

# THE MARI LWYD - article by Jeff Alden

I am very grateful to John Lyons of Narberth for drawing my attention to the article by David Jones of Wallington of 'The Mari Lwyd: a Twelfth Night Custom'. The following account is mainly based on that account.

In 1888 David Jones of Wallington, the Llanblethian-born historian of the Vale, felt that the 'special local observations and rural pageantry which in Glamorganshire, on and about Twelfth Night, wound up the festivities of Christmastide, are no longer to be met with'. He distinguished two customs. Canu Gwassaila, Wassail singing, involved the 'blacking up' of the party, which included a Bessy, a man dressed up as a woman and equipped with a broom. The men in the party had staves, and padded clothes, and as soon as they were admitted into a house after their challenging songs, would beat each other with the staves. They indulged in considerable amounts of horse play; and carried a wassail bowl, made of Ewenny pottery, which would be filled – and refilled with beer.

The more elaborate Mari Lwyd involved more decorous 'wassail singing' together with the dressing up of a man in a costume involving a horse's head and white cloak.

For the Mari Lwyd, great preparation was needed – for several weeks beforehand, involving very many people. The basis of the Mari Lwyd was the skeleton of a horse's head, padded on the outer side and shaped with calico. The jaw was fastened so as to move up and down easily, and could be made to bite at the will of the man who played the horse. Eyes were made out of the bottoms of broken beer-bottles carefully chipped round, while the ears would be of felt, leather or any other suitable material. The whole would be decked with 'ribbons so plenty' that the Mari was indeed a sight to see. From the neck hung a large sheet which covered the young man who gave life to the Mari. The men who made up the party came dressed in their Sunday best, and with ribbons of many colours (lent them by their womenfolk) stuck on to their coats and hats.

The party went from house to house singing challenging verses to a traditional tune. At least the first three would be in Welsh, of which the first ran as follows;

O dyma ni'n dywed  
Gym' docon dinuwad  
I ofun cewn genad  
I ganu.

In the bilingual districts of the Vale, they would then change to English

We've got a fine Mary  
She's dressed very pretty  
With ribbons so plenty  
This Christmas.

Apparently this was enough to admit the party to beer, cake, and fun – particularly for the Mari who would run after the young women of the house. The party left after collecting some money, singing the valedictory verse

God bless the ruler of this house  
And send him long to reign  
And many a merry Christmas  
May he live to see again  
And God send you a happy new year.

'Mari Lwyd', according to Jones, means 'Blessed Mary'. He takes it to be a survival of a previously popular Festival of the Ass which was held certainly in pre-Reformation times on 14 January and which commemorated the flight of the holy family into Egypt. A donkey covered with robes used to be led into the church, a service performed in its honour in which the responses imitated the hee-hawing of the animal. After this, the donkey, ridden by a girl and child, representing the Mother and child) would be led around the parish. Apparently some similar survivals of this ancient custom survived at least up to the nineteenth century in Monmouthshire, Lancashire and Kent.

David Jones's description of the Mari Lwyd

It was John John – Grassy John – of No 7 Church Street, Cowbridge, who is regarded as the last singer under the Mari Lwyd in Cowbridge, before the revival by George Crabb, Bill Lewis and the others. What they perform these days seems to be a combination of the two customs, with a blacked-up Bessy with a broom, and mock fights, as well as wassail singing and the Mari Lwyd.

*The Mari Lwyd: a Twelfth Night Custom.*—The rapid decay and disappearance of old customs which the latter half of the nineteenth century has witnessed is a matter of such common observation that it has become the merest of truisms to speak of it. Many old observances which this century had inherited from a long line of predecessors have now ceased to be found even as “survivals”; if met with at all, I apprehend it would be only as “revivals”, produced as something strange and rare for the amusement of the curious. Thus it has come to pass that the special local observances and rural pageantry which in Glamorganshire, on and about Twelfth Night, wound up the festivities of Christmastide, are no longer to be met with as part of the life of the people. “Canu Gwassaila” and the going about with a “Mari Lwyd”—customs common enough in the forties and fifties of the century—must now, I suspect, be classed with the things of the past. Both customs—for they certainly were each of distinct origin—were known by the one name of “Canu Gwassaila”, or even more commonly, “Singing Gwassaila.” But, while the “Gwassailwyr” proper needed not to trouble themselves with providing a “Mari Lwyd”, those who went about with a “Mari Lwyd” were perforce obliged to “Sing Gwassaila”. Singing was part of the performance, and tradition provided them with no other song. Of the two names, the first is self-explanatory: it is the “Singing of Wassail”; the second, in its application at least, is not very clear. The word “Lwyd” means “Blessed”. How the name “Blessed Mary” has come to be applied to the skeleton of a horse’s head, decked with ribbons and other finery, as will be presently described, is a question easier put than answered. An attempt, however, will be made to explain its appli-

cation; and the conclusions arrived at may or may not be acceptable. What follows on this subject will be taken chiefly from a contribution of my own to a Glamorganshire newspaper in 1878—one of a series of papers on local folk-lore—in which the Christmas and Twelfth Night customs of Glamorganshire were dealt with at length. To the theory I then advanced I still adhere, and I fancy it has since been adopted elsewhere.

By the kindness of a friend at Llangynwyd there was exhibited at the late meeting of the Association at Cowbridge a very fair representation of a “Mari Lwyd”. It was not (as it turned out) a veritable “Mari” which had gone the round of the parish, but had, in the previous winter, been specially got up to aid in the illustration of a lecture on Glamorganshire Customs delivered at Maesteg, and some of the details it had not been thought necessary to reproduce for the occasion.<sup>1</sup> It was enough like in appearance to answer the purposes required.

The “Gwassailwyr” pure and simple were a body of rustics who enlivened the season, both for themselves and their neighbours, by going about from house to house singing the Wassail song. It was sufficient for the occasion if they blackened their faces, wore rough masks, or disguised themselves in any manner, and the rougher the disguise the better. One of them should be in woman’s clothes, to play the part of “Bessy”. Bessy carried a besom; the others had staves, with which, when the in-door fun began, they belaboured each other’s sides and backs in a manner which would have been painful to behold if one had not known that each and all were pretty well protected by straw under their puffed-out garments. At the door of the house they wassailed they began with the following song, to a traditional tune, which I doubt not is still well known:—

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| <p>I.<br/>“O dyma ni’n dywed<br/>Gym’docon dinuwad,<br/>I ofun cewn genad, &amp;c.<br/>I. ganu.</p> | <p>III.<br/>“O tapwch y faril<br/>Gyllynwch yn rhigill, &amp;c.<br/>Nos heno.</p>                            |
| <p>II.<br/>“Os na chewn ni genad<br/>Ni drewn ar y nailldu, &amp;c.<br/>Nos heno.</p>               | <p>IV.<br/>“A’r deishan frâs felus<br/>A phob sort o spisus<br/>A gatwyd yn garcis, &amp;c.<br/>Y gŵyla.</p> |
| <p>V.<br/>“Cei’r gŵyla mynd heibo<br/>Heb neb dod i’ch cofio ?</p>                                  | <p>“Ond ni sydd yn cofio, &amp;c.<br/>Nos heno !”</p>  |

