

# They sent the fruit home

**From across Europe they came.** In the 19th century millions of Europeans were attracted by the opportunities of a new life in the United States, many driven from their homelands by poverty or persecution. Among them were two Welsh cousins.

**Mike Snell** follows their journeys.



*Immigrants wait patiently at Ellis Island for entry into the United States.*

## Between the years 1880 and 1930 more than 27 million people entered the United States – some 20 million of them through New York’s immigration centre at Ellis Island.

From across Europe they came: nearly five million from Italy, four million from the old Austro-Hungarian empire, more than three million from the Russian empire, nearly three million from Germany and more than two million from the British Isles. In the 1880s alone, nine per cent of the total population of Norway emigrated to America. Few were turned away. All they needed was a ticket, a few dollars in their pocket and to state that they were neither a polygamist nor an anarchist.

Among this seething humanity were two young Welshmen, Owen and Hugh Humphreys, who shared the same driving ambition of many of those working on farms and in the quarries of North Wales at the end of the 19th century.

A new life in America was no simple wanderlust. The Humphreys family had eked out a living for generations through hard toil. Indeed Hugh’s father, Humphrey, had died when Hugh was only nine years old; he had presumably given up farming to work in the more lucrative local slate quarrying industry and had died well before his time at the age of 41. Hugh had seen his two brothers – William and Griffith – move away from home to live and work in England in order to better themselves, and he was clearly fired by the same need for change and improvement. But it was

Hugh's cousin Owen - 10 years the senior - who made the first move to America, but probably not quite for the same reasons.

### *Owen's story*

Owen Griffith Humphreys was born on the 21 September 1870 at Glanygors, near Garn Dolbenmaen, Gwynedd. At the time this tiny, hillside settlement was the home of Owen’s grandparents, Griffith and Catherine Humphreys. Owen’s mother was 27-year-old Jane, a domestic servant and seemingly illiterate - she certainly couldn’t write as she applied her mark to register Owen’s birth a month later. More importantly, however, Jane was unmarried and no father’s name was

entered on Owen’s birth certificate.

Nothing further is known about Jane, who is not found in the 1881 or 1891 censuses. It is feasible that she died soon after Owen’s birth. She may also have married, although if this were the case then she appears to have had nothing further to do with her son.

Owen was cared for by his grandparents and grew up – as all of the men in the family had done before him – working the unforgiving land in the Penmorfa valley. By the 1891 census Owen was living and working as a servant at Tyddyn Mawr, and where his uncle Humphrey had also been employed.

What prospect, therefore, faced this young man, who bore the stigma of illegitimacy and had lived through his formative years without mother or father? The possibility of emigration to the United States – which, by the 1880s, was in full swing – was perhaps simply too tempting for Owen Humphreys. His grandfather, Griffith – who would have been an important influence when he was growing up – died in August 1894 and the loss of this father-figure may have been a further stimulant for Owen to leave for the New World a year later.

Owen is recorded on the manifest of the *RMS Lucania* as a 24-year-old farmer and arrived in New York from Liverpool (via Queenstown, Ireland) on 16 March 1895.

Like so many Welsh people before him, Owen Humphreys headed for Utica in upstate New York. Situated on the important Mohawk Valley route between the Hudson River and

***"What prospect faced this young man, who bore the stigma of illegitimacy?"***

the Great Lakes, Utica has long been a travel crossroads. Indian trails converged there, and Fort Schuyler was built on the site in 1758. The community which grew around the fort's ruins became the village of Utica in 1798.

During the American Revolution, patriot militia under General Nicholas Herkimer at Oriskany on August 6 1777 halted an invasion by the British, compelling them to raise the siege of Fort Stanwix (Rome). Tories and Indians continued to raid Mohawk Valley communities until 1781. However, with peace came land speculators who reopened the area to settlement.

Governor De Witt Clinton at Rome in 1817 started the construction of the Erie Canal, which was completed in 1825. The Erie Canal, its Chenango



*RMS Lucania*





*Utica, in Oneida County, New York State, was a strong magnet for thousands of Welsh immigrants at the end of the 19th century.*

*Photo courtesy of A V Photography, New York*

branch to Binghamton (1836), and railroad service (1837) increased Utica's importance as a transportation centre, and the area prospered. Industrial production started early with textile mills being established along the Sauquoit and Oriskany Creeks. At Ilion, Eliphet Remington pioneered the manufacture of firearms, while Rome became famous for its iron, copper and brass works. Today makers of electrical and electronics equipment have replaced textile factories, while fertile farmland continues to provide dairy products.

