

Wales

remembers

the Irish Great Hunger 1845-1851

Celtic Cross, Cathays Cemetery, Cardiff

Noon, Sunday 10th May 2015

(Part of the Global Irish Great Hunger Commemoration)



Welcome to the Irish Great Hunger Memorial

A big Irish and Welsh welcome today as we reflect on the Irish who came to Wales before us. Today, we will share some background on the Irish in Wales with songs and poetry on the Great Hunger period of 1845-1851.

Irish Potato Famine

by Ciarrai Manning
Read by Bernie Finnegan

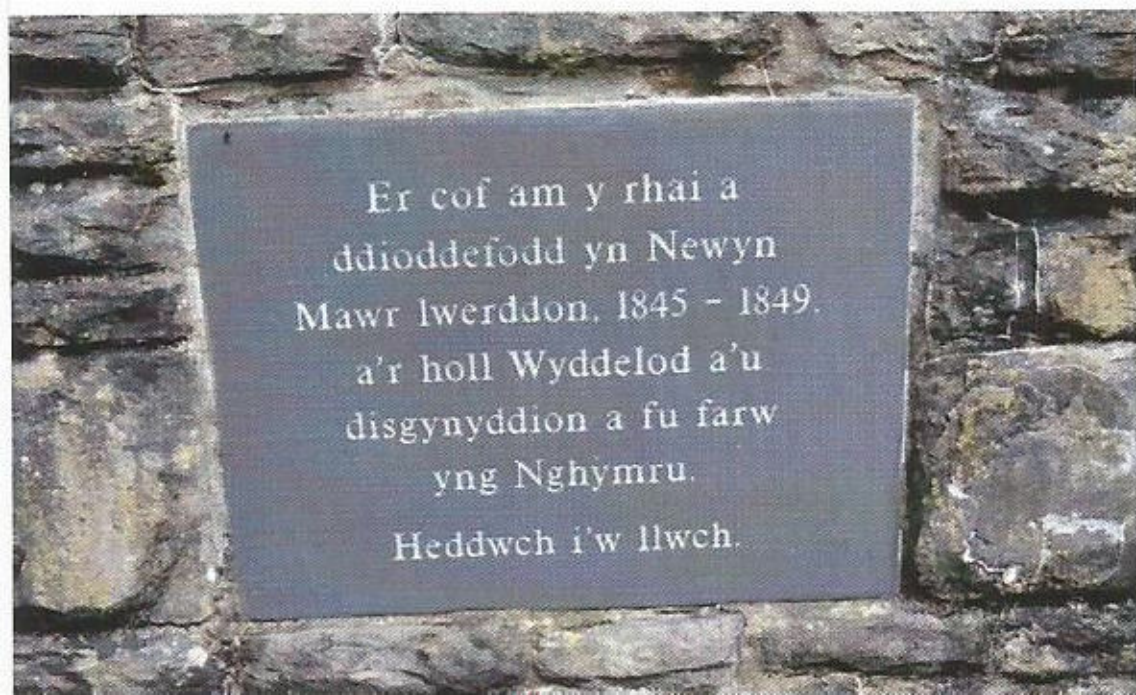
Freezing to death in a drafty cottage,
Raging snow pounding against the walls.
No warmth, no food, no light, no comfort.
The Potato Famine goes on in 1847...

The government wants us out,
Ships of death are built to remove us.
Some are too sick to make it to the dock,
They die on the shore, no one cares.

They said someone would be waiting for us
On the other side of the ocean
To help us get started in our new lives.
But no one was waiting, we're on our own again.

The few who survived the treacherous journey
Have no way to get back home to Eire.
We're stranded here in this strange country...
Perhaps we should have stayed in our marred motherland.

But we are Irishmen, we do not give up.
We will work hard and fight for happiness.
We will live on, unlike many back home.
And we will never forget why we are here.



Er cof am y rhai a
ddioddefodd yn Newyn
Mawr Iwerddon, 1845 - 1849.
a'r holl Wyddelod a'u
disgynyddion a fu farw
yng Nghymru.
Heddwch i'w llwch.