These were verses of obligation: when these had been sung then, possibly, would come the tug of war. It was a recognised part of

<sup>1</sup> The “Mari” which was exhibited has since been presented to the Museum at Cardiff, and I understand that the energetic Curator of that institution has since obtained another from Lantwit Major, which had seen actual service in that parish.

the custom that if any one inside the house replied, those outside must answer, and so a musical dialogue would be kept up until one or the other of the two parties would be unable to respond in impromptu verse. When at last they obtained admission, it would be well if ample space had been cleared for them in the kitchen or other suitable apartment wherein they might display their antics. A good deal of "horse-play" would be indulged in, for the licence extended to the season by prescription would be availed of to the utmost. They should by right have with them a wassail-bowl, or that which is, I believe, its proper Glamorganshire substitute, namely, a *feol* made of Ewenny ware; but the "survival" of these articles within the time to which my own memory extends was a common bucket, or even, it might be, a tin can! Whichever vessel it may have been, it would be passed round, or at least you would be offered a mugful of drink out of it, while it was of course expected that the master of the house would do his part in keeping it pretty well replenished from the "barrel", which in song they had already asked should be "tapped" for them. Finally, the jingling of coins in a battered tin vessel, which did duty for a money-box, would be heard, and when this appeal had been responded to the Wassailers would take their departure, singing ere they went a valedictory stanza outside the house door. The words of this closing verse I do not remember.

For the "Mari Lwyd" much greater preparation was required. Indeed, it took the long evenings of several weeks beforehand to get everything necessary for the success of the pageant, and put all in apple-pie order. Why, the "Mari Lwyd" was the pride and admiration of the whole village! Everybody almost would have had a hand in the adorning of it and in decking out these "Gwas-sailwyr"—mothers, sisters, sweethearts—all! The lads who formed the party came dressed not only in their "Sunday best", but in great bravery of ribbons of many colours (cheerfully lent them by the women) superadded to coats and hats. If ribbons were not abundant enough, the want would be supplied by a sort of frilling of coloured paper. The "Mari Lwyd" itself, however, has not been described. The basis of the structure was, as has already been stated, the skeleton of a horse's head. This was padded on the outer side, where the flesh had been, and then covered into shape with white calico. The jaw was so fastened as to move up and down easily, and could be made to "bite" at the will of the man who played the part of "horse". Eyes were made out of the bottoms of broken beer-bottles carefully chipped round, while the ears would be of felt, leather, or any suitable material. The whole would be decked with "ribbons so plenty" that the "Mari" was indeed a sight to see! There was also some arrangement to give the appearance of a neck, and over this from the head there depended a long and large sheet or loose gown of calico, which served to conceal the young man who gave life to the "Mari". A smart "groom" had charge of the "animal", which he led by a

long rein of wide scarlet braid. The number of the party would be regulated by liking or convenience, but they were usually about six. They also sang at each door they went to about three verses of the Wassail song already given; upon the fourth they changed from Welsh to English, thus:

“ We’ve got a fine Mary,  
She ’s dressed very pretty  
With ribbons so plenty  
This Christmas.”

This is how it would be managed in the bilingual district comprising the Vale of Glamorgan. In the northern parts of the county the singers continued in Welsh, thus:

“ Mae Mari Lwyd yma  
Mae'n werth i gael gola',  
Yn llawn o rhubana,  
Y Gwyla !”

After this intimation it was not usual to challenge them to a musical parley from the inside; they were generally admitted at once. They brought with them no “survival” of the wassail-bowl, such as we have seen the “Gwassailwyr” proper had, as an inseparable adjunct to their perambulations, and their proceedings indoors were of a more orderly character than what has been already described. Still there was a good deal of romping. If there were any young women about, they came in for the not very welcome attentions of “Mari”, who ran after them, pretending to bite, and so forth. It was all meant in harmless fun, and the whole proceedings generally promoted a good deal of it. They would have beer given to them, and, possibly, a piece of cake each. They, too, had a money-box. On leaving, the strain sung by this party, at the door, was—

“ God bless the ruler of this house,  
And send him long to reign,  
And many a merry Christmas  
May he live to see again.  
And God send you a happy new year.”

There seems to have been, eighty or one hundred years ago, a sort of unwritten law that the “Mari Lwyd” of one parish should not intrude within the bounds of another. If this were done the intruding party did so at its peril; for if it were so met by a “Mari Lwyd” party of the parish intruded upon there would be a battle royal between them, and each would do its best to destroy the “Mari Lwyd” of the other.

It will, I think, be at once conceded that in this rustic pageant of the “Mari Lwyd”, or the “Blessed Mary”, we have had amongst us the survival of part of some ancient popular rite or ceremony. Is it not the last remnant of the once highly popular



“Festival of the Ass”? This festival was held on the 14th January, and commemorated the flight of the Holy Family into Egypt. An ass decked in rich robes or trappings was led to the high altar of the parish church, and a special service performed in its honour, the responses to which were an imitation of the hee-hawing of the animal itself. After this ceremony a girl and child, personating the Virgin and Child, mounted the ass and were taken round the parish. A wooden ass was sometimes used, and lay figures representing the Mother and Child placed thereon. In either case the perambulation of the parish seems to have been an essential part of the proceedings. What more likely, then, than that the “Blessed Mary”, which so many generations of our Glamorganshire lads took so much pains to get up, deck so bravely, and carry from house to house with so much mirth and revelry—a horse’s head with a man concealed under it—was a direct representative of the animal on which the “Mary” of olden time made a tour of the parish upon? Adopt this view, and the name “Mary” appears as a natural heritage which clung to the fragmentary part of the paraphernalia of the old festival which descended to our own time. As the “Festival of the Ass” was very commonly observed in pre-Reformation times, we might expect to find that traces of it remained to a late period in other parts of the kingdom besides Glamorganshire. I have discovered that it was not unknown in Monmouthshire; that, however, is very near our own borders. But there are evidences of somewhat similar “survivals” in places as remote as Lancashire on the one hand, and Kent on the other. In Lancashire they amused themselves on Twelfth Night by carrying round the semblance of a horse’s head; while in Kent they still, I believe, “go a hodening” on this night, the “hoden” being a horse’s head carved in wood, which is carried about to the accompaniment of carol singing and hand-bell ringing.

Objection may perhaps be taken to the solution here offered on the ground that the day of the celebration of the “Festival of the Ass” did not coincide with the “Festival of the Epiphany”; that the two observances were distinct, and were never likely to be commingled. Whether there is a lack of likelihood in this or not, I have, I think, shown pretty plainly that the Twelfth Night customs of Glamorganshire were of a twofold character, certainly of a twofold origin, and were partially, at least, commingled. We must remember that in pre-Reformation times the festivities of the Christmas season were kept up until Candlemas. After the Reformation the natural tendency of the times was to shorten them. Herrick, however, gives us to understand that in his time the Christmas decorations were kept up until the Feast of the Purification. The Puritans, as we know, did what they could to abolish Christmas revellings altogether. They were powerless to do this, from the hold which these had upon the minds and affections of the people. But they accomplished two things: (1) they shortened the duration of the period of licence and buffoonery; and, as a natural con-

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sequence, they (2) displaced and threw into some confusion the several popular observances which had served to mark the prolonged course of the festival. The procession of the “Blessed Mary” was of too popular a character to be thrown aside altogether; rather, therefore, than lose it, the day of its celebration was thrown back by popular consent ten days in the calendar, and was held on (and after) the 6th of January, instead of the 16th, and was allowed to share the honours of Twelfth Night rejoicings with the “Gwas-saila”.