By 1900 Utica had become an immigrant city. Sixty-four percent of its citizens were foreign-born or had parents who were. Germans made up the largest foreign group with 3,696 residents. British (including Welsh, Scottish and Canadians) were second with 3,484 and the Irish were third with 2,548. Other foreign-born immigrants included those from Poland, Italy and Russia, and large parts of the city grew up in neighbourhoods dominated by different national groups.

Little is known of Owen Humphreys' arrival and early days in America. He returned to Wales at least once, however; the manifest of *RMS Campania* shows him arriving in New

York from Liverpool on April 26 1906, and it states that he is a US citizen "returning home" to Utica. By the spring of 1904 Owen was living at 41 Spring Street, Utica, as this was the destination address that his young cousin Hugh Humphreys gave to immigration officials when he arrived in America that year.

***"By 1900 Utica had become an immigrant city"***

By 1910 the Census reveals that Owen had moved to Marshall Township (a small community a few miles south of Utica). He married Jane Edwards (familiarily known as Jennie) at a friend's home on Otsego Street, Ilion, on 12 August 1908, where they were joined by many family members and friends including Owen's cousin Hugh and his new wife Jane. Jennie was also Welsh; she was born on 9 January 1872 and grew up in Ffestiniog, the centre of the North Wales slate quarrying industry. The couple's first child, Catherine, was born on 7 March 1910.

Ten years later the family had moved

to rented accommodation in Mill Street, Marshall Township, and Owen had become a farm manager. The family had also grown by one – eight-year-old Griffith who was at school. The 1930 Census also records Owen as living in rented

accommodation (valued at \$15) in Deansboro Road, Marshall, and still working as a farm manager. Daughter Catherine, now aged 20, was a teacher in a public school, while Griffith was at college.

Owen's death on 23 August 1937 shocked the tightly-knit hamlet of Deansboro. He was found dead in a cornfield on the farm where he had worked for 41 years - almost since he first arrived in America. Sadly, his daughter Catherine had been visiting relatives in Wales and was returning home when her father died. The funeral was held at Deansboro Congregational Church and Owen was buried in the town cemetery. The Rev George Allen Jnr said of Owen: *"With high courage he left his native land of Wales and came to America in his youth. Here he made the most of his opportunities displaying in a marked degree, industry, integrity and good judgment. He became a good citizen, established a home, reared a worthy family and lived his Christian life."*

*"So when the summons came it found him at work and he laid down to rest with his tool in his hand. Thus closed a life of honor and uprightness."*

Jennie remained in the area but the loss of her husband clearly left a large

hole in her life. In 1943 she wrote a newsy letter to her cousin Margaret from 173 Madison Street, Waterville, where she lived with her son Griffith. She gave the happy news that Griffith was to be married (and would most likely move out), but closed her letter with: *"I'll be 72 Jan 9th ... so old ... I miss Owen more and more, especially now I will be alone."*

Jennie died in Waterville on 17 March 1956 at the age of 84 and was also buried at Deansboro Cemetery.

Their children, Catherine Elizabeth and Griffith, continued to do well. Catherine went on to be a teacher, working for many years at the Geneva public schools in New York State and latterly at Sherburne-Earlville Central School until she retired. She married Stuart Young at the First Presbyterian Church, Bath, New York State, and had one son, David. Catherine died, at the age of 93, at South Main Street, Earlville, on 18 May 2003.

Griffith was born in Deansboro in 1911 but moved to Waterville in 1937 where he became a significant figure in his community. Like his sister, he forged a career in teaching. From 1933 he was a vocational education teacher at Proctor High School, Utica, and was an instructor in the industrial arts department there from 1950. He was promoted to chairman of the department in 1965. He married Margaret Upton in 1945 in Gainsville, New York State, but the couple had no children. Griffith died at the age of 59 on 25 January 1970 at his home, 713 Madison Street, Waterville, and is buried at Crown Hill Memorial Park, New Hartford.

## *Hugh's story*

As he jostled to stare out from the deck of the *RMS Campania* across New York harbour on 16 April 1904, Hugh Humphreys' thoughts of the drudgery of farm labouring at his

home in North Wales had long since faded – washed out by the cool spring air. Now his destiny was in his own hands.

Hugh's cousin, Owen, had emigrated



*RMS Campania*

nine years earlier and was already settled in New York State. Utica, with its surrounding fertile and gently rolling countryside, had become a natural home-from-home for hundreds of Welsh immigrants.

By 1904 ships were routinely crossing the Atlantic from Liverpool; what had been a \$20 fare a few years earlier



*Hugh Humphreys*

had been driven down to just \$10 by strong competition for moving a generation of Europeans to North America. The Cunard Shipping Line owned and operated the *Campania* and the journey from Liverpool to New York (often via Ireland) would take just over a week. Built by Fairfield Shipbuilding and Engineering Company of Glasgow in

1893, the *Campania* was 12,950 gross tons, 622 feet long and had a service speed of 21 knots. She could carry a total of 2,000 passengers (600 first class, 400 second class, 1,000 third class, also known as steerage). The ship was sold to the British Admiralty in 1914 for refitting as an aircraft carrier, but was sunk following a collision in the Firth of Forth in 1918.