Background to Irish/Welsh relations

Via Media Wales

Read by Eileen Bevan

The Great Hunger, 1845-1851

The failure of the potato crop in successive years took away the staple food that sustained millions of poor people. About a million Irish people starved to death or died of the virulent diseases associated with starvation and poverty. The Great Hunger forced about 2 million people to seek refuge in other parts of the world. There was no county in Ireland, no religious denomination, no social or political class which did not bury its dead during that dreadful calamity. Of those forced into exile many thousands arrived in Wales: they were the largest single group of immigrants to play a part in the story of Wales.

The Country I leave behind

Sung by Dave Burns

My barque leaves the harbour tomorrow
Across the wild ocean to roam
But Kitty my burden of sorrow
Is more than I wish you to hold

Chorus

There is a deep dark cloud hanging o'er me
There is mighty great load on my mind
When I think of the prospects before me
And the country behind
So farewell to the green fields of Erin
Farewell to all hearts true and kind
And where ever I be
I'll be true love to thee
And the country I leaving behind

So Kitty give over your sighing
And don't share a tear now for me
For tomorrow my barque will be sailing
Far away cross the wild raging sea

Chorus

Wretched condition of emigrants

Extract from the *Monmouth Merlin*, 6th February 1847

Read by John Sweeney (Retired Chairman Wales Famine Forum)

Hundreds of unfortunate creatures from the land of famine have been recently thrown on upon our shore, and the numbers increase so rapidly that the suggestion of a highly influential gentleman in our neighbourhood should be immediately adopted, – namely, a memorial to government, to meet the serious expense of sustaining these unhappy creatures, a course which has been adopted by the authorities at Liverpool, and which the Home Office cannot reasonably refuse; but in the meantime the wretched strangers must be taken care of and not suffered to perish.

On Monday last, a vessel called *The Wanderer*, Captain Casey, from Baltimore, Ireland, arrived in this port, which place she left on 23 December last, with 113 destitute passengers, consisting of men, women, and children, several of them were from Skibbereen: owing to the adverse winds the vessel was obliged to put into Monkstown; they were driven back to Cork, and once more they were obliged to put into Monkstown, from which port they sailed, and finally reached here as before stated, but human conception can hardly reach the depths of misery in which a large number of them appeared.

They were straitened for provisions, although we learn that the relief committee of Cork were not wanting in affording proper aid when *The Wanderer* put in there.

Men, women, and children, to the number of 26 were found dying stretched upon a scanty portion of straw which but did partially protect them from the hard and damp ballast on which they were lying in the hold. This sad fact being known upon the arrival of the ship at the wharf at Pillgwenlly, – the offices of humanity were promptly afforded by Mr Honey, Mr Pyne, and Mr Jefferies, surgeon and shortly after by a gentleman of the subscription fund committee of Newport; but above all, the most prompt and efficacious assistance was rendered in the way of proper nourishment by the Misses Homfray and Mrs Lewis. How true it is said of the tender sex, – ‘when care and anguish wring the brow a ministering angel thou.’

We are happy to say, that through the prompt and assiduous care extended to those destitute people, but one death is likely to ensue, and the case of the survivors will be brought before the board of guardians at our union tomorrow.

