# Contemporising Custom: the re-imagining of the Mari Lwyd

David R. Howell



# Contemporising Custom: the re-imagining of the Mari Lwyd

**David R. Howell**
Lecturer, the University of Gloucestershire, UK and Cardiff University, Wales

## ABSTRACT

Intangible forms of heritage are particularly vulnerable and susceptible to change. While evolution is inevitable for a living entity, at what point do we consider a tradition to have evolved beyond the parameters of that which made it distinctive? This article focuses on the Welsh tradition of the Mari Lwyd. This seasonal, animal head tradition is celebrated in Wales as a resistant, surviving legacy and is frequently described as a continuance of an 'ancient tradition'. However, the legitimacy of this claim is questionable. Instead, this paper proposes that the contemporary Mari Lwyd seen in Wales today, are unique entities, distinct from the historically recorded examples. In many respects, they should be treated as a new form of intangible heritage, which have emerged only in the last few decades. Understanding how the historical variant of this tradition has evolved into the distinct modern version is of critical importance in terms of understanding how 'elements' of intangible heritage are altered and manipulated beyond the confines of what first made them distinctive and considered to be of importance.

## Keywords

Mari Lwyd, Wales, devolution, revivals, artificiality, Trac, *pwnco*

## Introduction

Since the introduction of the UNESCO *Convention on the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage* in 2003,[1] interest in and recognition of this vulnerable, living form of heritage, has gradually increased. While there are some important forms of political resistance to the validity of intangible heritage, most notably from the UK Government,[2] globally the emphasis placed upon intangible forms of heritage can only be seen to have been strengthened. As the two UNESCO lists which catalogue intangible heritage are added to on an annual basis, awareness of and participation in the safeguarding of intangible forms of heritage continue to grow.

The 2003 *Convention* places a clear emphasis on the ideals of safeguarding. This can be seen as a form of active conservation which should protect traditions,

but not prevent their natural evolution and growth.[3] Safeguarding acknowledges that cultural traditions are active and dynamic and, in order to survive, let alone thrive, changes in the nature and form of those examples must be expected. In many instances, the adaptation and evolution of cultural traditions should be regarded as an organic process, where communities and participants adapt to factors such as economic, environmental and population change. There are, however, notable examples where an intangible form of heritage can be seen to have been corrupted by external forces, in a way that cannot be regarded as natural evolution.

Examples of inorganic cultural change have been best evidenced in the case of Balinese dance traditions. While this case study has been covered in extensive detail by other authors, it is useful to highlight that in Bali, the nature, form and content of that which was considered to be traditional dance, changed significantly and rapidly in response to tourist demands and appetites for particular examples of dances over others.[4] In the case of Bali, the intangible form of heritage was altered beyond recognition, and arguably compromised, as its intangible values were sacrificed in order to appease a commercial market. Such instances are not isolated. A constant challenge faced by practitioners involved in the process of safeguarding cultural traditions is finding a balance between raising awareness of traditions, without creating pressure through the stimulation of external, non-traditional audiences/consumers that may result in the heritage form being irrevocably changed.

In the context of Wales, examples of intangible cultural heritage are afforded no formal form of safeguarding. Despite over a decade of devolved politics, decisions made on matters pertaining to UNESCO, including ratification of the *Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage*, remain the sole preserve of the Westminster Government.[5] Unfortunately for enthusiasts of intangible heritage within the United Kingdom, central government has demonstrated a general lack of interest in intangible heritage, and has certainly made no efforts to prioritise such cultural resources, certainly not when compared with the built heritage of the island nation.

A lack of formal recognition for intangible forms of heritage throughout the UK means that such resources are on a weaker footing than, for instance, World Heritage properties within the UK. UK intangible heritage lacks promotion, financial support and any structured, national approach to safeguarding. The devolved political landscape, however, has placed greater emphasis on this area, with Scotland being notably proactive. A partnership between Edinburgh Napier University and the National Museum of Scotland successfully archived a list of intangible heritage examples in Scotland, and the devolved Scottish Government has continued to show an interest in and offer platforms for engagement on intangible heritage. This interest in intangible heritage has been echoed in Northern Ireland and Wales and there are several notable examples in Wales which should give cause for optimism.[6]

While Wales is rich in what could legitimately be described as intangible heritage, most notably present in the activities associated with the annual National Eisteddfod,[7] several valid examples exist in isolation from the major, state-sponsored cultural festival. Of these, the Mari Lwyd might appear to be one of the more robust intangible forms of Welsh cultural heritage. Described in more detail below, the Mari Lwyd is an example of competitive verse, or *pwnco*, which uses a decorated horses' skull as a focal point. There is a casual tendency in Wales to describe the Mari Lwyd as an ancient tradition, though source material can reliably date the tradition to no earlier than the nineteenth century. The Mari Lwyd is also celebrated as being in an ongoing state of revival. Having almost disappeared from the annual cultural calendar, the Mari Lwyd tradition can now be witnessed across Wales, with variants appearing in England, Europe and North America.

Taken on face value, the Mari Lwyd in Wales can be presented as a positive case of continued intangible heritage. It is arguable however, that many (if not all) of the examples of the Mari Lwyd performed today no longer maintain elements which mark the custom as intangible heritage. In this paper, it will be argued that, far from being a celebratory continuance of an 'ancient tradition', the majority of examples of the Mari Lwyd seen in and beyond Wales today, are expressions of a new form of cultural activity. This is not, however, an argument which will dismiss the validity of the 'new' Mari Lwyd as a legitimate form of intangible heritage. Instead, the argument will be presented that two distinct forms of the Mari Lwyd as intangible heritage exist in the Welsh cultural landscape, with the more recent examples only appearing in the last ten to twenty years [Plate 1].



