INTRODUCTION BY
HUW EDWARDS

BBC BOOKS

THE STORY OF WALES

JON GOWER

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About the Book

Accompanying a landmark BBC series presented by Huw Edwards, *The Story of Wales* is an ambitious account of Welsh history for a new generation. Drawing on the latest research, Jon Gower revaluates the critical events in Wales's timeline and what relevance they have for Wales today.

This one-volume history examines Wales on an epic timescale, from the earliest settlements through to the present day. Gower revisits the major turning points in Welsh history, including the forging of Welsh identity during the Middle Ages and the rise and fall of the fledgling Welsh state under Llywelyn the Last, through to the country's transformation into an economic power with the Industrial Revolution, its participation in the creation of a modern British Welfare State and the economic boom of the 1940s and 50s.

Gower re-examines many of the myths and misconceptions about this glorious country, uncovering rich evidence of its outward-looking dynamism and its important role on the world stage, as well as revealing a Welsh people who have reacted with energy and invention to changing times and opportunities.

About the Author

Huw Edwards is a BAFTA-award winning journalist, presenter and newsreader. Born in Bridgend, Welsh-speaking Huw is a former graduate of Cardiff University. He joined the BBC in 1984 and became a familiar face during his time on *BBC Six O'Clock News*. Since then, Huw has covered numerous national events, is a regular on a range of BBC programmes, including as lead newsreader on the *BBC News at Ten*, and has presented a variety of documentaries on British and Welsh culture.

Jon Gower is a former BBC Wales arts and media correspondent. He is a documentary maker for television and radio and has eleven books to his name, in both Welsh and English. In 2009 he was awarded a major Creative Wales award to explore the Welsh settlement in Patagonia. Jon is currently a Hay Festival International Fellow.

THE STORY OF WALES

JON GOWER

With an introduction by Huw Edwards

BBC BOOKS

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INTRODUCTION

IT’S OUR STORY

My story of Wales is not your story of Wales, but your version is every bit as valid as mine.

My story is the sum of a singular set of circumstances and experiences. So is yours. Mine is the story of ‘Cymru’. You may prefer ‘Wales’. Both are equal entities; they are two sides of the same national coin.

My personal story is principally about Ceredigion, the Garw valley, and my native Llanelli. I am a product of these places. You may be a product of Pontrhydfendigaid, or Llantwit Major, or Llandudno, or Abergwyngregyn, or Amlwch, or Caerleon, or Port Eynon, or Swansea, or Pontypridd, or Wrexham, or Porthmadog, or Ton Pentre, or, indeed, any of the places we visited while filming *The Story of Wales*.

If you identify yourself as Welsh, maybe you are a Welsh speaker, like me. Or not. You may live in Wales. Or, like me, you may not. You may be proud of Wales, like me. Or you may not. Perhaps, like me, you have regrets about Wales. Or you may have none. So many permutations, so many potential divisions, so many differences for such a small nation – and yet all of us who claim a Welsh identity share one certain truth: each of us, regardless of our language or our region of origin, is part of the great story of Wales.

So it is perhaps no wonder that some thought I was unwise to take on a project of this magnitude. Great men and women have laboured in the field of Welsh history, and

I follow in their footsteps with deep respect. While filming, we were always mindful of their achievements.

The Story of Wales packs 30,000 years of history into six hours of television. How was it possible to achieve this? We were helped in part by the memorable sights that abound in Wales. The site of Crawshay's immense iron furnaces in Merthyr is still impressive in scale and form, while the sadness and tranquillity evoked by Llyn Celyn in the early morning light is a very special experience. The ruins of Strata Florida Abbey near Pontrhydfendigaid offer a haunting glimpse of life in medieval Wales, and the vivid, lunar-like landscape of Parys Mountain in Ynys Môn, with its ancient copper workings, is unforgettable. Dinefwr castle, majestically sited above the Tywi, is probably my favourite castle in Wales. And who can resist the peace and beauty of St David's Cathedral, a prime site of Christian worship for the past 1,400 years?