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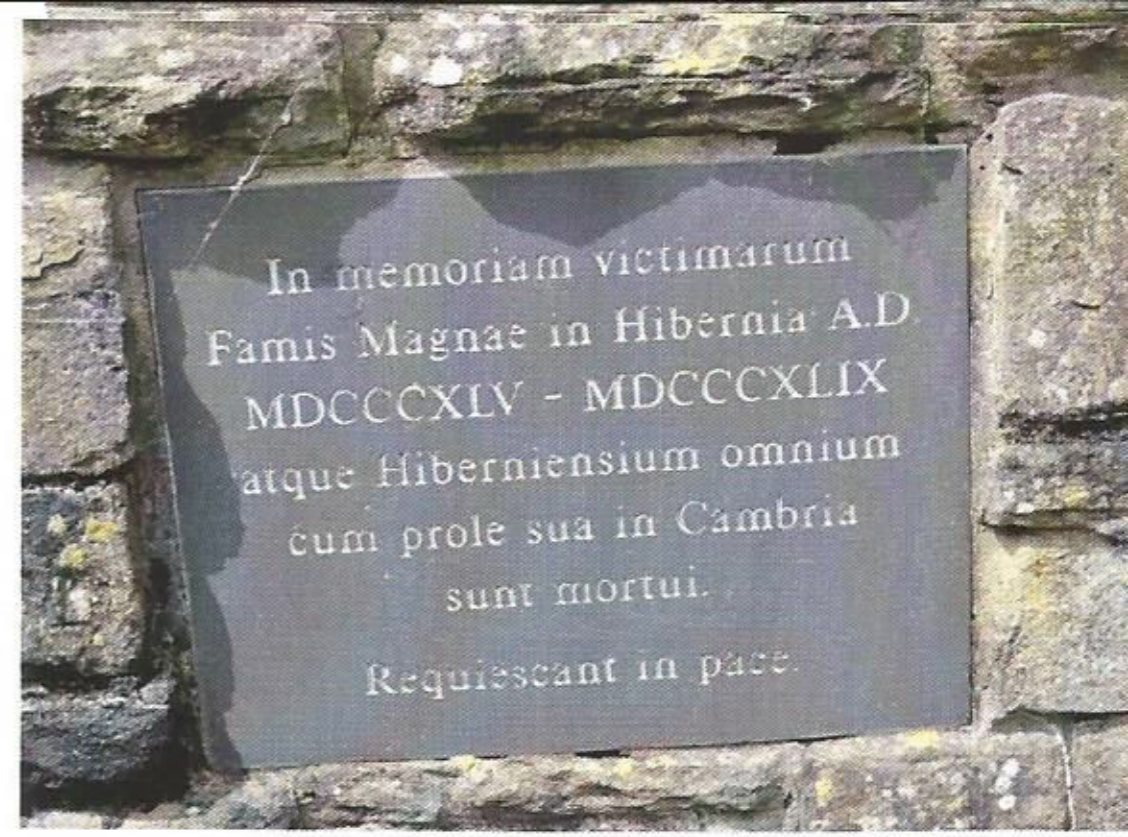
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PONTYPOOL

Mr. Davies, of Abersychan, has been appointed Collector of Taxes for this parish, in the room of Mr. Wallace, who has



THE WANDERER (OF LIVERPOOL)
from a painting by MR. J. SPURLING



The Fields of Athenry

Pete St. John
Sung by Dave Burns

By a lonely prison wall
I heard a young girl calling
Micheal they are taking you away
For you stole Trevelyn's corn
So the young might see the morn.
Now a prison ship lies waiting in the bay.


Low lie the Fields of Athenry
Where once we watched the small free birds fly.
Our love was on the wing we had dreams and songs to sing
It's so lonely 'round the Fields of Athenry.

By a lonely prison wall
I heard a young man calling
Nothing matters Mary when you're free,
Against the Famine and the Crown
I rebelled they ran me down
Now you must raise our child with dignity.

Low lie the Fields of Athenry
Where once we watched the small free birds fly.
Our love was on the wing we had dreams and songs to sing
It's so lonely 'round the Fields of Athenry.

By a lonely harbour wall
She watched the last star falling
As that prison ship sailed out against the sky
Sure she'll wait and hope and pray
For her love in Botany Bay
It's so lonely 'round the Fields of Athenry.

Low lie the Fields of Athenry
Where once we watched the small free birds fly.
Our love was on the wing we had dreams and songs to sing
It's so lonely 'round the Fields of Athenry.



In memory of the victims
of the Great Famine
in Ireland 1845 - 1849,
and of all Irish people
and their descendants
who have died in Wales.
May they rest in peace.