**Plate 1**
The making of a modern Mari Lwyd. Patrick Dean and Matthew Youde assemble a 'flat pack' [see below] Mari Lwyd for an event in London, 2016.
Photo: Ffion Mair

## The Blue Mari of Walthamstow

It is not the intention of this paper to restate well established descriptions of the Mari Lwyd tradition, though for comparative purposes, more detailed historical accounts will be included below. As indicated above though, the traditional Mari Lwyd is built around a decorated horse's skull. Covered with a white shawl and adorned with bells and ribbons, the Mari is worn or carried by an individual, usually a male, and led through a community, travelling from house to house or, as is the nature of the tradition today, pub to pub. The horse effigy is accompanied by a small party of men, each playing a pantomime-like character, including a sergeant, and a Punch and Judy. Cross dressing is another familiar element. This 'ceremony' is accompanied by competitive verse, either in poetry or song, known as the *pwnco*. This distinctive form of verse and response echoes the wider historical importance of poetry and the bardic tradition in Wales. While variants exist outside of Wales, the specific terminology of 'Mari Lwyd' is, historically, exclusive to Wales. However, these elements of the cultural tradition have been challenged in recent years.

Perhaps the most striking addition to the range of recorded examples of the Mari Lwyd was identified in January 2016, in Walthamstow. This borough of London is a long way removed from the traditional areas associated with the Mari Lwyd, namely the South Wales valleys. It is also distinctively isolated in terms of the cultural geography of London. A strong expatriate community survives in London today, having been established during significant migrations during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The London Welsh Centre on Gray's Inn Road, and the London Welsh rugby club, in Richmond, are the strongest surviving living heritage legacies of Welsh influence in London, though several Welsh chapels survive across the city as well. Walthamstow, however, does not have as strong a historical Welsh narrative as other parts of the city, making the appearance of a strikingly Welsh tradition in this area of greater interest.

While the geography of the Walthamstow Mari Lwyd is intriguing, it is the form of both the Mari Lwyd, and surrounding activities which is perhaps of greater significance. This example forgoes many of the elements of the tradition which, by the framework established by UNESCO for the identification of intangible cultural heritage, would be deemed central to the tradition. Most notably, the horse skull is replaced with an effigy of a complete horse, made from card and painted blue. The body of the individual carrying the Mari remains decorated with white fabric, but the individual's identity is not obscured as it is in the case of the earlier versions of the tradition. In the case of the Walthamstow Mari, the horse is also carried by a woman.[8] [Plates 2 and 3]

Other familiar elements of the Mari Lwyd event have been retained in the Walthamstow example. Again, though, there are clear deviations from that which might be regarded as traditional. The *pwnco* competitive verse element is maintained in Walthamstow, but in a significantly reduced form. Community members taking part in the event are given song sheets and, at designated public spaces, group singing is initiated. This 'stripped down' version provides only an ephemeral imitation of the more complex 'original' form. Yet, a key consideration within reflections upon the safeguarding of intangible heritage is the survival of the form. Here, albeit altered, a form of the *pwnco* continues. The Walthamstow variant clearly lacks the spontaneity and mastery of the Welsh language required to allow for the instant delivery of new verses. In turn, previously recorded verses are maintained and delivered in a familiar manner.[9] This, therefore, is a compromise in the maintaining of tradition.

London, in 2015 (and again in 2016), was home to a second Mari Lwyd 'revival', hosted by the aforementioned London Welsh Centre and several nearby local pubs. In discussion with one of the co-organisers of what will be referred to as the 'London Welsh Mari Lwyd', it became clear that again, while a recognisable form of the Mari Lwyd had been maintained and brought to a new audience, several elements of the tradition had been removed. The London Welsh Mari Lwyd was an initiative brought to the city by the members of the Spring Heeled Jack band. Band member Ffion Mair cited her past enjoyment of participating in the Mari Lwyd in Wales, but wanted the convenience of their 'own' Mari. The tradition was also seen as having potential for assisting in the promotion of the band.[10]

In 2016, the London Welsh Mari Lwyd visited three local pubs before finishing at the London Welsh Centre. Song sheets were provided, including a predominance of Welsh language verses, with a shorter selection of English language songs, to accommodate the predominantly English language demographic of attendees in central London. The Mari Lwyd itself, like the Walthamstow example, was a cardboard alternative to an actual horse's skull. This was provided by the Welsh cultural organisation, Trac, discussed further below. The Mari was accompanied by three individuals, but no characters, such as the sergeant, were identifiable. The night ended with an organised *twmpath,* a communal Welsh folk dance and music event, not specifically associated with the Mari Lwyd.[11]





**Plates 2 and 3**
The Blue Mari Lwyd, Walthamstow, organised by Lucy Gibson, 2016
Photos: The Scribble and Smudge arts collective.

