

Ifor Part 3



My parents' generation... from a London Welsh point of view... were maybe more Welsh speaking than they would have been, because of the war, because of World War 2. World War 2 created something of an Indian summer in the history of the Welsh community in London, because a whole generation of children, including my own father, were sent... instead of leaving London as evacuees to go to random destinations, to, I don't know, Norfolk, Devon or wherever....

Their parents had the option to send their children to a place of safety of their own choosing... and that was the usual pattern with the London Welsh. They'd send their children to stay with their grandparents, in west Wales oftener than not... and accordingly there were some who'd spent the entire war in a fully Welsh -speaking community, indeed some of them came back to London with very little English! My father was only down with his grandparents in Pontrhydfendigaid, for a year, at the height of the blitz from 1940 to 1941... so, that created, as I said, a new generation of London Welsh, with a very firm grasp of the language, and yet when it came to passing the language on, there was, as I said earlier, a lot of slippage, I remember talking about this... a group of us used to meet socially, a group of London Welsh youngsters, every Friday night in the London Welsh club in Grays Inn Road... and someone asked one Friday y'know... 'ow many of us, 'ow many of our parents speak Welsh then?' So, we went around the group there were about twenty of us sitting in a circle together... and d'you know, there were fifteen of us with two Welsh speaking parents, the other five had one, but out of that twenty, only five of us in our generation had had the language from their parents... so there you have it, there were a lot of London Welsh young parents at the start of the 1960s who didn't see any value in passing on the language to their children, and accordingly I'm immensely grateful to my parents that they chose to do so...

Which is not to say that I didn't hear English at home... my brother had some developmental issues and the doctor advised my parents that it wasn't surprising that he had problems because they were speaking Welsh with him... that was the conventional wisdom of the time!...so the language at home changed increasingly to English. We'd still speak Welsh when we went to chapel, and we'd speak Welsh (and this was probably my salvation) when we visited our relations down in Wales, and we would always spend all our Easter and summer holidays with my grandparents in Llanrwst, and that explains in part why I have a north walian accent rather than a westwalian accent in Welsh, because we would also visit my grandfather's old home in Pontrhydfendigaid, and of course the London Welsh population then, was dominated by people from the west... which to an extent is explained by demographics, If you lived in the

north you were more likely to seek a better future in Manchester or Liverpool, whilst those in the west and the south were more likely to come to London.

A generation earlier of course, they would have headed for the coal-mining villages of the south east, and indeed I have a lot of distant relatives in the coal mining areas of Glamorgan... But in my grandfather's generation, he came with his two brothers to London, to work in the bank...they had cousins who worked in the dairy business... and if you ask anyone 'what was the quintessential Welsh business in London?' that's the answer you'd usually get, 'working in a dairy business'...we had relations who did that, but no, my grandfather went to work in a bank. Ceredigion, a county in west Wales, was quite an impoverished area in the second half of the nineteenth century... and so people were drawn to London to seek a better future for themselves, and they found that they could use their talent for husbandry by keeping dairy cattle in London, as often as not on the premises, with the cows being pastured on Hackney marshes every three months or so, to maintain their condition and the quality of the milk that they gave on the back streets of London. That's what they did and subsequently the dairy businesses gradually evolved from being people who kept cows, to people who bought milk in, and kept small shops...

There was another extensive group of London Welsh people, who also worked in 'retail' but on a different level, and that's what brought my great grandfather to London, to work in a big store, a drapery store, there were a lot of Welsh people working like this, again, many of them from Ceredigion and Carmarthenshire... yeah, that's the kind of place London was then... and I'm part of that heritage!