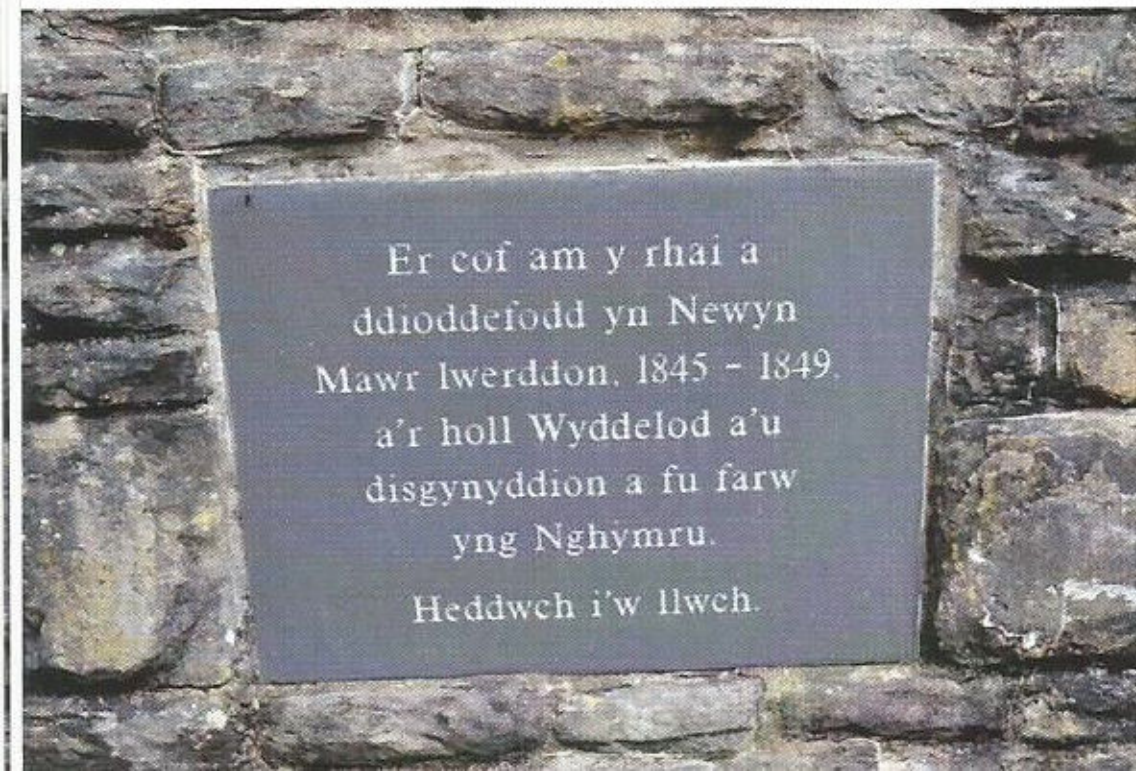
The Journey

Tens of thousands of the refugees arrived at the ports of South Wales after travelling as ballast in the holds of coal ships on their return journey. Many were diseased and starving, and they had endured appalling conditions on the sailing ships.

The journey to Wales took days, or even weeks when the weather was bad and some refugees died on board ship or succumbed shortly after landing. Harrowing times often lay ahead as fearful migrants encountered an anxious and sometimes hostile population. As one commentator at Cardiff put it, the destitute newcomers arrived with nothing more than “pestilence on their backs, famine in their stomachs”.

Officials in the ports did their best to deter the refugees from landing. In a vain attempt to stem the flow of people, they prosecuted ship captains for carrying too many passengers. The captains responded by avoiding the unpopular reception waiting for them at the main ports and unloaded their human cargo on beaches in small inlets along the coast.

In one tragic case in May 1847, an Irishman who had been landed away from the port of Cardiff drowned in the mudflats near Penarth, having been trapped by an oncoming tide. In June 1849 officials at Cardiff issued a poster advertising a £10 reward for information leading to the conviction of sea captains who landed Irish passengers illegally between Aberthaw and the River Rumney.



Er cof am y rhai a
ddioddefodd yn Newyn
Mawr Iwerddon, 1845 - 1849,
a'r holl Wyddelod a'u
disgynyddion a fu farw
yng Nghymru.
Heddwch i'w llwch.



On A Single Day

This piece written by Christy Moore highlights the fact that food was exported while the people starved.

A list of exports from Cork Harbour
On a single day
The fourteenth of September, Eighteen
Forty-Seven
Ran as follows:

147 barrels of pork,
986 casks of ham,
27 sacks of bacon,
528 boxes of eggs,
1, 397 firkins of butter,
477 sacks of oats,
720 sacks of flour,
380 sacks of barley,
187 head of cattle,
296 head of sheep, and
4, 338 barrels of miscellaneous provisions,

On a single day,
The ships sailed out from Cork Harbour
With their bellies in the water.

On a single day in County Galway,
The great majority of the poor located there
Were in a state of starvation,
Many hourly expecting death to relieve their
suffering.

On a single day,
The Lady Mayoress held a ball
At the Mansion House in Dublin
In the presence of the Lord Lieutenant of
Ireland.
Dancing continued until the early hours,
And refreshments of the most varied and
sumptuous Nature
Were supplied with inexhaustible profusion.
On a single day.
On a single day.