The tracing of Welsh history led us to every region. We travelled to Wrexham in the northeast, where the Catholic martyr Richard Gwyn was executed in the beast market in 1584. In northwest Wales we toured the opulent Penrhyn castle, once home to the Douglas-Pennants who owned the vast Penrhyn slate quarry and who became one of the most despised families in the industrial history of Britain. We visited a section of Offa's Dyke, near Knighton in mid-Wales, where the landscape has remained unchanged over many centuries, and in the southeast we marvelled at the scale of the ruins of the Roman city Caerleon. We stood on the sands of Mill Bay on the Welsh southwest coast, the site of Henry Tudor's landing in 1485 on his way to claim the crown of England. And in the valleys of south Wales we paid our respects to Senghennydd, where 439 men and boys died in the Universal colliery disaster in 1913; there is surely no more potent reminder of the dominance of coal and the terrible price paid by thousands of families,

including my own. These places, and many more, all play their part in the complex past of Wales.

This book adds depth to our television narrative: it is an ideal companion to the series. The author, Jon Gower, an old friend of mine from Llanelli Grammar School, has produced a stunning text.

Jon and I are among many of those who remember the major televised history of Wales, *The Dragon Has Two Tongues*, brilliantly fronted by Gwyn Alf Williams and Wynford Vaughan-Thomas for HTV more than a quarter-century ago. It mesmerized viewers: each presenter vigorously promoted his own story of Wales, engaging in endless argument about people, places and events. Their verbal sparring conveyed the volatility of that period; there was a palpable uncertainty about the very notion of Wales. The country seemed to be in flux as the political landscape was dominated by the year-long miners' strike of 1984–5. Gwyn Alf and Wynford taught viewers that the best history provokes debate and encourages reflection.

This series has been made 26 years later in a rather different climate. Wales is in many ways a new country, clearly energized and boasting its own government and law-making National Assembly. For the first time in the history of our nation, laws are being made by elected Welsh representatives, in Wales, for Wales. This is surely the glittering prize that eluded the revolutionary Owain Glyndŵr, whose vision of a cultured, educated, assertive Wales has inspired so many patriots over the centuries.

These recent developments suggest a temptingly neat storyline: we have a beginning (the birth of Wales and eventual union with England); a middle (Wales transformed from rural backwater to industrial powerhouse); and an end (Wales starts to govern most of its own affairs). The narrative drive is compelling, but it ignores countless subtle layers of sense and significance.

Much of the story of Wales and its people is coloured by relations with neighbouring England. During our filming I visited the National History Museum in Cardiff. Tucked away in a corner of the main gallery was a prize exhibit: the Act of Union of England and Wales (the first of two, royally approved in 1536) was on Welsh soil for the very first time, on loan from the Parliamentary Archives at Westminster. This is the document that created the legal entity 'England and Wales' – a momentous event in Welsh history, which provoked not a murmur of protest, as Geraint H. Jenkins explains so lucidly in our series. The heroic failures of Owain Glyndŵr, Llywelyn the Great and Llywelyn the Last to create an independent Wales had sapped the people's morale, apart from which, there were certain economic benefits to be gained by the merging of Wales with England.

It is a powerful experience for any Welsh man or woman to handle the actual document that sets out the terms of the union (annexation is a more accurate description). That experience is even more intense for a Welsh speaker, given the explicit hostility to the language expressed in the legislation. But there is a powerful lesson in all of this: the Tudor authorities fully recognized that the Welsh language was easily the most powerful distinguishing feature of the people who lived beyond Offa's Dyke. It was a prime badge of nationhood.

It still is today – with one capital difference: what has changed beyond measure is the people's settled view of the language and its place in our national life. There has been a quantum shift during my lifetime, and certainly since Gwyn Alf and Wynford locked horns in the 1980s. When I arrived at Cardiff University in the late 1970s, we Welsh speakers were made to feel like outcasts in our own capital city; the language was a topic of poisonous debate. The venom even seeped into the exchanges on devolution in the referendum of 1979. That world has now gone – and good riddance.

There are certainly some die-hard opponents whose crusade goes on, but they are fewer in number every year.

The roaring success of Welsh-medium schools, a solid base of new language legislation, and a healthy respect for different cultures in our mixed modern society have all been significant factors in the change of heart towards the Welsh language. The biggest challenge now is to make Welsh a relevant, natural medium in all walks of life for those who wish to use it. The current fear is that too many of the young people leaving Welsh-medium schools will be unable or reluctant to use the language in their working lives. There is more to be done, but the past 40 years have seen a profound transformation.

