

Home of iconic First World War poet saved for nation

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The Snowdonia National Park Authority and its partners have announced that Yr Ysgwrn, the family home of iconic First World War soldier and Welsh-language poet Hedd Wyn, has been secured for future generations.

Image



Yr Ysgwrn, home of Hedd Wyn

Alongside Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen and Robert Graves, Hedd Wyn is one of the UK's most important First World War literary figures who poignantly captured the horrors and disillusionment of the Great War through poetry.

From a poor Welsh farming family and self-taught, Hedd Wyn (born Ellis Humphrey Evans*) achieved early literary success. His greatest poem *Yr Arwr* (*The Hero*), was written just a few months before he was tragically killed at the Battle of Passchendaele in 1917. It went on posthumously to secure him the bardic chair, the highest honour for poetry, at that year's National Eisteddfod**. In a moving ceremony attended by the Prime Minister David Lloyd George, his empty bardic chair was draped in black cloth. Delivered to his parents at home at Yr Ysgwrn, it became known as the Black Chair and became a poignant symbol of Wales's lost generation, representing every empty chair across the nation where

a son had not returned from the war.

The Black Chair, along with five other bardic chairs previously awarded to Hedd Wyn, now belongs to the nation as part of the contents of the Grade II* listed house. The building, preserved entirely as it was in the poet's lifetime, is a rare survival, reflecting its precise domestic arrangement in the early 20th century.

The property was at risk of being dismantled and sold on the open-market when the former owner was unable to continue farming the land. Now, with financial support from the National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF) and the Welsh Government, Snowdonia National Park Authority has been able to step in to acquire it via a private sale and ensure it can remain intact and open to the public.

Dr. Manon Williams, NHMF Trustee for Wales, said: "This is a very important project. As the centenary of the First World War approaches, the sacrifice made by Britain's young men and women is coming into sharp focus. Like so many, Hedd Wyn paid the ultimate price and came to symbolise the loss of an entire generation. His poetry, together with other writing inspired by his death, stands as a poignant testament to the culture of his age. The National Heritage Memorial Fund was founded to help safeguard our heritage as a lasting memorial to the fallen and the home of Hedd Wyn, whose work continues to inspire today's new generation of poets, is a powerful tribute to them all."

On behalf of the Snowdonia National Park Authority, Chairman Cllr Caerwyn Roberts said: "I wish to thank the Welsh Government, National Heritage Memorial Fund, the National Museum of Wales and Mr Gerald Williams for their vision, support and enthusiasm in ensuring that Yr Ysgwrn will be safeguarded. It is a privilege for us to be entrusted with the care and the protection of this important national asset and we will ensure that the site will be protected as a record of Welsh social and agricultural culture at the beginning of the 20th century, in the wake of Hedd Wyn's life and literary contribution."

The First Minister of Wales, Carwyn Jones, said: "As we celebrate St David's Day, I am delighted to be able to announce that this important building and its unique collections will now be safeguarded for the entire nation. Hedd Wyn, his work and his tragic death give him a special place in both the history and culture of our nation. It's wonderful that the Welsh Government has come together with both the National Heritage Memorial Fund and the Snowdonia National Park Authority to safeguard Yr Ysgwrn for future generations. It is all the more poignant as we approach the 100th anniversary of the start of the First World War and we

remember the sacrifices made by so many.”

The SNPA will now develop a management plan to ensure the future of Yr Ysgwrn including the house, its contents and the surrounding agricultural land. There will be greater protection for the land ensuring good practices are highlighted. Internally the house will undergo a period of conservation and the contents will be restored, catalogued, reinterpreted and put on display.

Yr Ysgwrn is currently closed for this conservation work and will reopen to the public by appointment later in the year.

Notes to editors

*Born Ellis Humphrey Evans, Wyn adopted the bardic name Hedd Wyn, meaning Blessed Peace in 1910.

** National Eisteddfod is a Welsh literary and musical festival.

Hedd Wyn

Hedd Wyn, was born Ellis Humphrey Evans on 13 January 1887 in Pen Lane, Trawsfynydd, North Wales. The eldest of eleven children, his family moved to a Yr Ysgwrn, a remote farm outside Trawsfynydd.

Wyn received a basic education at elementary and Sunday school but left at fourteen to work as a shepherd on his father's farm. He had not been a particularly brilliant student but had a natural gift for poetry. Self-taught, he composed his first poems by the age of eleven and entered his first Eisteddfod at the age of 19. A promising poet, he won his first bardic chair at Bala in 1907 and by 1910 he adopted the bardic name Hedd Wyn, meaning Blessed Peace.

In 1916, with the First World War underway, the Evans family was faced with a difficult decision. With the introduction of conscription, one of the Evan's sons was required to join the British Army despite farming being work of national importance. Wyn enlisted rather than his younger brother Robert and in February 1917 he received his training at Litherland Camp, Liverpool.

In March 1917 the government called for farm workers to help with ploughing and many soldiers were temporarily released. Hedd Wyn was given seven weeks' leave and during that period spent much of his time working on the poem Yr Arwr (The Hero), his submission for the forthcoming National Eisteddfod.

In June 1917, Wyn travelled to Belgium with the Royal Welsh Fusiliers and on 31 July he was killed during the Battle of Passchendaele. His entry to the National Eisteddfod won him the bardic chair that year, which was presented to him posthumously. Ceremoniously covered in a black cloth it came to be known as the Black Chair and symbolised Wales' loss during the First World War. It was delivered to Wyn's parents in the same condition.

All of the poet's bardic chairs remain on display at Yr Ysgwrn, which has been preserved just as it was in 1917 by the poet's nephew, Gerald Williams who has regularly opened the house to the public. There is also a bronze statue of him dressed as a shepherd in the centre of the village. It was unveiled by his mother in 1923.

In popular culture, the poet became the subject of the Oscar-nominated anti-war biopic Hedd Wyn in 1992. Also The Black Chair, a 2009 novel for young people by Phil Carradice, is based on his life.

Funding

The site has been acquired by the Snowdonia National Park Authority with the assistance of:

- The National Heritage Memorial Fund - £350,423
- The Welsh Government - £388,000

Further information

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