It's about time this little country of ours had a
bit of peace.



From 1841 the Irish began to arrive in Wales. Those who disembarked were in a desperate state. *The Wanderer* docked in Newport in 1847 and deposited 113 destitute men, women and children in the town, with 20 of them said to be close to death. This prompted comment in Parliament, and the *Monmouthshire Merlin* newspaper wrote of “the alarming and lamentable appearance of the streets of Newport, crowded with many hundreds of famishing Irish”.

By 1861, almost 30,000 people had arrived. They settled primarily in the four largest South Wales towns – Cardiff, Swansea, Newport and Merthyr. By the 1860s there were 73 ghettos in Cardiff alone. Irish people also settled in other rapidly developing towns such as Bridgend, Caerphilly, and other mining valleys of Glamorganshire and Monmouthshire. Settlements also began to form in West and North Wales.

All of these people men, women and children, together with their tragedies, faith, endurance, and enterprising spirit are a part of Welsh and Irish history. In honouring them, we honour the Welsh who helped them, and in remembering them, we ensure, that we in turn will be remembered by those who will take our place in the Wales and the Ireland of the future.


An extract from “Famine”

by Sinead O’Connor

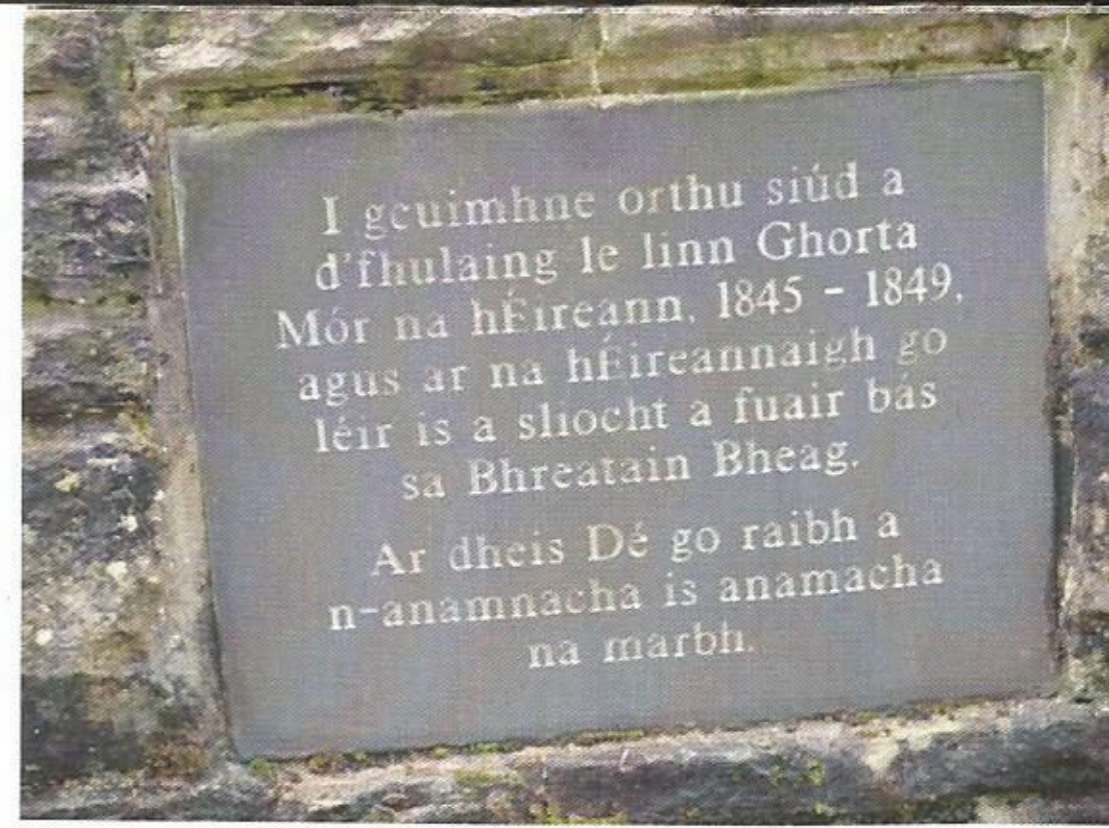
Read by Nuala Lomax

OK, I want to talk about Ireland
Specifically I want to talk about the “famine”
About the fact that there never really was one
There was no “famine”
See Irish people were only ALLOWED to eat potatoes
All of the other food
Meat fish vegetables
Were stripped out of the country under armed guard
To England while the Irish people starved.