Again, various elements recognisable to the Mari Lwyd tradition have been introduced to London. However, there is a consistency among those elements that have been compromised or removed all together. For the London examples, the Mari Lwyd is the only identifiable character, while there appears to be no accommodation for spontaneity among the gang singing, verses being prepared in advance. Perhaps one of the most important elements about the London Welsh Mari Lwyd, is that Mair revealed that the actual inspiration for the specific form and structure of this example, was derived from the Mari Lwyd performed by the community of Dinas Mawddwy, in north Wales. What is remarkable in this instance is that the Dinas Mawddwy Mari is itself a revival, dating back no more than fourteen years.[12] This therefore is a revival, of a revival, of a tradition which had died out. Far from an organic continuation of a cultural form, this might better be regarded as an echo of a tradition. How recognisable, then, would the contemporary Mari Lwyd be to someone participating in or witnessing the examples recorded as folklore from the later nineteenth century?

## Identifying an 'original' form for the Mari Lwyd

The Mari Lwyd is a cultural tradition which suffers in contemporary culture from casual journalism. It is consistently referred to as an 'ancient tradition', though there is no evidence to support this notion.[13] While there is no shortage of animal, and specifically animal head, cults in prehistoric and historic contexts, it is impossible to demonstrate any sense of cultural continuity from any of these, to any variety of the Mari Lwyd maintained in the last two hundred and fifty years. Despite this lack of evidence, the concept of an ancient connection is a popular one and difficult to contest with an accepting public. Comparisons with academic merit have been made, and Miranda Aldhouse Green discusses the contemporary Mari Lwyd in relation to horse and threshold ceremonies, drawing upon examples in an Iron Age context including those held at prominent ritualistic sites such as Danebury.[14] The relationship between the Mari Lwyd and the symbolic importance of crossing thresholds is further elaborated upon by Juliette Wood.[15] Such narratives, however, present one of many challenges posed in attempting to isolate an original form for the Mari Lwyd.

It is the premise of this paper that we can today consider two distinct versions, or phases of the Mari Lwyd tradition - one 'living' example to have taken its form in the last two decades, and another 'lost' version identified in the nineteenth century. With additional scrutiny, it may well be possible to identify other specific phases in the evolution of this cultural form in an earlier period. For this paper, it is important to identify that which is distinctive about the contemporary Mari Lwyd, which marks it as a separate intangible heritage form.

The Mari Lwyd has been the subject of academic research, though it has perhaps not received the level of academic scrutiny in recent years which the subject requires. The most recent gathering of academics to give special attention to the tradition came in 2006, when a one day conference was held at the St Fagans National Museum of History. The intention here was to reflect on the form and variety of the contemporary revivals. While well attended, sadly the conference proceedings are yet to be published and the information coming out of these discussions has been largely lost.[16]

While more recent academic treatments are limited in scope, with Juliette Wood among the few to have probed the origins of the tradition, it had been the subject of scrutiny in earlier decades. Notable contributions were made in the 1940s by Iorwerth Peate,[17] once director of the St Fagans National Museum, and later by Trefor Owen in his seminal 1959 publication *Welsh Folk Customs*.[18] Preoccupations in publications between these periods focused on a rational explanation for the origins of the tradition, citing a mixture of pre-Christian to Christian based interpretations for the form and name attributed to the Mari Lwyd.[19]

Where actual descriptions of the Mari Lwyd are made in publications, references tend to be brief and/or in the context of wider folk customs. Fred Hando cites a discussion he had with a former participant in the Caerleon Mari Lwyd. Writing in the 1950s, his interviewee, Gus Sargeant, said that the Mari Lwyd had not 'gone out' in Caerleon for over twenty years. Sargeant describes the horse's head used in Caerleon in the following terms:

> *...we could make the jaws shut with an awful crunch. We filled the eye-holes with wadding and pop-alleys* [a type of glass bottle] *and fixed great ears made of wadding...one man acted as the leader with ribbons, then came the Mari draped in a white sheet, followed by the three singers.*[20]

Similar brief accounts are recorded throughout Wales, often in local publications. The journal of the Gower Society provides a brief half-page summary of the Mari Lwyd in Mumbles, near Swansea. Here the custom is described as *a party of local youths and girls, chosen for their quick wit and aptitude for rhyming, dress up in weird costumes, the leader covering himself with a long white sheet and a horse's head bedecked with gay ribbons.* These local accounts, supported by local newspaper reports,[21] provided short accounts, which allow for an overview of the Mari Lwyd tradition in Wales.

A critical text in our understanding of the Mari Lwyd tradition is the Eisteddfod entry paper from the Reverend William Roberts.[22] Writing in 1852, Roberts had attempted to present an argument debasing the cultural value of the Mari Lwyd as an immoral practice which should be discouraged. His submission included a detailed account of the form of the Mari, and committed to paper several verses of the competitive *pwnco* song. While Roberts' work was intended to undermine the long-term viability of the tradition, he inadvertently created an easily accessible archive account which would go on to provide the template for Mari Lwyd customs, and *pwnco* verses, across Wales and beyond. The Mari Lwyd revival held annually in St Fagans, the National History Museum of Wales, is just one of many examples to use this template,[23] and has been cited as being partly responsible for the 'fossilisation' of the cultural tradition.[24]

## Contemporising custom

Wales is currently home to a rich diversity of Mari Lwyd variants, some of which claim to have a significant historical lineage. For the purposes of this paper, it is more relevant to concentrate on some of the examples to have emerged in the last few decades. These 'revival' examples are perhaps most indicative of a new form of the Mari Lwyd, distinct from any identified in historical accounts. It is not the intention at this point to provide an exhaustive list of examples. Initially this would be impractical due to the volume of short lived revivals lasting no more than a year or two. Detailed below, the Caerleon Mari Lwyd, revived in 2015,[25] fell out of use again within one year. It is perhaps implausible to account for all such briefly maintained examples. Equally, the folk-art development and promotional body, Trac, has been responsible for documenting living examples of the Mari Lwyd.[26] Their work is arguably as close to a complete archive as is accessible on the modern Mari Lwyd, with no immediate need for a replication of their research. Instead, some of the more distinctive variants will be considered below.