Of wassailing itself much might be said, both as to the mode in which the custom was observed in Wales, and also under the wider view of its observance throughout the country. This, however, I will not touch upon. It will be sufficient to say that there are several Welsh wassailing songs in existence. Miss Jane Williams of Aberpergwn has preserved two for us in the collection of *Ancient National Airs of Gwent and Morganwg*, published at Landoverly in 1843, namely, “Y Washael”, at p. 30, and “Hyd yma Bu’n cerdded”, at p. 31. Hone, too, in his *Ancient Mysteries Explained*, gives the translation of a very curious one by “Thomas Evans”, which is well worth study for the allusions it contains, and which I elsewhere have attempted to analyse. These are in print, and accessible to all. The inquirer who wishes to pursue the subject further will, if he is industrious, find several more in manuscript.

I ought, perhaps, to add that since the meeting at Cowbridge I have been shown a Welsh essay upon the “Mari Lwyd”, but was not able to do more than glance at it. I regret to say that I did not note, and do not remember, the author’s name. It would seem to have been published about 1882. The wassailing song contained several more verses than I have given; but the greater part were quite new to me, and I venture to think would not be generally known in Glamorganshire.



## “Mari Lwyd” and its Origin.

BY THE REV. W. ROBERTS (NEFYDD).

*Translated from the Welsh by W. Eilir Evans.*

*Edited for the Transactions by T. H. Thomas.*

THE following article consists of lengthy quotations from a work written by the Rev. W. Roberts (Nefydd), a Baptist minister and antiquary of some standing, which form part of a book published in the year 1852. A large portion of the original is polemic in character, this essay having for its object the dissuasion of the inhabitants of Wales from observing the customs described. “Nefydd’s” descriptions of the customs in Wales are very full and accurate, and he must be looked upon as perhaps the first writer who appreciated their significance from the point of view of the student of folk-lore. The translation has been carefully done by Mr. W. Eilir Evans, at the request of Alderman Richard Cory, J.P., to whom the Society is indebted for permission to publish it.

“Certain traditions, superstitions, amusements and forms will be maintained hereditarily, without even a knowledge of, or respect to, their origin, but merely as customary, by the lower order.”—(Rev. P. Roberts’ *Popular Antiquities*.)

WITHOUT endeavouring to state the different views concerning the origin of Mari Lwyd which have recently appeared in the press,\* I shall proceed to give what seems to be the more probable origin of the custom, a custom as to the beginning of which history has little definite to say. Roberts himself does not state its origin.

It is our object directly to prove that Mari Lwyd is but a relic of the dramas which were at one time performed under the sanction of the Roman Catholic Church, and it would seem that many other Welsh customs might also be traced to the same age.

\* “Seren Gomer,” “Monmouthshire Merlin,” &c., &c.

It is well known that many dramatical compositions were formerly acted, several of which have survived to quite recent times, such as the "Mysteries of Coventry and Chester." Doubtless such interludes as these formerly existed in Wales, indeed the Rev. P. Roberts, the writer of the "Popular Antiquities of Wales," goes so far as to suggest that the story of Uthr Pendragon's transmigration by Merlin \* is a kind of interlude. He also infers that the feast given by Cadwgan ab Bleddyn, in the year 1107, at Christmastide (*vide* Carnhuanawc, pp. 614 and 531), and the feast of Gruffydd ab Rhys, at Ystrad Tywi, in 1135, were held with a similar object. But it is more reasonable to suppose that those were more like Eisteddfodau, or literary meetings, at which also physical recreation was indulged in.

In the 12th century the Welsh were famous as poets, minstrels, and for their study of nature, as may be seen from portions of the work of Grialduus Cambrensis.

In the writings of W. Hone, a comprehensive account is given of the mediæval dramas. The reader may consult Hone's book on "Ancient Mysteries and Religious Shows," published in 1822.

It is supposed that these dramas originated in a desire to bring religion to the level of the masses, with a view to their instruction rather than amusement. In Greece dramatic representation reached a high pitch of excellence, and it is probable that the first Christian religious drama was composed by Gregory Nazianzen, when he was Archbishop of Constantinople.

The ancient "Fathers" were strongly averse to the classic Greek plays, and condemned and excommunicated those who patronised them. Tertullian says that "those who in their baptism renounce the devil, with his vanities, become apostates when they appear on the stage." It is supposed that the archbishop's object, in providing scriptural dramas, was to counteract the popular effects of the Greek plays of Sophocles, Euripides, and others. One of Gregory's dramas is still extant; it is a tragedy on "Christ's Passion," in which the Virgin, or the Blessed Mary (Mari Lwyd), form one of the characters. It is said that Gregory succeeded in stemming the influence of the Greek stage by providing comedies and tragedies, based on scriptural events for the people's diversion, and that these were performed in public.†

But acting, as a means of inculcating doctrines held by the Church, as already stated, was introduced in opposition to the pagan plays, and spread widely, and continued in use from Gregory's time up to a few centuries ago. Several customs still in vogue among us may be relics of those times. As regards dramas of this nature still extant, and which go under the name of "Mysteries." The Mysteries of Coventry are forty in number, and the Mysteries of Chester twenty-four. Dugdale, in a

\* *Vide* "Enderbie's Camb. Triumphans," p. 185, and "Roberts' Antiquities," p. 137.

† "Ribadeneira's Lives," Vol. I., p. 333. "Leclere Lives," Vol. VIII., p. 289.

work published in 1656,\* says: “Before the destruction of the monasteries, this city (Coventry), was famous for its plays on Corpus Christi Day, which caused multitudes of people to gather together from far and near; the acting was done by the Grey Friars, who had large and tall theatres on wheels, so as to move hither and thither in the city for the convenience of the onlookers. They consisted of Old and New Testament histories, set in rhyming dialogue, as may be seen in the old manuscript (Bibl. Cotton. Vesp. D. VIII.) called Ludus Corpus Christi, or Ludus Coventriæ.” We find that there was a large influx of people to Coventry at the time these plays were acted. Richard III. was a spectator at the feast of Corpus Christi held there in 1483. Henry VII. and his consort visited Coventry for a similar purpose in 1492. The Mysteries of Chester, says a distinguished historian of that district,† were acted up to the time of the Reformation, the last time being in 1574. Williams, in his history of Monmouthshire, surmises that Sion Cent became famous for the part he played in religious dramas, and that the stories concerning him and the devil thus originated (Williams’s, p. 231). W. Hone has published a few of these dramas as specimens. Those now before me are eight in number, all referring to the birth of the Virgin Mary and of Christ as set forth in the Apocryphal gospels more especially. These were published by W. Hone, in 1820. The first mystery treats of the birth of Mary; the second of her teaching in the Temple and the ministering of angels unto her; the third takes up the miraculous betrothal of Joseph to Mary; the fourth gives the Counsel of the Trinity regarding the incarnation; the fifth, Joseph’s intention to put Mary away privily; the sixth, Mary’s visit to Elizabeth; the seventh, the Trial of Mary and Joseph; and the eighth, Jesus’s miraculous birth in a manger.