Steerage passengers would spend most of their time below decks, playing cards or entertaining themselves with a variety of musical instruments. When a ship was full, life for the steerage travellers would have been almost unbearable. Food was invariably poor quality

and many people succumbed to chronic seasickness; there was no privacy, no peace and quiet. All around lay suitcases, trunks, family heirlooms and bundle upon bundle of cherished possessions – all that these people would carry with them into their New World.

Arrival in New York, therefore, offered relief. But this was often short-lived as steerage passengers sometimes had to wait aboard their ships for days before being transferred to the reception centre at Ellis Island. In the early 1900s there could be as many as 15,000 immigrants arriving in one day, and the ships had to drop anchor outside the Narrows, where quarantine officers would come aboard to check for signs of epidemic diseases. If a ship was free of disease, doctors would then examine the first and second class passengers, most of whom were given permission to land as soon as the ship docked. Steerage passengers were ferried to Ellis Island for inspection. Once there they could be confined to the overcrowded barges for hours without food or water, waiting for their turn to disembark for inspection. So close, yet still so far.

An Irish immigrant recalled his own



arrival at Ellis Island: *"The boat anchored at mid-bay and then they tendered us on the ship to Ellis Island. We got off the boat ... you got your bag in your hand and went right into the building. Ah, that day must have been about five to six thousand people. Jammed, I remember it was August. Hot as a pistol, and I'm wearing my long johns, and my heavy Irish tweed suit."* Many travellers wore only their traditional dress from all parts of Europe: it was a colourful and, at times, bizarre sight.

This was the arrival into the United States for Hugh Griffith Humphreys. He had \$70, a few personal possessions and his good health. In his pocket he had a note of his cousin's address in up state New York and enough dreams and ambition to

that touchstone of modern development, a radio set! By the 1940 Census Hugh's home and farm was worth \$20,000 and son, George, now had his own home on the farm with his wife Eleanor (née Alberding) and children Ralph (aged four) and Janet (aged two).

Hugh died on 28 October 1958 and left a remarkable family and commercial legacy, all thanks to his brave decision to leave the land of his birth over 50 years earlier.

## Following on

Next to emigrate was Hugh's sister Kate in 1912, who followed her husband Ellis Roberts. Ellis, aged 35, arrived in New York on the *RMS Baltic* from Liverpool on 28 May 1911. A farm labourer, Ellis had stated on

***"He had \$70, a few personal possessions and his good health"***

fill the Statue of Liberty.

By 1910 Hugh's circumstances were changed and already looking up. He had met, and married, Jane Ann Brymer Jones in 1907. The couple lived at 16 Chestnut Street, Whitestown, with one-year-old son, George, and Hugh was working as a moulder in a pipe foundry. In 1916 John was born to complete the family.

But it was over the next 30 years that the family's fortunes improved most significantly. Hugh bought a dairy farm at Tibbitts Road, New Hartford, in 1912 where he settled down to build on the opportunities offered by his move to America. In fact the business thrived and in 2012 the now substantial Humphreys family celebrated the farm's centenary.

The 1930 Census revealed that, along with an increasing number of his farming neighbours, Hugh owned

the ship's manifest that he was going to stay with his cousin, Hugh Humphreys, who lived at Whitestown, Utica. Two of Hugh's friends also travelled with Ellis: Robert Henry Williams from Blaen y Pennant and Morris Griffith Llewellyn from Cefn Coch, Garn Dolbenmaen. Both were 24-year-old farm labourers.

Ellis had left Kate at home – the School House, Blaen y Pennant – with their first child, two-year-old Ellis. Kate was pregnant at this time and had to wait to follow her husband to New York the next spring, arriving with toddler Ellis and 10-month-old Kate on 6 April 1912. Like her husband, 22-year-old Kate had travelled on the *Baltic* from Liverpool and was

destined for Marcy, Oneida County, where Ellis was now living.

In the spring of 1913 Evan Griffith Jones was the next to leave the shores of Wales for the excitement of the United States, and the *RMS Baltic* was again the choice for the 19-year-old's voyage to America. Within three years, Evan had returned to Europe to fight in France in the First World War. After demobilisation, Evan went back to Utica and to his old job with the American Express Company and in 1923 he married Ella Hughes. However, by 1936 the couple had decided not to settle permanently in the United States and returned to the family farm at Garn Dolbenmaen. Evan died, at the age of 91, on 23 October 1985; Ella died just three weeks later.