Arguably the most successful example of a Mari Lwyd revival can be found in Chepstow. Equally, it can be argued that this version of the event is the most striking example of a new Mari Lwyd tradition, which echoes rather than sustains an older narrative. The promotional website for the event acknowledges this to an extent, describing itself *as the newest old tradition in Wales, or is it the oldest new tradition....*[27] Having begun in 2005, the Chepstow Mari has grown into a significant local celebration in south-east Wales. The event focuses on two key locations within Chepstow, the historic town bridge and the local museum. The day-long event also visits the grounds of Chepstow Castle, local pubs and the town Drill Hall. Annually, the event attracts numbers comfortably into the hundreds,[28] and community participation with local schools has been a consistent priority for the organisers.

Taking the historical examples above as a guide, there are certain elements of the Mari Lwyd tradition which we might expect to see. Critical elements should include the decorated horse's skull, a small supporting party, and the practice of the *pwnco*. Chepstow certainly respects these elements, but they are arguably lost within the wider proceedings of the day. The local border dancing group, The Widders, acquired a horse's skull from Germany, and has maintained the use of the same skull throughout the history of this event. While the Mari is accompanied by a small group, there are no discernible 'characters'. The event, though, is significant not so much for the presence of a single Mari Lwyd, but the conjunction of several traditional examples from across Wales and variants from English communities. No fewer than seven Mari Lwyd variants have been recorded in attendance in any one year, including Welsh Mari examples from Carmarthen, Llanfihangel Tor y Mynydd (Monmouthshire),[29] Pembroke and Swansea, in addition to the 'Poor Awd Oss' of Nottingham, the Gloucester based 'Broad' head and the horse head example from Stroud.[30] This roster changes from year to year, but the idea of multiple Mari Lwyd variants being present is a consistent element. It might be argued that the significance of a single Mari has been lost in this example, and certainly it is questionable whether this version of the tradition would prove to be as popular were the numerical strength of the Mari Lwyd to be diminished in any way [Plate 4].



**Plate 4**
The Llanfihangel Tor y Mynydd Mari Lwyd (left), hosting two additional Mari Lwyds in 2017. The appearance of multiple horse's head effigies at Mari Lwyd 'events' has become an increasingly common element of the tradition.
Photo: Author

The *pwnco* element is performed outside the town museum. However, as is consistent with the two London-based examples, the creative element of the competitive verse is replaced with song sheets, formally distributed prior to the *pwnco* taking place. One of the 'songs' to be used is based on the verses recorded by William Roberts. What, theoretically, was a documented account of a spontaneous competition of verse, is now committed to paper and recited by a small party at the door of the museum. Inside the museum, a response is organised in advance before the multiple Mari Lwyds walk through the museum and exit through a rear door. The event ends with a communal *ceilidh* in the Drill Hall.

The Chepstow Mari Lwyd is an organised event. The promotional website again reveals what is perhaps the true nature of this 'tradition', by citing when the Mari Lwyd will be 'performed' at designated locations within the town.[31] Spontaneity is given over to formality and structure. As suggested above, this in one regard can be celebrated as the most successful Mari Lwyd 'revival' in Wales today. However, it is a revival which has compromised many of the traditional elements, to instead create a well-attended event. This perhaps, is a key indicator of the modern Mari Lwyd tradition, and that which makes it distinct from the historical version.

A smaller scale example, but one with a longer local history, can be found in Cwmafan (also known as Cwmavon) in Neath Port Talbot. This south-west Wales example of the Mari Lwyd dates back 25 years, having first been revived in 1991.[32] Unlike the example from Chepstow, this is a true geographical revival, with a historically attested Mari Lwyd recorded in the locality.[33] Tim Rees, one of the co-founders of the Cwmafan Mari Lwyd, reflected that this revival was stimulated by a mixture of local knowledge, having grown up hearing stories about the Mari tradition, but that the key catalyst was the former captain of the local rugby club thinking that it would be a 'bit of fun' to bring the tradition back.[34]

Rees indicated that the Cwmafan horse skull is locally derived, and he further acknowledged a fictional folkloric narrative behind its origins. Gifted by a local farmer, it is claimed locally that the horse from which the skull came was from the lineage of horses owned by the medieval Lords of Afan. Herbert Fitz William, killed by local Welsh forces in 1245,[35] is claimed in local folklore to have been knocked from his horse by a Welshman throwing a stone at his head. In the story, while Herbert was slain by the rock his horse ran loose into the surrounding Welsh landscape, and sired a lineage which was maintained to the near-present.[36] Despite the almost certain embellishment of the narrative, the tale

makes the Cwmafan Mari Lwyd skull more enigmatic and yet more relevant to the local community.