The shame felt by so many Welsh people after the 1847 publication of the notorious Blue Books (an official report on education in Wales, slamming most aspects of Welsh life) can nonetheless be perceived today in some quarters. I still meet people of a certain age whose lives appear to have been spent covering all traces of their Welshness; they seem to feel mortified by their true identity. My late father spent decades studying the psychological, social and literary impact of the Blue Books; he had no doubt that they caused a national trauma, the effects of which are still with us in the twenty-first century. Those effects are weakening, and the nation’s view is, as I perceive it, more settled. But I feel it is essential to draw attention to this degrading episode highlighted in the television series.

The principal milestones of Welsh history are very familiar to most of us, and the challenge of any modern history project is to explore potential new perspectives, seek new significance, and dare to question some cherished interpretations where appropriate.

That said, there were some real surprises: I had not been aware that the prehistoric copper mines beneath the Great Orme in Llandudno are considered the most important in the world, and I was amazed that the laws

passed by the English parliament after the revolt of Owain Glyndŵr had been so ferociously racist in their treatment of Welsh people. It was unexpected that the wise Welsh ruler Hywel Dda had made a pilgrimage to Rome in 928, and I was fascinated to learn that the church at Llantwit Major has a magnificent collection of ancient stone crosses.

There were plenty of questions too. Had Henry Tudor been such a good friend to Wales? Did the drowning of the village of Capel Celyn really kick-start the modern drive to devolution? Was the ancient land we now call Wales a backward, isolated place? How are global perceptions of Wales and the Welsh shaped by literature and film?

In considering the answers we are all forced to reflect, rethink and reappraise.

For someone who has been a London Welshman for the past quarter-century, the project has been doubly challenging. I have obtained an outsider's perspective to add to my insider's view. These perspectives overlap at times, creating an even more powerful understanding of some of the forces at work. I have a sense that my family represents some of the most salient themes in our story: farming, rural poverty, migration to London, emigration to the United States, coal mining, seafaring and Nonconformity. As the narrative of Wales's history unfolds, it is natural for all of us to work out how and where we and our families fit in. I found myself confronting episodes in my own family story – some of them happy, some tragic.

The Edwards family were tenant farmers in the wilds of Ceredigion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Theirs was a life of back-breaking poverty. Some of them fled this misery by emigrating to the United States, as did thousands of other Welsh people. The Edwards clan can still be found in Oak Hill, Ohio, today. Of those who stayed at home, two Edwards brothers left for London and set up in the dairy business. They were part of a great Welsh industry in the capital. My grandfather, John Daniel, was

born in London, where his father was a dairyman's assistant. My grandmother, Olwen Myfanwy, was born in Llanbradach where her father was a miner.

On my mother's side, the Protheroe family were farm workers who came from Hereford and settled in the Garw valley, where they found work in the coal mines. My grandfather, Leo Price, was a miner who lost his life in a rock-fall at the age of 28. My grandmother, Elizabeth Muriel, was born in Cardiganshire, but spent most of her long life in the Garw valley.

That's the wide-angle view. But what of the close-up? My personal story of Wales starts in Llanelli, where I was raised, and leads to London via Cardiff and Neufchâteau, a town in eastern France, where I spent a year teaching. Llanelli is a town whose Welsh credentials are difficult to match. In its economic heyday, it was a heavily industrialized cauldron of working-class Welshness, truly one of the most remarkable towns in Wales. It has endured decades of economic hardship, but there are signs of renewal at last.

Renewal. That, in a word, is surely the dominant theme of our story of Wales.

For Gwyn Alf, the story of Wales was a series of ruptures and fractures. Wynford fancied a rather more fluid narrative. I am decidedly for Gwyn Alf's view, though I favour the theme of 'renewal' over his 'rupture'. Time and again, our country has shown its canny ability to change and adapt. It is still doing so today. Wales in the early twenty-first century is once more a country in the tumult of rejuvenation. The Welsh people, more culturally and ethnically diverse than ever before, are a nation in renewal.

A distinguished modern historian recently declared that there has never been a more exciting time to be Welsh. *The Story of Wales* has convinced me that he is right.

Huw Edwards

PART ONE

BEFORE WALES

CHAPTER ONE

THE RED LADY OF PAVILAND

A DETECTIVE STORY

THEY HAD COME to bury their dead: trudging across the permafrost, mantled in reindeer skins, they carried the corpse. On resting from their labours, they could see the huge mass of the glacier in the middle distance, the dense ice grey and glaucous. If you had inclination enough to stand there for a lifetime, you would see it moving, scraping slowly across the land. But at zero degrees it was too cold to linger long. This was Wales 29,000 years ago, in the Upper Palaeolithic era, and there was a lot more ice on the way.[fn1] A huge wall of it would cover the land as the climate chilled.

