

House and Farm Names in North Wales

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TWENTY YEARS AGO I spent some time in a small town in North Wales, and was much interested in the use there of house and farm names and their relationship to personal names.

To a large extent house names were used instead of numbers in the streets of the town, even for row houses. Usually these names were descriptive of the location or some prominent feature of the place, or commemorated the place of origin or some other association of the owners. Gorphwysfa, "resting place," stood at the top of a steep hill; Garnedd, "cairn," belonged to the family which also owned the farm called "Rhyd-y-Garnedd," the farm beside the ford at the cairn. More personal names were Bodowen, "Owen's abode," or Bodhyfryd, "pleasant abode." Once we stopped to talk to a man at his gate. He carried the mail by day, he said, but he was a poet too, and he pointed proudly to the name lettered in gold on the glass of the transom above his door, Lletty'r Awen, "home of the muse."

Every farm had its own name, and the people of the farm were known by the farm name rather than their own. These names too usually described the farm's location: Glan-y-mor, "sea shore"; Pen-y-Bryn, "top of the hill"; Is Coed, "under the wood"; Fron Newydd, "the new house on the breast of the hill" (probably dating from the eighteenth century, at the latest). Ty'n y Cornell, "the house in the Corner," might stand at the "corner" of a lake, or in a corner between two hills. Will Jones, who lived at Ael-y-Bryn "crest of the hill," would be known as Will Ael-y-Bryn; his wife and daughter were referred to as the wife, or the daughter, of Ael-y-Bryn.

These farm names were very old, continuing through the centuries, while the names of their holders might change from generation to generation. Even old gravestones carried the farm names

in addition to the family names. The people at Tal-y-Bont, "head of the bridge," held deeds bearing this name which went back to the time of Edward I. This meant that there had been a bridge at that spot and a farm by the bridge, at least since the fourteenth century. Gwyddelfynydd, "Irish mountain," had been on record by that name since the twelfth century. Some went even further back. Hearing a woman spoken of as Janet Castell bach (little castle), I asked if she lived in a castle. No, they said, it was only a farm. Was there ever a castle there? Oh no. Then why the name? They didn't know, but added that the farm was on the old road that ran along the mountain top, and that the next farm, about a mile away, was called Castell fawr, "big castle." Later I found the answer in a book on Roman Britain. Roman roads were laid out along the high ground, to avoid ambush by the natives. Along the roads stood guard houses, called castellae, a mile apart, with a larger one at intervals for supplies and reinforcements. So the farms, Castell bach by the small guard house, and Castell fawr by the big guard house, had kept their names and identities for some fifteen centuries.

The stories behind the names were mostly forgotten. No one could tell me why a tiny village on the moor was called Rhos-lefain, which means "the crying in the gorse." They only answered vaguely, "Once there was fighting there." It might have been Roman, Saxon, Dane, or Norman; no one knew.

Last names were rarely used in the village. Only in a formal introduction would they say, Mr. Jones, Mr. Morgan, and this was usually followed, for further identification, by the farm name or professional name. More often they simply used the first name or a nickname with the name of farm or occupation: Dai Maes-teg (David from Fairfield); Jack y glo, who dealt in coal; Tom crydd, the shoemaker, Mrs. Jones Shop, Mrs. Evans the Post.

In the family, the mother's name was added, for identification, to that of the child, which produced wonderful combinations like Billy Mary Ann or Wilkin Hannah. If a man sang in the local or regional Eisteddfodau, or wrote poetry or music, he used a Bardic name. Thus Egryn, the singer, might also be called Gitts Cathryn for his mother, Griffith Caerberllan for his farm, Griff y gof for his blacksmith shop; he would be introduced to you simply as Mr.

Pritchard, and it usually took some time to figure out the other allusions.

Nicknames complicated things still more. They stuck for generations, and moved freely from person to house to the next person who happened to live there, on down through the years. Once on the street someone said, "Here comes Johnny Crosseye." I remarked in surprise, "He's not crosseyed!" And the answer was "No, but his grandfather was." There was a whole family of Matches, so called from a quick-tempered mother who "flared up like a match," and another of Merikas, one of whom had once been to America and talked of it forever after.

Hearing a man called Tom Watterloo, I asked why. Because he lived in Watterloo Cottage. Why was it called Watterloo? Because old Janet Watterloo lived there. Why was she called that? Then the story came. In the early 1800's her husband was a soldier. After the Battle of Waterloo other men came home, or were heard from, but there was no news of him. Finally Janet set out to look for him. She crossed England on foot, made her way across the Channel, and reached the battlefield. At last she found him, wounded and ill, in a farmhouse. She nursed him and brought him home, and of course was known as Janet Watterloo for the rest of her life. The name clung to her cottage, and attached itself to later residents. No doubt they have carried it on to other houses, in their turn.

Most Welsh surnames are only modifications of given names. I have been told that originally there were no surnames; a man when asked his name would answer: "I am John ap (son of) Lewis ap Hugh ap Morgan ap Rhys," and so on, relating his whole genealogy. Court procedures and other business matters were so slowed down by the length of time it took simply to write down the names of the parties concerned, that in the end a royal edict was issued that as of a given date, every man should use his father's name as his surname. Some characteristic Welsh names are: Lewis, Johns (Jones), Owen, Bowen (ap Owen), Richards, Pritchard (ap Richard), Hughes, Pugh (ap Hugh), Evans, Bevan (ap Evan), Roberts, Parry (ap Harry), Williams, Rhys (Reese, Rice), Price (ap Rhys).