I believe the “Mari Lwyd” originated in these mystery-plays, the word *lwyd* being often used in the sense of blessed, as may be seen from the following instances:—

“*Llwydion fu'r saint, geraint gu,  
Disyml, a llwyd yw Iesu.*”  
—*Rhys Goch Eryri.*

“*Mynd, er gwann, i'r mwyndir goed,  
Mae yn dy law, mynn Duw lwyd.*”  
—*William Lleyu.*

“*A chywyddau i Dduw lwyd  
Yw Llaswyr Dafydd Brophwyd.*”  
—*Dafydd ap Gwilym.*

“*Rhad Duw a Chynoran lwyd ar y da*—The grace of God and the blessed Cynoran on the cattle—was an ejaculation made use of in offering at the well of Cynoran, at Llysfaen, on behalf of deceased cattle.”—(“*Cambrian Biography*,” sub. loc., “Cynoran.”)

In the copy of the *Cambrian Biography*, owned by Iolo Morganwg and Taliesin ab Iolo, opposite the above quotation, a marginal note,

\* “*Dugdale’s Warwickshire*,” p. 116. † “*Ormerod’s History of Cheshire*.”



written by one of the two, reads as follows—"Llwyd, blessed, hence Duw lwyd, etc." This will suffice, by way of illustrating the former meaning of the word, though it would be easy to multiply instances from the works of the Welsh bards to prove that it was then used. The works of the bards from the earliest times to the Reformation are full of apostrophies to the Virgin as "Mair."

Certain feasts, which may seem connected with the Mari Lwyd, were established, one was called Feast of Fools, and the other Feast of the Ass, in the year 990, by Theophylact, Patriarch of Constantinople.\* Beletus states that the Feast of Fools was held in some places on New Year's Day, and in others on the 12th of January, while in some it was observed the following week. These feasts were held in the most amusing manner. In France it was observed as follows—The "Bishop," or the "Archbishop of Fools" was appointed and in the neighbourhood adjoining the metropolitan see, the "Pope of Fools" was elected. These had their proper official vestments, and made gestures on the stage, opposite the church, before the people. Their conversation and gestures were highly unbecoming; their faces were blackened. Some appeared in female attire and made coarse and lewd signs; sang immoral songs; ate pudding at the end of the altar, played at dice close to the priest when celebrating mass, censed him with the smoke of old burnt shoes, running and leaping in church. The Bishop or Pope of Fools, while celebrating, was robed in priestly vestments, and when he had finished he was placed in an open carriage drawn by a throng of clergy and laity, who threw mud and dirt over the bystanders. It must be recollected that those were the ages, very properly called "dark."

Consequently, Gregory (Bishop of Neocaesarea, who died in 265) established holy days or feasts in memory of saints and martyrs, in lieu of the feasts of the pagans, in order to facilitate their conversion. The christian feasts, therefore, were held instead of the pagan feasts, and grew like unto them, such as the observing of Christmas with joy and merriment, eating and drinking, and every kind of mirth and amusement, instead of the Bacchanalia and the Saturnalia, the first of May with flowers, instead of the pagan Floralia, and the feasts of the Virgin, John the Baptist, and several of the Apostles, instead of heathen institutions on the appearance of the sun in the different signs of the Zodiac.†

Some sections of the priesthood went so far in its observance of feasts of this kind in imitation of pagan practices, that Boniface is said to have "complained of certain German priests, who, though professing Christianity, sacrificed bulls and goats to heathen gods."

The tenor of Pope Gregory's letters to Milletus, the abbot, on the eve of dispatching for Britain, in the sixth century, is to the same effect. Milletus is enjoined to instruct Augustine, Archbishop of Canterbury, that "he (Gregory) having given much thought to the case of Britain, adjudged that the temples of the idols, which that nation

\* "Warton," II., 369. † "Turner's History of England," Vol. II., p. 340.

possessed, should not be destroyed, but be sprinkled with holy water, and certain relics deposited in them. Also, inasmuch as the ancestors of the people sacrificed oxen, they be permitted to slay kine or oxen, and build huts of the branches of the trees that grew around the temples, on the day of the dedication of the latter, which were the birthdays of the martyrs and saints, whose relics the temples contained, and hold a comfortable religious feast."\*

The above quotations illustrate the beginning of several feasts and customs which are still, to some extent, in vogue, but were once more so up to a recent period in the Principality. We find the origin of our May-day festivities in the pagan Floralia. It is from those we have the floral decorations, the rosettes, the ribands, and the summer dances of the North, the bearing of the may-pole, the lifting of the birch-bough in South Wales and in England. We will now confine our remarks to the feast of Christmas, though it will be necessary to notice now and again how customs have been shifted from one part of the year to another in some districts, while they are only occasionally observed in some localities. Christmastide commenced on Christmas eve, and sometimes extended over a fortnight, and at some periods we find that the holy season was kept up during December, January, and February. It was during this season mystery plays were acted, feasts given, and sports and festivities of various kinds indulged in. Now were held the Feast of Fools, already described, the Feast of the Ass, the Boy Bishop, besides the religious interludes before referred to. We now proceed to describe briefly the Boy Bishop and Feast of the Ass, which had some features in common with the Feast of Fools. It was in the Feast of the Ass, more particularly, our institution of Mari Lwyd originated.

The Boy Bishop was elected as were his two deacons. He was escorted to church, wearing a mitre, by a choir of boys, where he officiated at a sham service. Thence he and the deacons went from door to door to collect money—not to beg for it as charity, but to demand it as a right. The bishop was elected on December 6th, and held office until the 28th, or Innocents' Day. It would be too long a task to notice everything that took place on these occasions, but some description is necessary by way of explanation. The feast and the boys were under the protection of St. Nicholas, by reason of the miracle attributed to the saint of bringing to life again the bodies of young boys who had been killed and hacked to pieces. This custom was observed in this country for about six hundred years, and such sanction was given to it by the church, that it was an honourable and legitimate feature of our religious life. Every respect was paid to the bishop as to a real bishop, when alive and at his funeral when dead. Sometimes beautiful effigies in marble were raised to the memories of these bishops, some of which are still extant.† This parody was prohibited

\* "Bide's Eccles. History of England," Vol. VIII., p. 94.

† "Brand," Vol. I., p. 332.

A curious item this :—

Item—for mendyng the deville's cote.

Also,

Item—for making the sollys cottys, ujd.

Item—for the spritts of God's cote, ijd.