For now it was just possible to survive in this challenging world, and besides, they had a burial to perform. Their sacred cave filled with the sound of thin notes played on a bird-bone flute and the beat of a simple drum. They had been here before, as had others. That is how the cave had become a place of sanctity after all: by these simple acts, which turned the cave into something

else, something more than just a refuge for hunters from the cold threat outside.

The body, possibly a shaman or a medicine man, was laid to rest next to the skull of an adult mammoth. He was buried wearing red ochre-stained funeral clothes, and powdered, loose ochre found in rocks nearby was also scattered over the body in its cave-grave. On the chest of the deceased were placed fragments of ivory, as well as ivory bracelets and rings the size of teacups. Near his thigh were two handfuls of perforated periwinkle shells, objects used only for male burials. And at his head and feet were two small headstones, simple markers to indicate this was indeed a grave.

This was a small, intense, public ritual, conducted in a frozen land that would eventually thaw, and later become the country known as Wales. These primitive undertakers were among the earliest truly human occupants of this tough and rugged country, although not the first. Neanderthal man had dwelt here too, long before the cave dwellers of Paviland. These earliest inhabitants weren't *Homo sapiens*, not wise humans like us, but rather *Homo sapiens neanderthalensis*. But they were humans of a kind, nevertheless, with their hairy feet wrapped around a lower rung of the evolutionary ladder.

The earliest human remains known in Wales are about 230,000 years old and were discovered between 1978 and 1995 at Pontnewydd Cave in the Elwy valley near St Asaph, Denbighshire, during excavations by Amgueddfa Cymru, the National Museum of Wales. They date from deep into the ice age, when these Neanderthals had to cope with life in the fridge. This species, which pre-dated man and was, in a sense, a different branch of the same evolutionary tree, survived until about 36,000 years ago. At this point *Homo sapiens* would become the sole human occupants of this early world.

The short and stocky denizens of Pontnewydd would have possessed large, square jaws and heavy brow ridges. They would have used primitive tools such as rudimentary hand-held axes, scrapers and basic spear points. Their environment would have been shared with a menagerie of wild animals, including lions, bears, leopards and wolves, and their simple tools were used for defence, hunting and simple acts of butchery as they skinned and prepared their kills. The remains of people discovered in the Pontnewydd Cave ranged in age from young children to adults. The most complete discovery from the site is a fragment of an upper jaw belonging to a child aged around eight years old. In the jaw a very heavily worn milk tooth can be seen positioned alongside a newly erupted permanent molar. Had this child lived, this new tooth would eventually have pushed out the milk tooth. This is unusually rare and intimate evidence.

Questions remain as to whether these humans were originally buried in graves within the cave. The cave has since been washed through by the meltwater from the retreating ice sheets at the end of the last ice age. Unfortunately, the forces that led to the preservation of these teeth deep within Pontnewydd Cave coincidentally destroyed any traces of their original burial context.

But let us return to Paviland, where the real detective story began. This involved the finding of a skeleton – a skeleton that would later undergo the most famous ‘sex change’ in the country’s history.

The original find at Paviland was commemorated in verse, albeit doggerel:

Have Ye Heard of the Woman So Long Under Ground
Have ye Heard of the Woman that Buckland has found
With her bones of empyreal Hues
O fair ones of modern days, hang down your head
The Antediluvians rouged when dead

Only granted in life time to you[fn2]

The Buckland referred to in the verse was William Buckland, the first ever professor of geology at Oxford University, who is credited with the discovery of the famous skeleton. He had arrived at Goat's Hole Cave at Paviland on the south side of the Gower Peninsula on 18 January 1823 to begin an exploration. Excitement would have been coursing through his veins: after all, this was still the golden age of geology, when major discoveries and enormous leaps in human knowledge could be made.