The form of the Cwmafan Mari Lwyd more closely follows that which is described in historical accounts of the tradition. A small party of no more than two accompanies the Mari Lwyd, with visits focusing on local pubs (rather than homes). Rees describes a 'traditional' verse being used for the competitive *pwnco* element, but this is the *'wel dyma ni'n diwad'* verse, based on the William Roberts account. There is however some room for improvisation, and while the complexity of new verse may be limited, the spirit of creating new verses in the moment of performance is being respected.[37] Once inside the chosen pub, song sheets are distributed, while singing is led or orchestrated by the small Mari party.

An important distinguishing feature of the Cwmafan Mari Lwyd is the connection to fundraising. Rees indicates that fundraising was an integral part of the Cwmafan Mari from its inception. In 1991, the Macmillan cancer support group was the focus of fundraising efforts, and more recently, in 2015, £530 was raised in support of a non-specified charity.[38] If it is accepted that the historic Mari Lwyd served, to some extent, a community function of supporting and visiting community members at a challenging time of year, then it could be argued that the fundraising element is a continuance of this charitable behaviour. Rees however, offers an alternative suggestion for the importance of fundraising, suggesting that a *charitable undertone undermines the dark nature* [which] *appeases some in the audience...*[39] Might charitable acts make an otherwise dark, sinister and potentially frightening event more socially acceptable? Fundraising though, does appear to be a more consistent element of the contemporary Mari Lwyd.

Fundraising appears in other contemporary Mari Lwyd variants. The Dawnswyr Twrch Trwyth, a folk-dance group in Cardiff, collects charitable donations while dancing through pubs in Cardiff city centre. In Fflint in North Wales, the Dawnswyr Delyn folk group have maintained a Mari Lwyd for twenty-eight years. In 2016 they collected money, as part of their Mari Lwyd event, to raise funds in support of the town hosting the Urdd Eisteddfod, a youth cultural festival celebrating the Welsh language. In previous years, other charities have been supported in a similar manner.[40] This is not to argue that charitable fundraising is a critical element of all Mari Lwyds, but that it is perhaps a developing feature of the contemporary form.

Of these more established examples of the Mari Lwyd revivals, inspiration is drawn from a narrow range of case studies or examples. The Dawnswyr Delyn Mari Lwyd, for instance, uses what Blandford describes as the 'St Fagans' *pwnco*', sung from sheets by the participants. St Fagans, the National History Museum, has maintained a Mari Lwyd since the 1980s. St Fagans is maintained as a living history museum, which uses re-enactment of events and activities as part of its interpretive strategy. The Mari Lwyd, performed annually, again uses the William Roberts verses for their *pwnco*, repeating the written verse rather than improvising new additions. Therefore, Dawnswyr Delyn 'perform' a Mari Lwyd, based on a re-enactment in the National Museum, which is itself based on a nineteenth century account of a Glamorganshire example. The authenticity of such examples, therefore, is questionable. However, as cited above, the exercise at hand is to identify whether a new tradition has been created with the modern Mari Lwyd, as much as it is to query whether these are continuances of a much older tradition. In the instance of the Flintshire Mari, at the very least this cannot be presented as a continuance, yet it may qualify for consideration as a new variant.

The challenge faced in making sense of the contemporary Mari Lwyd is in part found in the sheer scale of the variants. During the time in which this article was being prepared, several 'new' Mari Lwyds were identified. In December 2015, a Mari Lwyd was launched in Anglesey. A horse's skull accompanied by three practising druids, visited the Neolithic burial mound Bryn Celli Ddu.[41] Superficially, this appears to be the Mari Lwyd, given the presence of the decorated skull, but key features such as the competitive *pwnco* singing, were not present. So again, key components of the tradition are compromised in the delivery of the 'new' tradition. Equally, the Caerleon Mari Lwyd is testament to the temporary nature of revivals. In 2015, local enthusiasts wished to bring back the Mari Lwyd to the town of Caerleon which, as opposed to Anglesey, has a historically attested example in the locality.[42] In order to do so, they relied heavily on the support of the organisers of the Chepstow Mari Lwyd, including the use of their horse skull, the structure and song sheets for their *pwnco* and the use of their dancers.[43] Due to other commitments, the individuals responsible for the Chepstow Mari were unable to maintain their support going into 2016, and the tradition was not enacted for a second time.

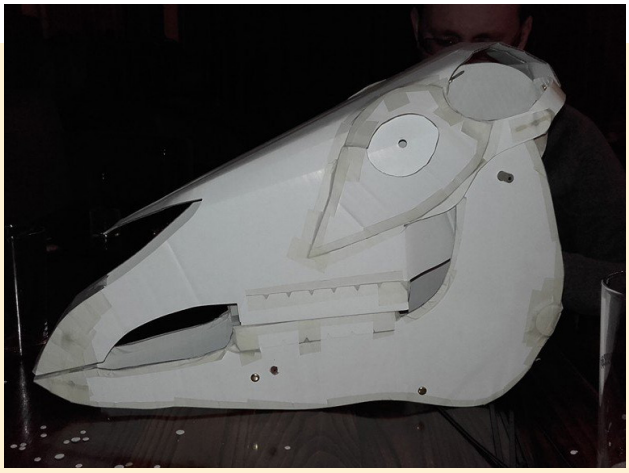


**Plate 5**
A cardboard flat pack Mari Lwyd, constructed and organised by the Spring Heeled Jack band, performed at the London Welsh Centre and nearby venues.
Photo: Ffion Mair, 2016.