Item—a hat for Pilate.

Item—for mendyng the devyls hede.

In 1477 :—

Item—for mendyng the demons garment.

Item—payd for a stage for the demon, iiijd.

In 1480 :—

Item—payd for mendyng Pilats hat, iiij.

Payd for mendyng the wynde, ijd.

Payd for a new roppe for the wynd, viijd.

Again :—

Payd for iiij pare of angyllys wynges, ijd.

There are instances of these plays being performed as late as 1817 and 1822 in different places, but maybe the above quotations will suffice on this head. Though it became necessary to leave out the religious character of these plays in this country, yet the people would not let go the amusement they afforded, and they were turned into secular observances, as we have already seen.

The well-known institution Mari Lwyd has nowhere been kept in Wales so like the original as in Gwent and Morganwg, assuming one's supposition as to its source to be correct. In other districts of Wales we only find a few indistinct traces of the thing. Looking to North Wales, all we find there as having relation to Mari Lwyd is the custom of "giving a skull," as it is there called, which is as follows :—Young men go in search of a horse's or an old ass's head. The latter is preferable if it can be found. If there be a woman to whom they wish to show incivility, or on whom wish to wreak vengeance for some unkindness, the horse or the ass's head (as it chances to be) is hung up in some place by the time she gets up on the first of May. Unless matters turn out successful by that date, the ceremony is delayed until May Day, a fortnight later. Sometimes the skull is put up on the door, at other times over above it. Generally, the men folk are up early on that day in order to find whether a skull has been left for a woman or for the women there, and read the name or names it heads, lest the woman gets about first and throw the skull away, and spoil the whole game. Having discovered that a skull has been left, the fact excites merriment and laughter to the whole company, family, or neighbourhood at the expense of the woman or women who may have been unfortunate enough to have been presented with a skull. Sometimes several skulls are found at one house, all intended for the same woman. But when a young man wishes to show his respect and kindness to a woman, he prepares a bouquet of pretty flowers, which he places in some convenient place above the door, as in the case of the skull, that the bonnie lass who is thus the object of affection

may find it on the morrow. It would appear that it was from Mari Lwyd or the Feast of the Ass this curious custom of giving a skull must have been derived, and that the giving of a she ass's skull at first signified a taunt or charge of some shameful practices on the part of the woman. The skull represented the Virgin Mary, Mari Lwyd pure and holy, as contra-distinguished from all impurity, unchastity, or any other uncleanness, and in strong contrast to the woman who becomes the object of disrespect. Also it would seem that the date was changed from Christmas to May Day in order (it being the season of the floralia) to get a time of year convenient at once to express honour by the giving of flowers, and dishonour by the presentation of the skull, thus emphasising the distinction made by the contrast that is between the two.

Looking at matters in other districts in the Principality, Dyfed, which contains the counties of Carmarthen, Cardigan, and Pembroke or Radnor, and the extreme point of Brecknock, contains but few traces of Mari Lwyd, or any of the feasts mentioned above. There we find the wooden horse brought into use to mark infidelity on the part of the husband or the wife. Doubtless the idea sprang from the same source as the skull custom in North Wales; Mary, on account of her purity, being placed in contrast with the publicly immoral, or those thought to be so.

The wooden horse ceremony is performed in this manner:—Having discovered that conjugal infidelity exists in the neighbourhood, without waiting for a certain fixed season of the year, such as Christinastide or May Day, to notify the fact, the intended disrespect is shown as soon as possible. A wooden horse is prepared, a number of people congregate together, bringing with them all the necessary instruments, such as old frying-pans, and tin vessels, horns to blow in, with everything calculated to make sufficient noise, so as to give publicity to the disgrace of the offenders. We seem to see the crowd now approaching the house of the guilty party, armed with all the implements above mentioned. The evil-doer has already seen them coming, who, feeling guilty and aware of the custom, needs no prophet to tell him the purport of this visit of the populace who have come to do him "honour." However, he is determined to bolt and secure the door, so that not a living soul can come in. But the friends are not to be thus defeated in their object. They make for the door, burst it open, and bring out the culprit, whom they set on the back of the wooden horse. Some person known for his wit and eloquence is appointed spokesman, whose duty it becomes to relate the sins of the fellow who sits on his wooden horse in a conspicuous place. Then the din commences, in one clamorous chorus, no matter whether grave or gay the character of the rattle and noise of the vessels and the horns, all that is cared for is the quantity and not the quality of the hubbub. The tin vessels are beaten furiously and the blasts of the horns are terrible. The procession wends its way through the principal streets, and in order to give the discipline a religious finishing, the crowd make

for the church, and turn three times round the sacred edifice. This turning round the church has ceased in some places, but was a common practice some forty years ago in administering this mode of punishment. But should the offender escape, or in some way elude his pursuers, the spokesman then would mount the wooden horse. Occasionally, also, the guilty parties were placed together on the back of the horse. This custom is in full swing up to now, at least in some neighbourhoods. We recently read an account of a similar event in Cardigan, and the matter in the end went to the law court. The case was reported in "Cronicl y Cymry." There still prevails in Pembrokeshire, and in certain localities in the adjoining counties, a custom which, doubtless, is related to Mari Lwyd, for all that one can make out. We refer to the custom locally known as "mynwenta" or "penwenta." It is difficult to make out the meaning of the word in this relation, but the custom has so many features like Mari Lwyd that it is thought the two were originally identical. In country places farmers are so scattered that young folk are unable to meet each other except occasionally. But about the spring or beginning of May, when the farmer brings a cart-load or two of corn to be ground in the mill, it is customary to attend to the task the night through. Young people of both sexes are told, somewhat privately, that the "mynwent" or "penwent" of so-and-so is to be at the mill on such and such a night. Then a horse's head is prepared in a manner similar to that in use in acting Mari Lwyd, so that it can be made to open and bite. Dialogues and every kind of merriment follow, very much the same as in Mari Lwyd, as will be more fully explained again. The practice may have fallen into disuse now. My informant had himself been engaged in this kind of play some thirty years ago.

Another custom is also met with in those parts of Wales, called "Bwca Llwyd," which must have been derived from Mari Lwyd, not only on account of the name, but also because of the similarity of features in both institutions. This custom is as follows:—A horse's head made of canvas is prepared. This is painted and stuffed with hay. A hay fork, the blades covered over with leather, does duty for ears, the handle being manipulated by the person inside, who guides the movements of the head as he wishes. I am told that this is taken round on All Hallows' Eve. It will thus be seen that the time at which Bwca Llwyd is played does not coincide with either the Saturnalia or the Floralia, but follows the sports and pastimes observed at the season of All Saints. The bonfire or coelcerth night in the North, Scotland, and other places, nut cracking, eating apples, candle lighting, with several other amusements, seem to have sprung partly from Druidic and partly from mediæval rituals. It cannot now be ascertained why "Bwca Llwyd" is played at this time of the year in particular.

We now come to the Mari Lwyd institution, as performed in Gwent and Morganwg, as well as in some parts of Brecknockshire, &c.

