, the journey to London would take a day and a half, as in those times people did not migrate as freely as we do today, so it was easier to maintain their identity. Not a political decision, but a way of life. "I remember people returning in the 50's and 60's and 70's and still spoke the same Welsh as they did originally in Aberteifi says Manon Rhys. "And I recall a cousin of mine whose parents pretended that they could not speak English so as to maintain her mother tongue! I'm sure a lot of families tried that trick to keep the Welsh alive at home. It was a huge effort but many succeeded."

A close relationship existed between the Welsh and the Jewish community in London, namely because of the mutual understanding of both nations being strangers in a foreign culture. Isaac's character in the series depicts this perfectly. However, the relationship changes in 1931 in the second series, due to the developments in Europe affecting everyone in London and Wales.

As Manon's research into the era continued it also became apparent that the Welsh language newspaper 'Y Ddolen' (The Link) played an integral part in the lives of the community, by reporting on marriages and various events. There had to be very strong storylines for all the scripts, and so the series is full of these including romances, marriages and deaths. The old traditions of the era are very apparent in the series, the first scene of the first episode being a perfect example.

As the first episode unfolds with the death of Ifan and Isaac's sister in London, her body is transported on a train from Paddington station back to Wales for a funeral. Traditionally the Welsh would gather on the station platform to say a funeral prayer and to sign the hymn 'O Fryniau Caersalem' (From the Mountains of Caersalem)... This was a ritual with the London Welsh, as the other city dwellers looked on without an understanding of what they were doing. We also learn to understand that hypocrisy is prevalent in the communities in both London and Aberteifi, as the preacher Luther Lewis, who turned his back on confession and lives the life of a vagrant, is refused entry into the chapel. Back in Wales a young girl is punished for her pregnancy by being thrown out of mass.

Life was hard in the big bad city, all the characters and storylines providing an accurate picture of life there in the 1920's. The characters represent all types of Welsh people including the farmers, the London 'innovators' who battle to keep their culture and language, and the other layer of the Welsh aristocracy who have lost their language as seen in the character of Lady Orme.

During the 1930's the world of the Welsh milk sellers changed dramatically, as big dairies bought the rights the milk rounds. From the 1950's onward the Welsh who moved to London to 'make it rich' led a different path; they went to University to become teachers, or worked in the financial sector or the media.