**Plate 6**
The first appearance of a new Mari Lwyd, 2017. Unusually, this example, rather than being tied to a specific location or community, was the work of an individual enthusiast. The loss of connection between the Mari Lwyd and a 'home' could mark another step in the evolution of the tradition.
Photo: Author

There is also a growing ease with which enthusiasts might be able to 'perform' a Mari Lwyd. In the London Welsh example, the Mari Lwyd used was a cardboard 'flat-pack' skull, provided by Trac. Trac Cymru launched an initiative in 2012 titled *'O Wela ni'n Dyfod'*. The programme focused on *re-invigorating and developing the Mari Lwyd tradition,*[44] by the creation of affordable 'flat-pack' skull designs. [Plate 5] This would allow school and community groups to access and perform the Mari Lwyd tradition, without the cost implication or potentially questionable ethical concerns in the procurement of a horse skull. In the case of London Welsh, the Mari Lwyd tradition has been brought to a new community where, without the assistance of Trac and the affordable cardboard skull, it would otherwise not have appeared. Again though, can this be regarded as a true example of the Mari Lwyd? While the *pwnco* and party structure might be sacrificed, can the Mari Lwyd truly be maintained if the skull element is compromised as well? It would be erroneous to suggest that all Mari Lwyd examples use an actual skull, with the Llantrisant Mari Lwyd being among the more well-known examples to have used a wooden effigy, while the Llanfihangel Tor y Mynydd 'revival' has used a wooden head consistently since 1999. However, the introduction of identikit pack versions of the Mari is a distinct change from a local individual crafting a head from wood, or procuring a skull. The flat-packs introduce a degree of impermanence and fragility to the one element of the tradition which is rooted in a physical object. Finally, there is also a consideration of locality, or geography, regarding the legitimacy of the contemporary Mari Lwyd. As established above, and seen recently in the gatherings of Mari Lwyd variations in Chepstow, this is a tradition which has clear echoes or variations throughout England. While the Mari Lwyd in name, and the *pwnco*, is distinctive to Wales, examples from England clearly maintain a horse (or other animal) head tradition, associated with a threshold crossing, midwinter 'event'. [Plate 6]

In recent years, the Mari Lwyd has notably been recorded in the United States. As individuals from Wales travel, so too do Welsh cultural traits. In 2012 and 2013, a Mari Lwyd could be seen in Los Angeles, as part of the now annual Los Angeles St. David's Day Festival, a cultural event launched in 2011. [Plate 7] The Los Angeles Mari Lwyd first appeared in the same year as the closure of the Welsh Presbyterian Church in Los Angeles, marking the decline of one Welsh cultural centre and the rise of a revival Welsh cultural tradition.[45] Of note, while preparing this article, I was contacted by Owen Kahn, a native of Pittsburgh. He had come across my research on the Mari Lwyd, and wished to share his enthusiasm for the tradition. Kahn revealed that as a Christmas gift in 2015, he had received a horse's skull, and intended to start his own local Mari Lwyd.[46] He stressed that there was no known ancestral connection to Wales (despite his first name, and a strong historical Welsh presence in the Pittsburgh area),[47] and that a desire to start a Mari

Lwyd was based purely on a curiosity about the tradition. With the introduction of the flat-pack kits, and a growing international awareness of the Mari Lwyd custom, it is possible that thriving examples of the Mari Lwyd will be found outside of Wales where, it might be assumed, the importance of the Welsh language, and elements such as the *pwnco*, will only continue to be diminished.

## Conclusions

This paper opened with the suggestion that there are two distinct forms of the Mari Lwyd as examples of intangible cultural heritage, which can be witnessed in Wales today. As stated, the very nature of intangible forms of heritage is their impermanence, their tendency to change, evolve and adapt to the cultural climates in which they are maintained. There is perhaps though, a tipping point, where adaptation gives way to the death of an existing tradition, and gives birth to something entirely distinctive. It has been argued here that this is what has happened to the Mari Lwyd in Wales.

While a small number of examples, such as the Mari in Llangynwyd, Maesteg, can lay claim to a continuity of practice running for over a century, few others can do the same. The majority of Mari Lwyds practised today have a lineage that can be traced no more than thirty years, and of those, a significant proportion have emerged only in the last decade. It is suggested here that these are not examples of the traditional Mari Lwyd custom, but rather that they should instead be regarded as a distinct traditional form, which still represents legitimate intangible heritage.



**Plate 7**
Los Angeles St. David's Day Festival, 2013
Photo: Lorin Morgan-Richards

Several identifiers have been explored above for the traditional Mari Lwyd. These include:

1. a horse's head effigy, predominantly though not exclusively made from a skull;
2. that the skull was acquired locally, or the effigy made locally;
3. the accompaniment of a small 'party' (which historically would only include men) with 'characters';
4. the performance of a *pwnco*, with improvised competitive verses;
5. the movement of the Mari party between homesteads in a community.

While not an exhaustive list of traits, these are certainly elements familiar to historical accounts of the Mari. The contemporary version of the tradition might better be summarised along the following criteria:

1. a horse's head effigy, predominantly though not exclusively made from a skull;
2. no prerequisite for a locally sourced head (which includes the use of the state sponsored, Trac flat-pack card Mari Lwyd);
3. the Mari is led by an individual rather than a group with no gender roles or characters;
4. a song called 'the *pwnco*' is performed, with limited to no improvisation;
5. the movement of the Mari between local pubs and taverns;
6. an emphasis on charitable fund raising;

It might also be added that the Mari Lwyd can be expected to be seen predominantly in the company of folk dance groups which, while not universal, is certainly an increasingly common relationship, and not a feature of earlier examples.