The chief theatre of the custom is Monmouth and Glamorgan, and this name is used only in those parts. Proceed we to describe the



play as acted in its greatest splendour by the Gwent folks themselves. As may be seen the Feasts of Balaam's Ass, and the flight of Joseph and Mary with the child to Egypt, with the dialogues spoken by the several characters in the different religious dramas performed during the festive seasons, form features of the Mari Lwyd play. Before Christmas comes round the young folk look out for the head of a horse, or a mare, or that of a he ass or she ass. It is worthy of notice that the head employed some time ago, was invariably that of an ass, but now it is of no importance whether it be that of an ass or a horse, both being indiscriminately used. Having found a head, a wooden arrangement is provided in lieu of a jaw, which has a spring attached so as to enable it to open and shut, at the command of the manipulator, to bite people, to eat grass, to neigh and do other things besides speaking. The head is decorated with ribands of various colours, and feathers are placed on the few parts remaining undecorated. The head is provided with a mane, and a pole is driven through instead of a backbone. A canvas cover is placed over the and also over the man who steers the apparatus, which is now called a "Mari Lwyd," and is the principal actor in the play. The frame-work is made to resemble a real head as closely as possible, and now the remaining characters are appointed. These sometimes are four singers, with, perhaps, two to represent Punch and Judy. Two of the characters are called sergeant and corporal. But these are not invariably the same. Sometimes one of these plays a fiddle and does the work of merryman. Thus the number, the work, or the costume of the actors is not uniformly the same. The costumes of all concerned, if possible, are clean and tidy, and gaily dressed with ribbons, and sometimes broad and pretty sashes are worn round the waist. The company start on Christmas eve, and are engaged in the play for a fortnight, three weeks, or even a month.

The play is conducted in the following fashion :—Having arrived, say, at some respectable house, the six men—Mari Lwyd, the leader, the sergeant, the merryman, and Punch and Judy—now start singing short verses craving for admittance. The husband, or someone else inside acquainted with the play responds, and refuses entrance. Should the person inside show greater aptitude than the Mari Lwyd without, or the person versifying, then it is legitimate to keep the party out of the house altogether. But usually, after a lengthy dialogue, they are permitted to go in. Instances are known of such dialogues being conducted for an hour or more. The following is a specimen of the dialogue in use :—

MARI LWYD (Loq.)

I Wel, dyma ni'n dwad,  
Gyfeillion diniwad,  
I mofyn am genad  
I ganu.

I Well, here we come,\*  
Innocent friends,  
Asking permission  
To sing.

\* For the literal translation of these verses we are indebted to Mr. T. C. Evans (*Cadrawd*), in whose "History of Llangynwyd," a variant can be seen at p. 161.

2 Whech o wŷr hawddgar,  
Rhai gora ar y ddeiar,  
I ganu mewn gwirar  
Am gwrw.

3 Ma ffashwn cwnsela,  
Er's mil o flynydda,  
A hyny miwn ffurfa,  
Gwna biofi.

4 Cenwch eich gora,  
Felly gnaf fina,  
A'r sawl a fo ora  
Geiff gwrw.

5 Mae'm dawn i'n cynhyrfu  
Wrth feddwl am ganu,  
Y nos yn y gwely  
Mi goelaf.

6 Mi ganaf am wythnos,  
A hefyd bythewnos,  
A mis os bydd achos,  
Baid i ichwi.

7 O, tapwch y faril,  
Gollyngwch yn rhigil,  
Na fyddwch ry gynnil  
I ganwyr.

8 Mae Mari Lwyd lawen,  
Am ddod i'ch tŷ'n rhonten,  
A chanu yw 'i diben,  
Mi dybiaf.

2 Six amicable fellows,  
The best upon earth,  
And truly to sing  
For beer.

3 The fashion of wassailing  
Is since a thousand years  
An old form (or custom)  
I can prove.

4 You sing your best,  
And so will I,  
And whichever sings best  
Shall have the beer.

5 I am moved by the gift in me  
When thinking out my song,  
Even at night in my bed,  
This is true.

6 I can sing for a week,  
Yea, for a fortnight,  
Or a month, if required—  
A challenge to you.

7 O, tap ye the barrel,  
Let it run freely,  
Do not be saving  
To singers.

8 Mari Lwyd the cheerful,  
A frisker, would enter,  
And to sing is her object  
I trow.

THE RESPONSE (inside).

9 Rhowch glywed, wŷr doethion,  
Pa faint y'ch o ddyinion,  
A pheth, yn wych union,  
Yw'ch enwa?

10 Rhowch glywed, wŷr difrad,  
O b'le'r y'ch chi'n dwad,  
A pheth y'ch gofyniad,  
Gaf enwi?

11 Mi gwnas o'r gwely,  
Gan lwyr benderfynu,  
Y gwnawn i dy faeddu  
Di'n foddus.

9 Let us hear, wise men,  
The number you are,  
And what your names may be  
Properly.

10 Let us hear, not treacherous men,  
From whence you come,  
And what is it you ask,  
We demand.

11 \*I rose from my bed  
Fully determined  
Of beating you  
Agreeably.

\* In these verses singular and plural are mixed up; this is accounted for by the way the answers were given: when the wassailers sung together the introductory verses they sung "we," but when it came to "*prancio*"—making rhymes at the time in answer to each other—it was left to one, and he, of course, would say, "I rose from my bed," &c.

12 'Dyw gwiw i chwi scwto,  
A chwnu'r latch heno,  
Waith prydydd diguro  
Wyf, gwiriaf.

12 You need not push  
And raise the latch to-night,  
Because I am an unbeaten poet,  
And that I will prove.

13 I ffwrdd a chi'r lladron,  
Ewch ymaeth yn union,  
Ni chewch chi yn hylon  
Fy ngwelad.

13 Away with you, robbers,  
Depart at once,  
You shall not merrily  
See me.

FROM WITHOUT.

14 Mi ganaf am flwyddyn,  
Os caf fi Dduw'm canlyn,  
Heb ofni un gelyn  
Y gwylia.

14 I will sing for a twelvemonth,  
If God will follow me,  
Without fear of any foe  
This holiday.

FROM WITHIN.

15 Mae Jenkins, y ffeirad,  
Yn dyfod, ar f'enad,  
Gna fe i chi fynad  
O fannedd

15 Jenkins, the parson,  
Is coming, upon my soul,  
He will make you go  
From my dwelling.

Then Mari Lwyd advances, the leader taking hold of the rein, and before the house is entered, some verses like the following are sung:—

FROM WITHOUT.

16 Y tylwyth teg o'r teulu,  
A ddewch chi i'r gola heb gelu,  
I weld y wassel yn ddiath,  
Nid oes ei bath yn Nghymru.

16 The good people of the family  
Will you bring a light from your hiding,  
To see the wassail without shock  
(or painful sensation),  
There is not like unto her in all Wales.

17 Mae'n berllan o lydan floda,  
O lwyrfryd heirdd a lifra,  
Rhibana gwychion, brithion braf,  
A luniwyd yn ddolena.

17 She is an orchard of flowers,  
Displaying beautiful livery,  
Gay ribbons of many colours,  
Artfully tied up in knots.