In 1914, at the outbreak of the First World War, Evan's 18-year-old sister Margaret Jones sailed from Liverpool on the *RMS Mauretania*, bound for New York. Domestic service in North Wales held no interest for Margaret and she was looking forward to joining her half-sister Kate Roberts at Washington Mills, Utica. She carried just \$25 with her. A year later Margaret married William Thomas, a 23-year-old iron moulder who had emigrated in 1912.

Finally, in 1920, 34-year-old Elizabeth Humphreys – by now married to Owen Jones – also emigrated. She travelled on the *Baltic* with her children Lizzie, aged 10, and eight-year-old Owen J, arriving in New York on 1 October. She was later reunited with her husband at 271 South Street, Utica.



*RMS Baltic*

## Visitors

Hugh's mother, Catherine, visited America at least once from her home in Wales (an elderly former acquaintance in Garn Dolbenmaen recalls that she actually made two trips). Certainly, her first journey was in 1924 at the age of 66 when she sailed from Liverpool on the *RMS Adriatic* and arrived in New York on 2 June. The ship's manifest confirms that Catherine was visiting her

daughter Margaret, from her marriage with Evan Jones. After emigrating Margaret had married William Thomas and they lived at 271 South Street, Utica. Catherine's intention was to stay for four months and it is, of course, certain that she would have spent time with her son Hugh and her daughters Elizabeth and Kate.

The journey would have been a test for Catherine. While she was

described in the *Adriatic's* manifest as being in good health, she suffered badly from arthritis. For this reason Catherine eventually left Caer Ffynon and moved in with her daughter, Ellen, at 44 Erskine Road, Colwyn Bay, North Wales.

Catherine died on 13 January 1948 and is buried with her first husband, Humphrey Humphreys, in Dolbenmaen Parish Churchyard.

Welsh poet R S Thomas

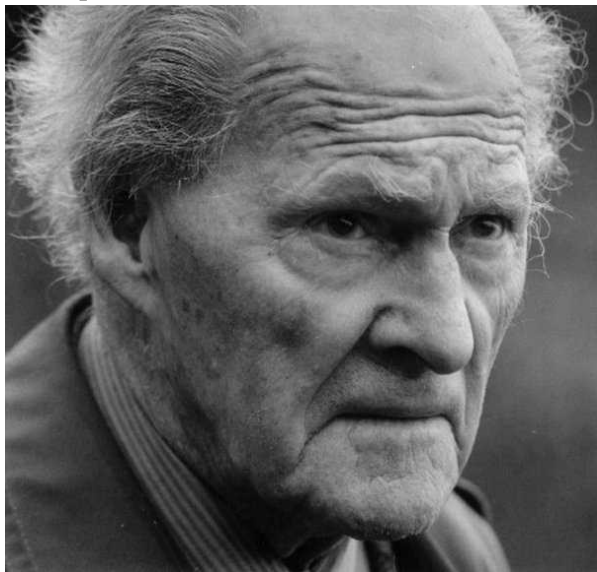


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***They sent the fruit home*** is a line from the poem *Walter Llywarch* by the acerbic Welsh poet, R S Thomas, who died in 2000 at the age of nearly 90.

Thomas's work was always challenging and sometimes seen as disparaging of the Welsh people. Yet through the drear and sometimes pitiless exposure of the hopelessness of ordinary Welsh farm and hill workers there shone Thomas's acknowledgement of a people's singular character and indomitable spirit.

## Walter Llywarch

I am, as you know, Walter Llywarch,  
Born in Wales of approved parents,  
Well goitred, round in the bum,  
Sure prey of the slow virus  
Bred in quarries of grey rain.

Born in autumn at the right time  
For hearing stories from the cracked lips  
Of old folk dreaming of summer,  
I piled them on to the bare hearth  
Of my own fancy to make a blaze  
To warm myself, but achieved only  
The smoke's acid that brings the smart  
Of false tears into the eyes.

Months of fog, months of drizzle;  
Thought wrapped in the grey cocoon  
Of race, of place, awaiting the sun's  
Coming, but when the sun came,  
Touching the hills with a hot hand,  
Wings were spread only to fly  
Round and round in a cramped cage  
Or beat in vain at the sky's window.

School in the week, on Sunday chapel:  
Tales of a land fairer than this  
Were not so tall, for others had proved it  
Without the grave's passport, they sent  
The fruit home for ourselves to taste.

Walter Llywarch – the words were a name  
On a lost letter that never came  
For one who waited in the long queue  
Of life that wound through a Welsh valley.  
I took instead, as others had done  
Before, a wife from the back pews  
In chapel, rather to share the rain  
Of winter evenings, than to intrude  
On her pale body; and yet we lay  
For warmth together and laughed to hear  
Each new child's cry of despair.