

Ifor Part 4



‘What’s the London Welsh community like today?’ ... well of course, I’m not the best person to answer a question like that, because my connection these days is from a distance... after my dad died, my mam has moved to live nearby to us here in Caernarfon... my brother still lives in London, or on the outskirts... and I still see my London Welsh friends occasionally... As far as I can see, Welsh people are still moving to London, that pull is still there, but not to the same extent as it was in my parents’ era, or for my grandparents, or the generations before them, because these days of course we have our own capital in Cardiff... and so undoubtedly, in the world of government, the media and so on, there’s much more of a pull now to Cardiff rather than to London

...and I also sense that London is maybe more of a multi-cultural society, or rather, more of a consciously multi-cultural society, than it was when I was growing up. Of course, London was a multi-cultural place then too...one of my best friends in primary school was Andrew De Menezes, whose dad came from Goa...my dad’s business partner, Suryakant Chauhan, was Gujarati, but a Gujarati who’d been born and brought up in Uganda and then forced to flee from there by Idi Amin...and I remember being surprised when Suryakant said that he intended visiting India for the first time... and that perhaps underlines the difference between being raised as a Welsh speaker in London, as opposed to being of another background, it was easier for us... Wales wasn’t far away, even in my father’s era, Wales was relatively close and they were able to visit quite frequently, my dad would spend all his holidays, Christmas, Easter and summer with his grandparents and that must have been a factor in his linguistic fluency...

mm... But it’s quite different for people from Asian communities, you know you can’t be jumping on to planes to take you back (Well, Suryakant certainly wasn’t going back to Uganda was he, for obvious reasons) but India wasn’t close for him either.

So... the resources available to an individual to help them maintain their identity in another language, will depend on what group they come from, which ethnicity... but generally, in the 1970s, I don’t feel that we were having these kinds of conversations. Our Welsh identity in London... well I would certainly have asserted it, if questioned about it in London, but it didn’t often come up...

As an example of that...mm... there was the time that I’d decided I’d like to do O Level Welsh, so I’d spoken with my school and they’d agreed that if I wrote off for the exam papers they’d let me sit them in school and ‘invigilate’ me, make sure that I answered the questions under suitable exam conditions... and so on the appointed day, physics was the main exam in the hall that day, so there I was, about to go in the hall and looking at the list to see where my name and desk

number was, because I certainly didn't want to be sitting down to a physics paper given that it was a subject that I'd given up... And standing beside me at the notice board looking for his desk number too was a boy from the same class as me, Bremen ... and I couldn't understand what he was doing there because I knew that he didn't do physics either, he'd given the subject up too, so I said to him, 'what you doing here then? You don't do physics'

'No,' he said 'no, I'm doin' O level Dutch'

'Gosh,' I said, 'so, do you speak Dutch then?'

'Yeah, that's our family language, that's what we speak at home'

'Oh!'

'But what are you doing here?' he said, 'you don't do physics either.'

'Well, no, I'm here for the Welsh exam.'

'Oh... so you speak Welsh then?'

'Yeah, that's what we speak at home'

...So, our home experiences mirrored each other, and yet, each of us was completely unaware till that moment that there were other layers to each other's identity - beyond our shared use of English, that dominated everything else... as it does to a great extent today, but I think that there is at least a greater awareness these days, that there are ... y'know...that there are other ways of living, and other languages that can be spoken...

But then I was brought up in the 1970s, when people thought that Love thy Neighbour was entertaining!... so yeah, we've definitely moved on from there, I'm glad to say.