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The 'Year of Legends' begins  
Farmers' Club bicentenary  
The story of Llangwm's opera

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In November the village of Llangwm won a national award for its home-grown opera. Heather Payton explains how it all came about

# How a village found its voice

**I**N NOVEMBER 2014 the village of Llangwm staged a full scale opera, written, produced and performed by local people, and accompanied by an exhibition.

At the start, the omens were not good – Llangwm after all has a population of only 800. But, despite initial misgivings, the project has now gone on to win a UK-wide award, 'Remember WWI 2016', announced in London in November.

The funny thing is, in the beginning it wasn't even supposed to be an opera. The idea was to mark the World War One centenary with the sort of light-hearted music hall concert used by the recruiters to persuade – or shame – unwary lads to enlist for the front. It sounded like a good idea to Llangwm Local History Society chair Jane Mills and her committee.

Now Llangwm, as we've established, is not a big place. You might not go through it to get anywhere, so it's pretty quiet. But perhaps because of that Llangwm boasts more than its fair share of writers and artists. It even has a choir, Village Voices. And, crucially, a proper composer, Samuel Howley.

So, full of expectation and the backing of her committee, Jane approached Sam. Would he write them a music hall celebration?

'No,' he said. 'But what I will do is write you an opera.' 'Before I knew it the words had come out of my mouth,' he was to say later. 'It came as a bit of a shock.'

It was a shock too to Jane and her committee, as, somewhat taken aback, they contemplated the idea of turning into opera impresarios.



*Composer Sam Howley (left) and librettist Peter George.*

Opera is, after all, notoriously expensive. (Costumes, lighting, orchestras, let alone chorus and divas – where on earth do you find that sort of money?)

The answer came in the form of those two crossed fingers to be found on posters in Llangwm's – and every other village shop – the National Lottery. So committee member Liz Rawlings approached the people who hold the purse strings.

Now if the Heritage Lottery Fund were surprised to see a village the size of Llangwm proposing to vie with the likes of the Welsh National Opera, they didn't show it. In went an application detailing costings to the last penny. And back came the HLF's reply: would £9,900 do you?

So there was no going back. Sam got the go-ahead and looked around for a librettist, which he found in the shape of award-winning Pembrokeshire poet and novelist Peter George who's based in Newport.

'WWI: A Village Opera' was a fact.

Director Carol Mackintosh, a recently-retired GP, joined the team. Local people came forward to handle lighting, sound and costumes. The music and the words began to take shape with Sam and Peter consulting by phone, email and, when they could, face to face.



*Here in a scene from the opera, Llangwm women gather to knit socks for soldiers serving at the front.*



The local choir, Village Voices provided the basis for the chorus and minor parts.

But as the project grew in scope it reached a crossroads.

'The lottery money enabled us to make a start,' committee member Liz Rawlings said later.

'But when we got the amazing score and libretto from Sam and Peter, we knew we had to up our game, so we put in another application, this time to the Ministry of Defence Community Covenant.'

The Community Covenant, since re-named the Armed Forces Covenant, was set up to support ties between the forces and the wider community. And they came up trumps, to the tune of £7,700. Other funders joined in.

**S**O FAR so good. But what about the story? The plan was to show the impact on a small rural community, and on two young lovers, Tom and Mary, who become engaged just as war is declared. Tom is persuaded to join his mates and signs up, to be drafted to the Western Front.

It was Peter's job to tell the story and although he already had the bare bones of it in his head, research by history society members provided the detail.

Llangwm's very own butter war, for example, was covered in the newspapers of the time, when local women staged a boycott after butter rose in price at Haverfordwest market. It worked, down came the price and a century on it formed part of Peter's libretto.

The exhibition too was taking shape – a fascinating collection of war memorabilia from local people, with the information gleaned by the researchers displayed on boards.

But the research also uncovered news of a tragic nature. Two brothers, whose family had emigrated to Canada before the war, returned as members of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. Both were sent to France and both lost their lives when one was shot and the other was killed as he cradled his brother's body in his arms. Their deaths are reflected in the plot of the opera.

But for Peter George, the plot was becoming an almost personal campaign to represent the truth.

'Everybody, it seemed, asked the question: why did the war happen? And it's almost impossible to answer that,' he said.

'But one could by doing research – and I did a lot of it – see the mistakes that were being made by the politicians of the time which actually led to the war.'

So music, words and money were all in place, members of the cast were chosen and two up-and-coming young singers, Louise Hales and Dave Moore were recruited to take the parts of Mary and Tom. Rehearsals started in earnest in the summer and the halls were booked for five performances – two in Llangwm, two in Haverfordwest and one in Peter's home town of Newport.

And so it really happened. A little Pembrokeshire village really did put on a full-scale home-grown opera, and it was a success, with full houses almost every time.

So what about the award? Well, two years on one of the committee members happened to hear about a competition being organised in London. An entry form was tracked down and filled in, with the same scrupulous care that had gone into the initial funding applications.

Time passed. Then in late September came the news that the opera and its accompanying exhibition had reached the final stages, and the presence of two representatives was required in London to face the judges.



*In one of the opera's most dramatic moments, the men wait for the call to go 'over the top'.*

A video presentation was hurriedly put together and composer Sam Howley and committee member Liz Rawlings found themselves sitting through a remarkably thorough bout of interrogation about both the opera and the accompanying exhibition of war-related artefacts.

Then another wait, and another trip to London for the awards ceremony. Back home, Llangwm was on tenterhooks.

Liz Rawlings remembers the wait in the lead-up to the announcements as 'excruciating'.

'But finally they got to our category, and when they announced our name we couldn't believe it,' she said.

'Being finalists in a national competition was a huge tribute to the commitment of our fantastic team, but actually winning was a dream come true. We were stunned.'

So, it turned out, were the judges.

In the words of the Remember WWI's award's co-founder John O'Brien: 'We were very struck by the ambition of this project, the mobilisation of so many in the community, its weaving of local stories into national events and the obvious significance it had in bringing the community together.'

**S**O TWO years on, was it just a flash in the pan, a few evenings of entertainment for the audiences, a bit of history, a few months' hard work and a bit of dressing up for the cast?

Well for a start it was far more than that even at the time. More than 80 people, representing one in ten of Llangwm's population, were involved in some way. It took over lives and stretched people's expectations of themselves.

But there was more than that.

As composer Samuel Howley pointed out, it's known that music can bind people together – but even so the opera affected the local community in a remarkable way.

'For example people would pop to the post office to get their loaf of bread or pint of milk and they'd be singing the tunes from the opera,' he said.

'But I think the most extraordinary thing is it's pulled together people from different social circles and people are now socialising with people they wouldn't ordinarily talk to, because they wouldn't otherwise have met.'

In the opera Peter's message – spoken by the narrator, the war memorial statue of a sergeant who comes alive in the first act – is that those who start wars where peace is possible face a terrible reckoning.

'For goodness sake,' said Peter, 'let's not ever do this again. Let us find other ways of settling international problems and dealing with them. Unfortunately it seems we haven't learned as much as we should.'