And if there ever is gonna be healing
There has to be remembering
And then grieving
So that there then can be forgiving
There has to be knowledge and understanding.



In memory of the victims
of the Great Famine
in Ireland, 1845 - 1849,
and of all Irish people
and their descendants
who have died in Wales.
May they rest in peace.



After the Great Hunger

The decades after the Great Hunger were a difficult time for the Irish community in Wales. Many lived in poverty in the poorest areas of Welsh towns.

Not all Irish migrants were poor and needy, even during the Hunger years. A significant minority were employed in skilled occupations and the professions. Some of the Irish at Merthyr, for example, were employed as ironworkers who obtained good jobs as “puddlers”. This was a well-paid occupation that conferred status on those who had the ability and skill.

Some individuals achieved prominence in public life.

Edward Dowling, the editor of Newport’s newspaper, the Monmouthshire Merlin, in the 1830s and early 1840s, was an Irishman. Some Irish businessmen achieved prominence in local government: James Murphy became Mayor of Newport in 1868, while John Beirne was the first Irish Mayor of Wrexham in 1877. Cardiff followed with PJ Carey becoming mayor in 1894.

A sprinkling of Irish doctors were at the centre of medical care in a number of towns and industrial settlements. Two of these – Dr Mark Ryan and Dr James Mullin – published autobiographies that provide fascinating insights into the lives of medics in Wales at this time. Dr Mary Hannan, who had worked on medical schemes for women in India, was described in 1896 as “the first and only lady doctor in Wales”.

Irish coal merchants and other business people also played a key part in Welsh life. The experience of the Irish in Wales, though at times difficult, looks very different to cities such as Liverpool and Glasgow, which had very large Irish communities in the 19th century. Those cities experienced sectarian divides well into the 20th century, as shown by the bitter rivalry between Glasgow Rangers and Celtic. In Wales there were small-scale rivalries between Catholics and Protestants, particularly in the field of education where Catholic schools represented separation. The distress caused by these tensions for individuals and families should not be underestimated but there were none of the bitter, violent and long-lived conflicts that continued to scar the public life of Merseyside and the West of Scotland.

Loss of family, loss of home

Travel in this period was normally just one-way and once someone left they did not return. This song gives an insight into the feeling of loss through immigration.

Kilkelly

by Peter Jones

Kilkelly, Ireland, 18 and 60, my dear and loving
son John
Your good friend the schoolmaster Pat McNamara's
so good

As to write these words down.

Your brothers have all gone to find work in
England,

The house is so empty and sad

The crop of potatoes is sorely infected,

A third to a half of them bad.

And your sister Brigid and Patrick O'Donnell
Are going to be married in June.

Your mother says not to work on the railroad
And be sure to come on home soon.

Kilkelly, Ireland, 18 and 70, dear and loving
son John

Hello to your Mrs and to your 4 children,

May they grow healthy and strong.

Michael has got in a wee bit of trouble,

I guess that he never will learn.

Because of the dampness there's no turf to speak of
And now we have nothing to burn.

And Brigid is happy, you named a child for her
And now she's got six of her own.

You say you found work, but you don't say
What kind or when you will be coming home.

Kilkelly, Ireland, 18 and 80, dear Michael and John,
my sons

I'm sorry to give you the very sad news

That your dear old mother has gone.

We buried her down at the church in Kilkelly,
Your brothers and Brigid were there.

You don't have to worry, she died very quickly,
Remember her in your prayers.

And it's so good to hear that Michael's returning,
With money he's sure to buy land
For the crop has been poor and the people
Are selling at any price that they can.

Kilkelly, Ireland, 18 and 90, my dear and loving
son John

I guess that I must be close on to eighty,
It's thirty years since you're gone.

Because of all of the money you send me,
I'm still living out on my own.

Michael has built himself a fine house
And Brigid's daughters have grown.

Thank you for sending your family picture,
They're lovely young women and men.

You say that you might even come for a visit,
What joy to see you again.