Interestingly, this subterranean discovery happened in the same period that two geologists, Adam Sedgwick and R. I. Murchison, were exploring rock formations in Wales. Together, in the 1830s, they came up with a system for determining the relative ages of Lower Palaeozoic rocks, giving them the names of the ancient tribes of Wales, namely Silurian, Ordovician and, in the case of the oldest, Cambrian. Indirectly, it suggests that the ancient people of Wales were 'hard' – they had to be. The landmass of Wales is mainly mountainous, an unforgiving and thinly soiled terrain, with fertile valleys relatively few in number. Living off the land was far from easy.

Buckland's explorations had been prompted by discoveries the previous year when a surgeon named Daniel Davies and a curate from Port Eynon, the Reverend John Davies, had ventured together into the pitch darkness of Goat's Hole. There they had found a scattering of animal bones, including a solitary mammoth tusk. They soon communicated the nature of their find to the Talbot family of nearby Penrice castle, prompting the redoubtable-sounding daughter, Miss Mary Theresa Talbot, to explore the cave for herself. There she discovered 'bones of elephants' on 27 December 1822.[1] A detailed letter from Miss Talbot was subsequently sent to Buckland at Oxford,

and it proved sufficiently intriguing for him to visit Gower within a month.

During a week's work in the cave, this pioneering 'undergroundologist', who was also in his lifetime Dean of Westminster and a curate at Christchurch College, uncovered headless human remains. These he mistakenly presumed to be those of a young woman, picturing her as a shamanic figure, as a Romano-British priestess perhaps, and naming her the 'Red Lady of Paviland' because of the red ochre (naturally occurring iron oxide) that stained the ancient bones. Buckland had a ready explanation for the colour scheme as well, suggesting that the Red Lady may have been a relation or descendant of Adam, who was 'made of red Earth'. Buckland suggested that the Red Lady might even be Eve herself.[2]

As we know, there were objects in the cave other than bones: periwinkle shells and ivory rods. But the bones … they were problematic. This was a period when intense debate raged about the history of humanity, when some questioned the belief that the whole of humanity was derived from survivors of the biblical flood, the children of Noah. The presence of animal bones, those of long-extinct species, might disprove the 'truth' of the biblical flood. Thus the Red Lady became fodder for Buckland's imaginative science, as he suggested various scenarios for her. At one stage he argued that this was the body of a customs officer, murdered by smugglers. Later he saw her as a Roman harlot, more scarlet woman than red lady, who serviced the sexual needs of soldiers from a nearby fort (which actually dated from the Iron Age). Buckland, sometimes known as the 'Ammon Knight' (a pun on 'ammonite', a common fossil) was a Romantic, drawn by the twilight glamour of his subterranean quests.

Modern science has since overturned his conclusions, showing that the skeleton was that of a young man, buried in the Goat's Hole Cave around 30,000 years ago. This

makes his the oldest anatomically modern human skeleton found in Britain, and Paviland the site of the oldest ceremonial burial in western Europe.

As Stephen Aldhouse-Green, professor of human origins at the University of Wales, Newport, has pointed out, analysis of the carbon and nitrogen content of the bones has revealed a great deal of information about the young man's diet. He was partial to seafood, which would have been collected on the coast, then 100 kilometres (60 miles) away. There might have been salmon too, as evidence for this fish is present in the bones of bears that also used the caves at Paviland.

Aldhouse-Green has also given us some vital statistics, describing a 'healthy adult male, aged 25–30, about 1.74 metres (5 feet 8 inches) in height, and possibly weighing about 73 kg (11 stone)', but one who is less robust then might be expected for the period. Whilst the earliest anatomically modern humans in Europe were characterized by tropically adapted body proportions, arising from their African ancestry, this is not reflected in the Paviland skeleton, probably because this individual was a product of perhaps 10,000 years of evolution by modern humans within Europe.

The young man was buried in an area that would have looked very different back then. The cliffs of the Gower Peninsula were part of a ridge rising above a river plain that was located 113 kilometres (70 miles) from the sea. Even in warmer phases, the ice sheet was never far away, and mammoths made the ground quake as they lumbered by. On the great plain below the cliffs, rhinos would have grazed, as well as a plenitude of deer stalked by that designer carnivore, the sabre-toothed tiger. After dark, hyenas would startle the nights with their wild cries. The cave would have been a refuge from all this.