18 Mae'n gaseg lwyswedd wisgi,  
Mae miloedd yn 'i moli,  
Ei phen yn gnotog enwog iawn,  
O foddion llawn difaeadu.

18 She is a mare of holy and brisk  
appearance,  
There are thousands praising her,  
Her head eminently knotted  
With material which cannot be  
surpassed.

19 Daw'r sergeant gwych a'i gwmni,  
Yn wrol i'n blaenori,  
At y gwaith mae eto i'w ga'l  
Wych, wastad gorpral gwisgi.

19 The brave sergeant and his company  
Will boldly lead us,  
And for the work we also have  
A gallant and an alert corporal.

20 Daw'r oslar gyda'r gaseg,  
A ledia hon yn landeg,  
A'i ffrwyn a'i gyfrwy gydag e,  
I rodio'r lle dan redeg.

20 The ostler attending the mare  
Will lead her comely and fair,  
Bringing with him his bridle and  
saddle,  
To step the place and run about (or  
trot around).

21 Daw hefyd Bwnch a Shuan,  
Ar unwaith o'r un anian,  
Dau filan draw, 'run lliw a'r drwg,  
Neu'r annedd fwg ei hunan.

21 There will be also a Punch and Judy,  
Both of the same instinct,  
Two villains of the colour of the  
evil one,  
Or of the chimney place itself.

22 Yn awr 'rwy'n darfod canu,  
Rhowch imi i ymborthi,  
Blwyddyn newydd dda i chi gyd,  
A phawb o'r byd serch hyny.

22 Now, my song is ended,  
Allow us to be feasted,  
A good New Year to you all,  
And all the world "for all that."

Afterwards Mari Lwyd goes in, first to the women—with puffing, snorting, neighing, pretended shying, and showing various equine antics, besides conversing. The merryman with his fiddle follows, performing every funny trick he can. They then sing the verse—

Wel, dyma'r hoenus feinwen,  
Sy'n codi gyda'r seren;  
A hon yw'r wassail wych ei chlod,  
Sy'n caru bod yn llawen.

Here is the blithesome maiden  
Who rises with the star,  
She is the wassail of far fame  
And loveth to be merry.

Then Judy comes, carrying a broom to sweep the hearth. After her walks Punch, and throws Judy down. A scuffle ensues. Punch afterwards kisses the women, and Judy pursues him with her broom. Then, having sung, danced, and played sufficiently long, all sit at the table, and are treated to meat and drink. Having acted the whole drama they sing:—

Duw rhoddo i'ch lawenydd  
I gynnal blwyddyn newydd;  
Tra b'o crwth a thincian cloch,  
Gwell, well, y b'och chwi beunydd.

May God give you happiness  
With the new year;  
As long as *crwth* or bells shall sound  
May you fare better daily.

Ffarweliwch, foneddigion,  
Ni gawsom roesaw ddigon;  
Bendith Duw i'o ar eich tai,  
A phob rhyw rhai o'ch dynion.

Farewell unto you, gentlemen,  
Our welcome has been plenteous;  
Blessing of God be on your home,  
And each one of your people.

The description of the action of this improvised drama, and the opening verses given above, in which many expressions witness to an ancient origin, have led the writer to connect the custom with the festivals fully illustrated in the early portion of the essay, and thus Mari Lwyd (Blessed Mary) reminds us of the flight to Egypt and the equine or asinine discourse of the Feast of Balaam's Ass, while the dialogues and characters recall Coventry with its mysteries and other dramatic representations.

NOTE: *Bibliography, &c.*—In addition to the information given by this article, further notices may be found in a paper by the late Mr. David Jones, of Wallingford, in "Archæologia Cambrensis" for 1888, p. 389; in "British Goblins," by the Hon. Wirt Sikes, and in "The History of Llangynwyd Parish," by Mr. T. C. Evans (Cadrawd), 1887, p. 161. (all in the Cardiff Free Library). At the Cardiff Museum, in the "Old Fashion Collection," may be seen a specimen of the ornamental horse's head used in the custom of "Mari Lwyd," which was obtained by Mr. T. C. Evans for illustration of the paper by Mr. D. Jones above cited.

hi dorson yn Crimpa  
wylk dyfod tag yma  
ar draws y stieila nos heus,

Os aethoch yn gyman,  
Di gwely'n dialgar,  
O Codwch i'n hawdgar roeseion.

y deisien pas felus  
a phob eorh o Spisid  
O rhanwch hi'n rhedus  
y gwelid

Do's yma'r un deisien  
ha thocms nag arian  
ond bara haid llechwau  
Heb ferman.

mae gyda ni phriol  
yn demau dolerol  
Cewch apail dewisid  
yn rhyddle.

O'r Swgwr fel tywod.  
Yn trai ar y gwaelod.  
A hutmegs a lemons.  
a pala,  
Fy Mwyd am fur teidi  
mae d'anal yn drewi.  
Drosg yddal o Seri nos heus.



**'Reminiscences of Cowbridge and District from the year 1860 to 1930 –**  
written for the Glamorgan Gazette by Mr E W Miles in 1930.

**Mari Llwyd**

In my early days, the Mari Llwyd visits were very general, as part of the Christmas festival and greetings. Three or four companies would visit the principal houses in the district for a couple of weeks, singing their peculiar greetings in Welsh. The leading man would carry the skeleton of a horse's head, fixed on a pole, with the head decorated with ribbons and glass eyes, a white sheet covering the man and the pole. The best hypothetical account of the origin of this custom which I have read, that it originated in Monmouthshire, where donkeys' heads were first used, to attract the illiterate in a primitive way in order to impress the various incidents of the birth and early life of Christ, in order to counteract the Pagan festivities of the Yule-tide. As time went on donkeys' heads became scarce, and horses' heads were used. I am inclined to believe, even in this advanced, intellectual age, the majority are more impressed by ocular demonstration than by theory. One outstanding example is the failure of a vast number, who have listened to innumerable discourses, to comprehend and appropriate Christian principles.

Cân y Fari Lwyd

*Pennill 1*

Wel dyma ni'n dwad  
Gyfeillion diniwad  
I ofyn scawn gannad x3  
I ganu

*Pennill 2*

Os na chawn ni gannad  
Rhowch glywad ar ganiad  
Pa fodd ma'r madawiad  
Nos heno.

*Pennill 3*

Mi dorson ein crimpa  
Wrth groeshi'r sticla  
I ddyfod tuag yma  
Nos heno.

*Pennill 4*

Os oes yna ddyinion  
All dorri anglynon  
Rhowch glywad yn union  
Nos heno.

*Pennill 5*

Os aethoch rhy gynnar  
I'r gwely'n ddialgar  
O codwch yn hawddgar  
Nos heno.

*Pennill 6*

Y dishen fras felys  
Â phob sort o sbeisys  
O torruch chi'n rhatus  
Y Gwyla.

*Pennill 7*

O topwch y baril  
A 'llengwch a'n rhugl  
Na rannwch a'n gynnil  
Y Gwyla.