Kilkelly, Ireland, 18 and 92, my dear brother John
I'm sorry that I didn't write sooner to tell you that
father passed on.

He was living with Brigid, she says he was cheerful
And healthy right down to the end.

Ah, you should have seen him play with
The grandchildren of Pat McNamara, your friend.
And we buried him alongside of mother,
Down at the Kilkelly churchyard.

He was a strong and a feisty old man,
Considering his life was so hard.

And it's funny the way he kept talking about you,
He called for you in the end.

Oh, why don't you think about coming to visit,
We'd all love to see you again.

A Song For Ireland

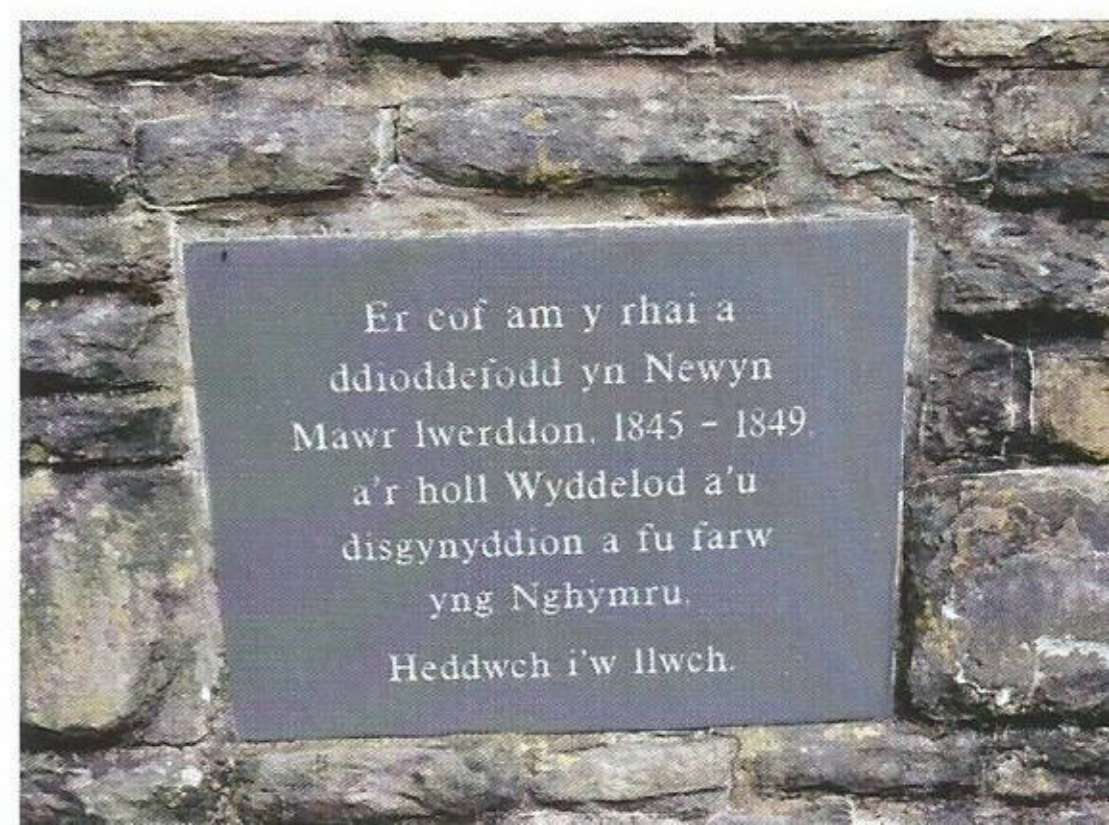
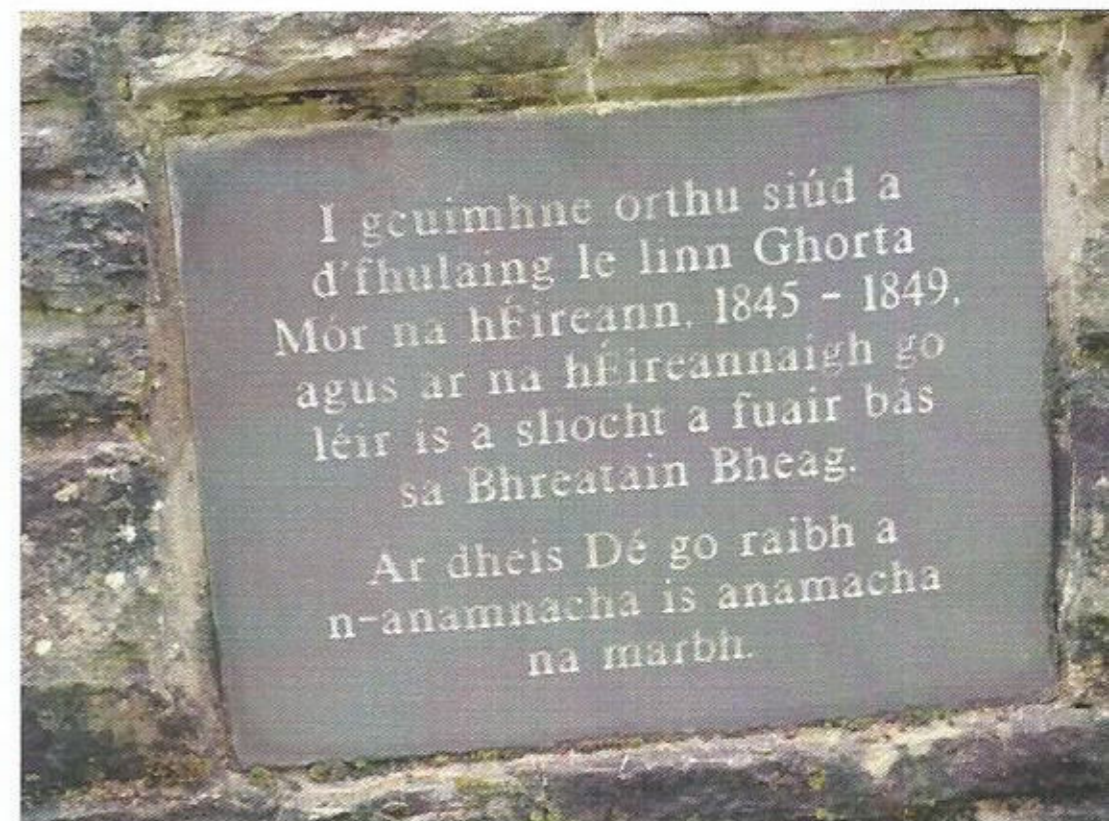
Sung by Emma Coulthard