The Red Lady of Paviland lived in the distant past of the Wales we have come to know, but the story is a good

metaphor for our journey: like the history of the Red Lady, the story of Wales is one worth revisiting with fresh eyes. And against the background of new historical evidence, it is a tale that might even need retelling, and the identity of the Welsh reappraised. The young man who lived and died so many thousands of years ago was shown to be resourceful, adaptable and intimately bound with the landscape around him – characteristics that we shall see displayed again and again by the people who lived on the landmass that came to be known as Wales.

fn1 The most recent carbon dating work by a joint team from Oxford University and the British Museum in 2006 suggests that the corpse may have lived 29,000 years ago or 4,000 years earlier than previously thought.

fn2 Buckland surmised that the poem was written by one of his undergraduates. In truth, its author was none other than Philip Bury Duncan, fellow of New College Oxford and Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum.

CHAPTER TWO

THE STONE AGES

AS THE SUN rises on Midsummer Day, the longest day of the year, fingers of light shaft thinly into the tomb. For thousands of years, at this precise time of year, the sun's first light has shone down the passageway into the burial chamber at Bryn Celli Ddu on Anglesey. There is only one other place in Britain where such a summer solstice alignment is to be found – although there are other sites that align with the low sun of the winter solstice – and that is Stonehenge, which was built several hundred years after the last stone tomb was completed. At both places, on Anglesey and in Wiltshire, the prehistoric folk of the Stone Age practised sun-worship that was backed up with a remarkable sense of celestial geometry.

The creators of tombs such as Bryn Celli Ddu were people mindful of death, and, quite possibly, respectful of a god. The tombs they erected were created without access to earth-moving vehicles or lengths of chain, or the benefit of precision instruments for measuring. Rather, they were built with the sweat of brows and a rudimentary but effective sense of how to set huge stone upon huge stone, employing nothing more sophisticated than timber levers, tree-trunk ramps and honeysuckle-vine ropes.

The exact reason for this once-a-year event is lost in the mists of time. Were the sun's rays meant to warm the bones in the chamber, nourishing the spirits of the dead on the longest day of the year? Or was it another demonstration of the ancient people's fascination with the appearing sun at the birth of the day – an event that, at its most basic, equates to life itself? Just as the Egyptian sun god, Re, crossed the sky in a ship each day, the sun above Wales was seen as the most powerful symbol of birth and rebirth. It seems natural that many tombs were aligned with the eastern edge of the horizon, as if scanning for their own sun gods.

In archaeological terms, Bryn Celli Ddu belongs to the New Stone Age, and dates from the period 4000–2000 BCE. The tomb is, in the formal taxonomy of archaeology, a 'passage grave' in the European Atlantic tradition, and is associated with similar constructions around the Irish Sea, and others as far north as the Orkneys. The tombs in Wales may be smaller than their great Irish counterparts – Bryn Celli Ddu is only 25 metres (85 feet) in diameter – but all usually display examples of simple decorative art.

Bryn Celli Ddu seems to have been erected circa 3500 BCE, and the inhumations, or burials, were made in a cross-shaped chamber that was set inside a circular retaining wall beneath a vast cairn. This was the age of great religious monuments that bore witness to cults of the dead and to fertility rituals. Constructed from stone, the tombs were built to last, although the people who raised the often-mighty capstones might not have guessed that they would last for 6,000 years and still be standing in the twenty-first century.

There are mysteries hidden even underneath the burial chamber at Bryn Celli Ddu. A carved stone was discovered buried below the chamber floor, its strange designs mystifying to the modern mind. Their meaning has been erased just as surely as the lines etched into the soft stone

have lost their definition, blunted by time. Some have suggested that the inscribed pillar found on Anglesey was a phallic symbol, while others posit that the swirling marks on the stone reflected the trance-like states of those who participated in rituals in such tombs. No one can know for sure. But we do know with certainty that this style of carving was not confined to Anglesey – far from it. It was employed by tomb-builders in northern Spain and the Orkneys. Examples can also be found in the valley of the Boyne in Ireland, where three massive tombs at Knowth, Dowth and Newgrange were found. The last of these contained a staggering 43,000 cubic metres (56 cubic yards) of stone, mirroring the features of Bryn Celli Ddu and suggesting that the creation of such tombs helped connect these sea-facing communities in a common approach to death.

Eighteen kilometres (11 miles) from Bryn Celli Ddu is another, smaller site, Barclodiad y Gawres, the Giantess's Apron. Here excavations have unearthed evidence of the preparation of a strange, inexplicable ritual stew with ingredients such as wrasse, eel, whiting, frog, toad, grass snake and small rodents.[1] On encountering such a weird broth, it is hard not to think of the witches in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and their 'double toil and trouble', as they added 'fillet of fenny snake', 'toe of frog' and 'lizard's leg' to their cauldron.