This paper demonstrates that certain fundamental elements of the 'historical' Mari Lwyd as intangible heritage, have been lost or compromised. As with the Balinese dance culture, what remains today is in some respects a superficial imitation. There is increasingly less emphasis placed on the Mari head being locally sourced, with cost and ethics resulting in a gradual move away from the use of skulls. The Mari party has largely been replaced by a single individual leading the horse, or an amorphous group numbering into the tens or twenties. The use of

characters has largely died out. Equally, the true form of the *pwnco* has been lost. Formalised song sheets are the norm for performance, while the competitive element relies on a single recorded example, transposed on examples across Wales and beyond. Finally, homes tend not to be visited, and have instead been replaced by social clubs and drinking establishments, with fundraising becoming an increasingly common feature and motivation for hosting the Mari Lwyd.

Dixey suggests that there are two categories of intangible heritage on display in Wales, classified as 'official' and 'unofficial', based on their levels of organisation.[48] Dixey indicates that due to a lack of organising bodies, the Mari Lwyd tradition lacks the formality, structure and state funding to be considered an 'official' form of intangible heritage. This can now be questioned given a clear level of organisation in the modern Mari. Far from this being a rare, secretive and unpublicised event, the Mari Lwyd today is highly advertised and treated as a major event in the cultural calendar of communities. It can be argued that the Mari Lwyd can now only be considered as an 'official' and highly structured tradition, long separated from a secretive and unpredictable custom. The promotional work conducted by Trac, indirectly funded by the Welsh Government, also provides a sense of state recognition which Dixey deems necessary for 'official' status to be conferred.

It has not been the purpose of this paper to dismiss the legitimacy of the contemporary Mari Lwyd as intangible heritage. It has been argued though, that that which is regarded as the 'traditional' Mari has died out. What can be witnessed in places like Chepstow, Fflint, London and Llanfhangel, is a distinct and new variant, created organically by enthusiastic individuals and community groups, largely within the last two decades. This new variety of Mari is a legitimate example of intangible heritage which should be welcomed and, it can be argued, be the beneficiary of state/government funding or support. The tradition today has moved away from the historical Mari to such an extent as to warrant a distinct classification. The new custom is, however, vulnerable, and without additional safeguarding could very easily become no more than a performance for the entertainment of crowds during the Christmas period, devoid of meaning and significance.

## ENDNOTES

1 UNESCO, *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, 2003. Paris: UNESCO.

2 Smith, L and Waterton, E., 2009. "The Envy of the World?": intangible heritage in England' in Smith, Laurajane and Akagawa, Natsuko (eds) in *Intangible Heritage,* London: Routledge: pp. 297-8.

3 For further details, see: Kurin, R., 2007. 'Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage: Key Factors in Implementing the 2003 Convention' in *International Journal of Intangible Heritage,* 2.

4 See Barker, T., Putra, D and Wiranatha, A., 2006. 'Authenticity and commodification of Balinese dance performances', in Smith, M. and Robinson, M. (eds.), *Cultural Tourism in a Changing World: Politics, participation and (re)presentation.* Toronto: Channel View Publications: pp. 215-224.

5 Confirmed in conversation with the Culture Minister in the Welsh Government, Ken Skates personal communication, 8th September 2015.

6 Ken Skates personal communication. During this discussion, the Minister revealed that he had been holding ongoing discussions with his colleagues in the devolved Northern Irish and Scottish administrations. These considerations continue to be discussed at ministerial level.

7 For a more detailed analysis of the National Eisteddfod as intangible heritage, see: Howell, D., 2013. 'The Intangible Cultural Heritage of Wales: a Need for Safeguarding?' in *International Journal of Intangible Heritage,* 8: pp.103-116.

8 The Walthamstow Mari Lwyd was, in part, recorded, and elements of the event can be seen here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=byvoYfyhdbw&feature=youtu.be (accessed 11th September 2016).

9 Lucy Gibson (event organiser) personal communication, 12th January 2016.

10 Ffion Mair personal communication. 11th January 2016.

11 Ffion Mair.

12 Ffion Mair.

13 The use of the word 'ancient' has become worryingly casual when describing the Mari Lwyd. Most recently, local newspapers continued the use of the term, describing the Mari Lwyd as an 'ancient tradition', see: 'Chepstow welcomes ancient Mari Lwyd tradition this weekend', *South Wales Argus,* 11th January 2016. This trend is then reinforced and given legitimacy by organisations such as the Heritage Lottery Fund, which in 2012, described the Mari Lwyd as being 'one of Wales' most ancient traditions', see: 'Mari Lwyd brought to life at Urdd Eisteddfod', https://www.hlf.org.uk/about-us/media-centre/press-releases/mari-lwyd-brought-life-urdd-national-eisteddfod (accessed 10 August 2016).

14 Aldhouse Green, M., 2001. 'Cosmovision and Metaphor: Monsters and Shamans in Gallo-British cult expression' in *European Journal of Archaeology,* Vol. 4 (2): pp. 203-23.