Walking all the day, near tall towers
Where falcons build their nests
Silver winged they fly,
They know the call of freedom in their breasts
Saw black head against the sky
With twisted rocks that run down to the sea
Living on your western shore,
Saw summer sunsets, asked for more
I stood by your Atlantic sea
And sang a song for Ireland

Talking all the day with true friends
Who try to make you stay
Telling jokes and news,
Singing songs to pass the night away
Watched the galway salmon run
Like silver dancing darting in the sun
Living on your western shore
Saw summer sunsets, asked for more
I stood by your Atlantic sea
And sang a song for Ireland

Drinking all the day in old pubs
Where fiddlers love to play
Someone touched the bow,
He played a reel
It seemed so fine and gay
Stood on dingle beach
And cast in wild foam we found atlantic bass
Living on your western shore,
Saw summer sunsets asked for more
I stood by your Atlantic sea
And sang a song for Ireland

Dreaming in the night I saw a land
Where no man had to fight
Waking in your dawn
I saw you crying in the morning light
Lying where the falcons fly,
They twist and turn all in you éer blue sky
Living on your western shore,
Saw summer sunsets asked for more
I stood by your Atlantic sea
And sang a song for Ireland.





A Special Thank You

A very special thank you must go to the Committee of the Wales Famine Forum and their supporters. Without them, we would not be standing here today, at this special memorial to the Great Hunger (one of only three in the UK). This memorial is to remind us of that difficult period and all those who lost their lives at this time.

I would particularly like to thank John Sweeney and Joe Moore for their help in arranging today's event.

Thanks too to the musicians Dave Burns and Emma Coulthard
And the readers: Eileen Bevan, Bernadette Finnegan and Nuala Lomax.

Pauline Lomax

Organiser

Email: paulinem.lomax@ntlworld.com

Thanks to Andrew Griffiths for producing this programme and Theresa Callan of Minuteman Printers.