To add to the mystery of the 'Apron', excavators also found a fine series of carved stones – again with unmistakable French and Iberian connections. The meaning of the pecked geometric patterns is now lost to us. What are relegated today to being mysterious Stone Age hieroglyphs are, at the very least, signs of an early cultural unity, interchange and movement.

The setting of megalithic structures, such as tombs, in the landscape helped to mark meeting places, often utilizing the drama of a particular natural form. One such

example is the tomb of Din Dryfol, which is set on a natural platform halfway up a hill on Anglesey. Other monuments seem erected simply to make a mark on the land. It was one way of changing the world, of establishing mastery over nature's mystery. Some tombs in coastal sites were easily spotted from the sea. Others marked former settlements, being built quite literally on the past. Sometimes the tomb was built because of happenstance, such as using the huge boulder deposited by a glacier on Cefn Bryn on the Gower Peninsula as reason enough to lever it into place as the basis of a striking tomb.

There were other figures in the landscape too. Many of the standing stones that punctuate the hills and valleys of Wales, such as those at Stackpole in Pembrokeshire, date from the Stone Age and suggest places of ceremony and congregation, while others mark established trackways. The existence of new tools also gave humans more control over the landscape. It was possible to fashion the land, mine it and eventually farm it. Humankind could suggest it was here for the duration by raising stones and monuments that could signal their existence over large distances. The circles of stones at places such as Gors Fawr in Pembrokeshire, and Cerrig Duon near the source of the river Tawe, seem to control the landscape, to gather the view around them.

We know very little about Stone Age people living in Wales during this period, but we know with certainty that before the advent of agriculture they would have had a tough time of it in the harsh and testing environment. Continuous human settlement began after the end of the last ice age, in about 9000 BCE. This was followed by a period of a rise in sea level, during which the country assumed the shape it has today. Temperatures rose and led to the spreading and thickening of a dense forest, which blanketed the landmass almost entirely. For Stone Age people, Wales was a huge, often-impenetrable wild wood,

with the tree-line of oaks and birch extending almost to the mountaintops. This relatively swift change in environment would precipitate a change in the way Stone Age people lived. A more benign climate, coupled with new pastoral skills, meant they could keep their own animals close at hand, rather than hunt them over long distances.

From the Middle Stone Age, herding had started to replace hunting, and the peoples who lived between 9500 and 4000 BCE exchanged skills of tracking and spear-throwing for more sedentary ones, such as tending flocks of domesticated animals, erecting simple enclosures, and guarding their stock from the predations of wild animals. Deer grazed new clearings, created when man harnessed fire to burn the vegetation. Thus the erratic, literally hit-or-miss life of the ranging hunters – felling giant cattle known as aurochs with their simple spears, following the migratory treks of red deer though the wild Welsh woods, or managing to snag salmon in the surging rivers – slowly gave way to farming.

The hunter, with his newly domesticated dog – a descendant of the wolf – was still a gatherer of seeds, fruits and roots, but over time his mobile lifestyle evolved into that of settled man. Some of the first settlements might have been fairly temporary, such as the camp discovered on coastal mudflats at Goldcliff near Newport, dating from around 5600 BCE. This revealed evidence of pigs and red deer having been caught and butchered, of eels having been cooked, and hazelnuts gathered and shelled.[2] But although these settlements may have been only transient, they still indicated that the early dwellers did not feel compelled to be on the move all the time, and that some locales could be sustaining.

Agriculture itself seems to have arrived in western Britain after 4000 BCE. Farming had first developed in western Asia, then in the Middle East, after which it was introduced across Europe, community by community. Along

with the early farming techniques from 6000 years ago came the tomb-building skills required to create Bryn Celli Ddu and Din Dryfol, not to mention the arrival of pottery and new flint tools.

New Stone Age findings reveal an existence with a sense of order or purpose, with possibilities even of high civilization. This manifests as memorials – such as those at Bryn Celli Ddu – that have much grandeur and dignity even today. These tombs for the dead bear witness to very early awe, and tell us where the awestruck people settled. They also demonstrate skills in logistics in transporting and erecting heavy, unhewn stones and in dry-walling too – the art of constructing a wall without the use of binding mortar. To give some indication of their relative antiquity, the laying and ordering of these megaliths, or huge stones, predate the pyramids by some 1,500 years and are 2,000 years older than the first Chinese dynasties.