*Ateb 1*

Rhowch glywed, wyr doethion  
Pa faint ych o ddyinion,  
A pheth yn wych union x3  
yw'ch enwau?

*Ateb2*

Rhowch glywed, wyr difrad  
O ble rych chi'n dwad  
A pheth yw'ch gofyniad x3  
Gaf enwi?

*Ateb 3*

Dyw wiw i chwi'n scwto  
A chwenni'r latsh heno  
Waith prydydd diguro x3  
Wyf inna.

*Ateb 4*

Mi gwnnas o'r gwely  
Gan lwyr benderfynu  
Y gwnawn i dy faeddu x3  
Di'n foddau.

*Ateb 5*

I ffwrdd a chi'r lladron  
Ewch ymaith yn union  
Ni chewch chi yn hylon x3  
Fy ngweled.

*Ateb 6*

Mi ganaf am flwyddyn  
Os caf Dduw i'm canlyn  
Heb ofni un gelyn x3  
Y Gwyla.

(yn 1953 recordiwyd y penillion gan William Morgan Rees, Brynmenyn ger Penybont ar Ogwr- gweithiwr rheilffordd ganwyd 1883.)

# The Last Mari Lwyd

**From: Old Cowbridge, 1922, Dr L Hopkin-James**

Mr John John, who is 80 years of age, the youngest old man in the town, is the last person who has gone round 'under the horse's head', as the Mari Lwyd, this old-world Christmas custom, has died out in the Borough. Mr John has sung his verses to me, and they are set down here phonetically as they came from his mouth in his form of the Glamorgan dialect:-

Mr John John, who is 80 years of age, the youngest old man in the town, is the last person who has gone round 'under the horse's head', as the Mari Lwyd, this old-world Christmas custom, has died out in the Borough. Mr John has sung his verses to me, and they are set down here phonetically as they came from his mouth in his form of the Glamorgan dialect:-

(1)

**Wel tyma ni'n dawad cymdogion diniwad**

**I ofyn os cewn ganad i ganu nos heno**

(Wel dyma ni yn dyfod gymdogion diniwed

I ofÿn a gawn gennad / ganiatâd i ganu nos heno)

Well here we are coming harmless friends (i.e. not causing malice)

To ask if we shall have permission to sing tonight

(2)

**Os na chewn ni gennad rhewch clywad ar ganiad**

**A pwy yw'r** (here his memory failed him)

(Os na chawn ni gennad rhowch glywed ar ganiad

A phwÿ'r ÿw'r...)

If we don't get permission listen to the singing ('put a listening on the singing')

And who is the...

(3)

**Ni dethon parchedig bron ty gwr bonheddig**

**I roi tro wyl nadolig ych welad**

(Ni a ddeuthom / Deuthom ni yn barchedig ger bron tÿ gwr bonheddig

I roi tro gwÿl Nadolig i'ch gweled)

We came respectably before the house of a gentleman

To have a Christmastime walk to see you (rhoi tro = have a walk, 'give a turn')

When the Mari Lwyd approached the house of visit those inside would secure the door and issue a challenging verse such as

(4)

**Os dos yma dynion all toru englynion  
Rhewch atab yn dynion i'r bechgyn nos heno**

(Os oes yma ddynion a all dorri englynion  
Rhowch ateb, y dynion, i'r bechgyn nos heno)  
If there are any people ('men') here who can write /  
compose ('break') englynion (verses of four lines)  
Give an answer, boys, to the men tonight

So they would keep up the challenge and response. If the parties inside failed to reply in verse admittance was looked upon as a right. Unfortunately we have lost the Cowbridge challenging verses from the inside, but Mr John remembers several of his answers

(5)

**Mae Mari Lwyd yma llawn sers a ribbana  
Mae wyrth i roi gola i welad nos heno**

(Mae Mari Lwÿd yma yn llawn sers a rhubannau  
Mae'n werth i roi golau i weled nos heno)  
Mari Lwÿd is here full of stars and ribbons  
It's worth putting on a light ('to give light') to see tonight

(6)

We've got a fine Mary, she's dressed very pretty  
With ribbons so plenty this Christmas

(7)

She has won a bridle and likewise a saddle  
Her name is Dame Tattle this Christmas

(8)

If you are good nature, go down to the cellar  
And fill a jug over this Christmas

From the inside:

(9)

**Fi safa yn y baili spor cerrig yn pantu  
Cyn ildai swd corgi a titha**

(Fi a saif / Fe safa i yn y beili nes bo'r cerrig yn pantu  
Cyn yr ildia i sut gorgi â thithau)  
I'll stand in the forecourt until the stones are worn down  
(‘develop depressions / hollows’)  
Until I yield to such an unpleasant fellow as you

Reply:

(10)

Your missis is willing to give us a shilling  
Without any grumbling this Christmas

(11)

**Fi gana ti ymhunan am punt ar y pentan  
A postio nhw mwn arian nos heno**

(Fi a ganaf / Fe gana i ti fy hunan am bunt ar y pentan  
??A phostia hwy mewn arian nos heno)

I'll sing myself for you by the fireside for a pound  
And give them?? (literally 'post them') in coin tonight

(12)

**Ma genni dwy dyrna fel sleds yn y cwara**

**Chaiff brwa dy drysa nos heno**

(Mae gennyf ddau (o) ddyrnau fel sleds yn y cwarre /  
chwarel

a gaiff friwo dy ddrysau nos heno)

I've got two fists like sledgehammers in the quarry

which will get to break down your doors tonight

(13)

**Fi gana am wthnos a phart o bythownos**

**A mis os bydd achos nos heno**

(Fi a ganaf / Fe gana am wŷthnos a phart / rhan o bythefnos

A mis os bydd achos nos heno)

I'll sing for a week and part of a fortnight

And a month if need be tonight

If the parties inside were beaten by the rhymesters outside  
admittance was gained and the song continued

(14)

**Wel clirwch y menca a byrddydd a chadira**

**Rhewch le ini wara nos heno**

(Wel cliriwch y meinciau a'r bordÿdd a chadeiriau

Rhowch le i ni chwarae nos heno)

Well clear the benches and the tables and the chairs

Make room ('give place') for us to play tonight

And at the end of the entertainment -

(15)

**Ni geson ein parched dos siwr a croesewydd**

**Fferweloch y leni ni'n madal**

(Ni a gawsom / Fe gawsom ein parchu, do siwr, a

chroesewÿdd

Ffarwelwch eleni, yr ym ni yn ymadael)

We were given respect ('we got our respecting'), yes indeed,  
and welcomes

Goodbye this year, we are leaving

Some of the verses were never meant for ears polite, and Mr  
John very rightly would not repeat them. He, however,  
ventured as far as to repeat: -

(16)

**O Billy pen bwldog a doi clust scafarnog**

**A dsawl dwy wynebog a titha**

(O Bili pen bwldog â dau glust ysgyfarnog

Y diawl dauwÿnebog â thithau)

O Bili (Billy) with the head of a bulldog and two hare's ears

You two-faced devil

DIWEDD / END

ORIGINAL TEXT:

The Last Mari Lwyd