

Blanche Parry and the Welsh Bards

Blanche ap Harry / Parry grew up at Newcourt knowing about the nine Welsh bardic poems that related to her family. Indeed one poem concerned her parents and one would concern her aunt Lady Troy. It is likely, therefore, that regular visits from bards to Newcourt were a feature of Blanche's childhood. The bards were respected, valued and honoured guests of the gentry and also, before the Dissolution of the Monasteries, of some of the monastic houses.

Bards were itinerant, travelling from great house to great house on a recognised circuit. Such a culture was viewed with some suspicion by the English government especially in the years after the rising of Owain Glyndŵr. Bards tended to be coupled with beggars:

No rimers, minstrels or vagabonds [should] be maintained in Wales whom by their divination, lies and exhortations are partly cause for insurrection and rebellion now in Wales.....15th century decree.

Despite the 1485 victory of Henry Tudor at the Battle of Bosworth and his accession, as Henry VII, of a sovereign with some Welsh ancestry these ideas persisted. The Council of the March in Wales and the Parliamentary acts extending the English government and legal system to Wales were all designed to limit perceived lawlessness.

By the time Queen Elizabeth I succeeded to the throne in 1558 vagrancy across Britain was a problem that could not be avoided. It was twenty years since the monasteries had been dissolved. One of their remits had been the alleviation of poverty and, even where this was rudimentary in practice, beggars could usually have some food. Henry VIII had coped with the crisis that his dissolution caused by allowing the impotent poor to beg but by 1552 a supplementary parochial poor rate had had to be introduced. Parishioners were asked, and reminded in church, to pay their dues.

By Queen Elizabeth's reign this was not enough and Lord Burghley considered the situation a threat to stability. So in 1563 this gentle system became a statutory obligation re-enforced by imprisonment. Measures were taken to classify the poor according to categories such as masterless vagrants, able-bodied beggars, the old, sick and impotent. In other words vagrants were divided into the deserving unemployed, the deserving poor and the undeserving poor. This was only the beginning of legislation to cope with this growing underclass and four more acts of Parliament were passed in 1572, 1576, 1597 and 1601.

In Blanche's Final Will of 1589 she attempted to provide an almshouse for:

four poor people to be chosen from time to time within the parish of Backton in the county of Hereford of the oldest and poorest within the said parish... (page 59 in book).

Blanche was at the centre of the Elizabethan Court and knew about the issues involved. She tried to found an almshouse at Bacton. Her friend and executor Hugh

Bethell would actually build an almshouse at Ellerton in Yorkshire. However, Blanche was successful in arranging for an annual dole of corn to be paid to the poor of Bacton and Newton (pages 161-165).

One interesting point was that through Queen Elizabeth's commission an Eisteddfod was held at Caerwys (in the old town hall) in 1567. The purpose was to identify and license reputable bards, which separated them from the undeserving vagabonds. As a result of this fifty-five bards were awarded licenses which authorised them to travel and perform. They could follow their centuries-old craft without fear.

It must be stressed that there is, as yet, absolutely no direct evidence Blanche was involved in the arrangements to allow this Eisteddfod to take place. However, she did value bardic poetry and David Powell would describe her *as a singular well willer and furtherer of the weale publike* of Wales (page 86). There is circumstantial evidence that she may have helped finance the publication of the Bible in Welsh.

By 1567 Blanche had been in charge of Queen Elizabeth I's Privy Chamber for two years. She had daily and unrivalled access to the Queen. It is, therefore, suggested that the exclusion of the bards from the vagrancy laws was through the intervention of Blanche Parry, or at the very least through the taking into account of Blanche's views. It is a possibility worth considering that she may have helped the Welsh bards and that Blanche Parry may have contributed to the founding of the national Eisteddfodau.

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