In addition to the passage tombs, there are over a hundred chambered tombs or *cromlechi* in Wales. These massive stone chambers within stone or earth mounds are mainly to be found in lowland coastal areas, with the greatest concentrations on western promontories, such as Anglesey, Caernarfonshire and Pembrokeshire. These sitings suggest that their builders were a coastal people with connections via the seaways with other such people, although there are also *cromlechi* clustered along the valleys of rivers such as the Conwy and Wye. Some are located inland, on the highlands of Breconshire, and confound too much ready reckoning. Taken together, these tombs scattered around Wales are easily the oldest architecture to be found in our landscapes, and some date back to as early as *c.*3600–3000 BCE.

The *cromlechi*, simple as they were, were hubs of life and death for egalitarian clans, who, as communities, owned the land around them, with just five acres a head perhaps.[3] They were still mobile people, but the *cromlechi*

anchored them. It gave them a place to honour the dead, and to preserve them. It allowed them to claim the land as their own, and, in so doing, claim it respectfully for their ancestors before them. The gradual rise of agriculturalism, and resulting increase in resources stemming from the growth of successful communities, enabled the strong and resourceful people to construct these *cromlechi*.

In the south of Wales, long cairns were built by peoples who came from western France to the Severn, and these simple edifices are collectively known as the Severn–Cotswold group. Even though the name derives from the fact that the greatest concentration of such tombs is between the Severn and the Cotswolds in Gloucestershire, there are also tombs of this kind in Glamorgan, even as far west as Gower. Further examples are also to be found in north Wales, such as Capel Garmon in Gwynedd, and Tyddyn Bleiddyn in Denbighshire. Like the *cromlechi*, long cairns were contructed by organized communities, and it took 200 people to put the capstone – the largest in Britain – on top of the Tinkinswood burial chamber in the Vale of Glamorgan, in which some 50 people are interred. The tomb interior was divided into various compartments and it has been suggested that different families took responsibility for building and filling their respective units. The area has a plentiful supply of the conglomerate rocks required to build it; these early builders often built near the source of their materials.

There is ample evidence that there were some relatively populous, settled areas in this period, with sufficient manpower to achieve considerable feats of very early civic building; a conservative estimate of the population of Wales at this time puts the figure at over 83,000.[4] Yet the wooden buildings they lived in have crumbled with time, suggesting that they were not built to last, a fact that distinguishes buildings with a domestic use from those with a ritual, higher purpose. In the same way that many people were

involved in building these tombs, so too were many interred in them. The Parc-le-Breos tomb at Ilston on Gower, discovered in 1869, enshrined the remains of over 40 people, including men, women and children, in four side-chambers linked to a central passage. Interestingly, even though those discovered lived near the sea, there is surprisingly little evidence of seafood in their diets. Instead there is a preponderance of animal-based foodstuffs, such as meat, milk and possibly blood.

In general, time has tended to erode or totally diminish the mounds that enclosed and surmounted the New Stone Age tombs. An exception is the single survivor at Penywyrlod at Talgarth in Powys, where both mound and tomb have withstood the test of time. A man's skull exhumed from here is the basis for a computer-generated reconstruction at the National Museum. His face is revealed as long and slender, with sensitive features. However, the discovery at the same site of a human rib punctured by a flint weapon-tip – thus Wales's first murder evidence – suggests that they might not all have been sensitive folk. Science is able to tell us even more about the people buried at Talgarth: one elderly lady lived to such a ripe old age that she had no teeth left, while another had an inflammatory scalp disorder akin to psoriasis. Such intimate details serve to bring those long gone very much to life for us.

There are other striking testaments to the building prowess of the New Stone Age peoples, none more so than the portal dolmens, such as the one at Pentre Ifan on Carn Ingli, the Hill of Angels near Nevern. The massive capstone, at 3.12 metres (10 feet), is sufficiently high to ride a horse underneath and is set at a dramatic rakish angle atop an angled portal, or H-shaped stones. In this case, three earthfast uprights support the huge weight, and have done so for millennia. The dolmen's location is striking: the votary, walking towards the entrance during a