15 Wood, Juliette, 1997. 'The horse in Welsh folklore: a boundary image in custom and narrative' in Davies, S. and Jones, N.A. (eds), *The Horse in Celtic Culture: a Medieval Welsh Perspective,* Cardiff: University of Wales Press: pp. 162-82.

16 Juliette Wood personal communication, 10th May 2016.

17 Peate, I., 1943. 'Mari Lwyd: A Suggested Explanation' in *Man*, 43: pp. 53-58.

18 Owen, T., 1959. *Welsh Folk Customs,* Cardiff: National Museum of Wales.

19 It is not the intent of this paper to revisit interpretations of the motivations for and origins of the Mari Lwyd. This is a complex subject, beyond the scope of this paper. However, further reading, in addition to that cited above, on such speculations can be found in the following, though this is only a sample of the available literature offering considerations of the origins of the custom: Ettlinger, Ellen, 1944. 'The Occasion and Purpose of the 'Mari Lwyd' Ceremony' in *Man,* Vol. 44: pp. 89-93; Peate, Iorwerth C., 1963. 'Mari Lwyd - Lair Bhan' in *Folk Life,* I: pp. 95-6 and Roy Saer, D., 1976. 'The Supposed Mari Lwyd of Pembrokeshire' in *Folk Life,* 14:1: pp. 89-98.

20 For a full description see Hando, F., 1951. *Journeys in Gwent,* Newport: R. H. Johns: pp. 22-8.

21 The *Monmouthshire Merlin* for the 31st December 1864, includes some speculation as to the origins of the Mari Lwyd in south-east Wales, citing an obscure incident supposedly in the 15th century defence of the village of Caerleon, which resulted in a horse's head being retained as a trophy, and commemorated in subsequent years through the parading of decorated horse heads. This is one of several historical newspaper accounts offering brief commentary on the Mari Lwyd custom, from the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries.
22 Roberts, W., 1852. 'Hanes Dechreuad 'Mari Lwyd' in *Crefydd yr Oesoedd Tywyll Caerfyrddin*, Carmarthen, Wales.
23 Andrew Dixey, personal communication, 10th July 2013.
24 Dixey, Andrew, 2012. 'Intangible Cultural Heritage in Wales' in Stefano, M., Davies, P., and Corsane, G (eds), *Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage*, Woodbridge: Boydell Press.
25 The author was heavily involved in the development of this example. The Mari Lwyd event was also covered in local media. See 'Mari Lwyd celebrations revived in Caerleon' in *South Wales Argus*, 10th January 2015.
26 See http://resources.trac.wales/traditions/mari-lwyd/ (accessed 10 August 2016).
27 See http://chepstowwassailmari.co.uk/ (accessed 10 August 2016).
28 Based on personal observations. The open air, day-long nature of the event makes it difficult to state with any confidence the actual number of participants and observers. In some years, it might be possible to speculate that over 1000 have taken part in proceedings. However, a more conservative and perhaps safer estimate would be to suggest that several hundred take part on an annual basis.
29 Howell, D., 2013. 'The Intangible Cultural Heritage of Wales: a Need for Safeguarding?' in *International Journal of Intangible Heritage*, 8: p. 106.
30 Based on conversations with participants accumulated over several years.
31 See http://chepstowwassailmari.co.uk/ (accessed 10 August 2016).
32 Much of the information which follows comes from an interview with Tim Rees on the 12th of January 2016, where he shared his personal memories and reflections on the evolution of the Cwmafan Mari Lwyd.
33 According to Rees.
34 Tim Rees, personal communication, 12th January 2016. The concept of the origins of the Mari Lwyd being connected to a desire for local entertainment have not been put forward in academic circles. However, given the mid-winter timing of the tradition, the shortened days and limited opportunities for social interaction in rural communities, it is perhaps not without merit to consider 'being entertained' as a plausible contributory factor to the creation of the tradition, even if the notion lacks academic complexity.
35 Lloyd, J.E., 2004. *A History of Wales; From the Norman Invasion to the Edwardian Conquest*, New York: Barnes & Noble Publishing, Inc.: pp. 228-237.
36 Tim Rees, personal communication.
37 The 2015 Cwmafan Mari Lwyd was filmed and has been made available online. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AcvWcDLagY (accessed 10th September 2016). The verse performed at the start of the film is based upon the William Roberts lyrics, though there is deviation and improvisation as the singing continues, making this a more legitimate version of a *pwnco*.
38 Tim Rees, personal communication.
39 Tim Rees.
40 Nic Blandford, personal communication. Blandford also notes that the Fflint Mari Lwyd is made from a local skull. It is claimed the skull comes from an ex-racehorse, said to have been shot and killed at Chester races. It is said that the bullet hole remains visible in the skull.
41 An image can be found here: https://twitter.com/Anglesey_Druid/status/679346572547747840/photo/1 (accessed 11th September 2016).
42 See Hando, F, *Journeys in Gwent*, op cit.
43 Again, these observations are drawn from personal reflections having been involved in the planning and delivery of this example.
44 Arts Council of Wales, *Annual Review Report 2012 - 13*, Cardiff: Arts Council of Wales: p. 6.

45 Communications with Lorin Morgan-Richards, founder of the Los Angeles St. David's Day Festival; personal communication, 10th March 2014.
46 Owen Kahn, personal communication, 30th December 2015.
47 See, for instance, Conway, A., 1961. *The Welsh in America,* USA: University of Minnesota Press.
48 Dixey, op cit: p.145.