

# The World comes to Wales



**Media Editor SIÔN T. JOBBINS on the new Welsh Language Daily Y BYD**

**D**aily newspaper sales are falling across Wales and the UK. *The Western Mail* is down from 70,000 in the mid 1970s to about 50,000 today and even the mighty London dailies are losing readers like autumn leaves. So, it's not a good time to start a new newspaper - right? Especially, not a Welsh language newspaper - right? Wrong.

Despite the long-term trend in Western Europe for contraction in daily newspaper sales, one man, Ned Thomas, is going ahead with launching a Welsh language daily, the first ever in the language. Moreover, he's convinced that now is precisely the time to do it, 'it's now or never' said the gentle persuader when I interviewed him at his home

in Aberystwyth.

Ned's optimism is as broad as his smile - but he's no mug. Nobody goes into such a big venture, a venture which, if it failed, would seriously dent an already disheartened Welsh-speaking community, without being deadly serious.

But, rub your eyes and believe it. *Y Byd* (The World) will be out in the shops in 2005. Despite the pitfalls, not least being a nation of doubting Thomases, Ned will go down in history as the man who launched the first Welsh-language daily.

The timing of the launch of *Y Byd* is no accident. The lucky combination of the foundation of the National Assembly which gives an institutional focus to Welsh politics for the first time; all political parties having an interest in better communication within the country; the rapid development in technology and publishing, and a consolidated Welsh-speaking middle class have all contributed to make the water warmer for the project. Added to that are the financial incentives for new businesses and job creation in EU Objective 1 areas. In fact, *Y Byd* could go down in history as the one and only decent project to come from the *milchkuh* turned white elephant, as the late Prof Phil Williams AM warned.

In 2001 Ned Thomas set about making his long-held dream a reality. There followed a year and a half of research funded by the European Commission, the WDA and others. This was carried out internally at the Mercator Centre at the University of Wales Aberystwyth by Ned and colleagues and externally on their behalf by outside consultants and a polling company. From this essential research came some important results. Although the official number of Welsh speakers is just over half a million, the complexities of Welsh language use means that the potential readership is less than this number - and that's before one takes into account the content and style of the newspaper. Literacy in Welsh is a problem which effects some geographical areas of Wales more than others, as does social background. Although everyone can actually read Welsh, which is written phonetically, because of the English-medium education



which most Welsh-speakers have been through, an unfamiliarity with standard Welsh and the dominance of English in many cultural fields of interest, many Welsh-speakers would have difficulty in fully enjoying a daily Welsh-language paper. For this reason the option of a Welsh tabloid in the British sense was discounted. “There won’t be a Welsh language *Sun* I’m afraid,” says Ned.

The research showed that there was a market for a newspaper which could bridge readers of the two Welsh dailies, *The Western Mail* and *Daily Post* and readers of the four main London broadsheets. Moreover, it became evident from the research that there was some dissatisfaction with the current content of the Welsh press in English.

Ned Thomas and his team, reckon there are some 50,000 households containing Welsh-speakers who would be seriously interested in reading a daily newspaper in the language. If *Y Byd* can reach 12 - 15,000 of these fifty thousand, it can survive financially, albeit given two other assumptions of the business model: grant aid and advertising success.

The plan is to publish Monday to Friday, leaving room for other Welsh language publications and also avoiding the extra staffing cost which producing six issues a week would entail. In keeping with the European tradition, *Y Byd* will be in tabloid format (but not with the British tabloid content). The research also concluded that a majority of the potential readers, whilst keen for Welsh and local news didn’t want different regional editions. This is good news in terms of cost and means *Y Byd* will become the country’s first truly national daily in either language.

In many respects, it’s surprising that there hasn’t been a Welsh language daily until now. In the eighteenth century, when nations such as the Slovenes and Slovaks were actually yet to decide whether they spoke a ‘language’ or dialects of Croat or Czech, not to talk of enjoying mass literacy in their vernacular, the Welsh were one of the most literate nations in Europe. This was down to the heroic work undertaken by the clergyman Griffith Jones, Llanddowror in the eighteenth century. His circulating schools taught some 200,000 persons (almost half the population of Wales at the time) to read and write Welsh so that they could understand the Bible.

As the historian Aled G. Jones notes, the earliest titles printed in Wales were ‘uncertain and speculative efforts’. Possibly the earliest is *Tlysau yr Hen Oesoedd* (Gems of Past Ages) produced by Lewis Morris of Holyhead in 1735. The revolutionary fervour of the 1790s saw experimentation in Welsh, as across Europe, with titles such as *Y Cylch-grawn Cymraeg* (The Welsh Periodical) published by the radical activist and Baptist minister, Morgan John Rhys. *Y Cylch-grawn* was an inspiration and model for Thomas Evans’s *Miscellaneous Repository or Y Drysorfa Gymysgedig* and David Davies’s *Y Geirgrawn* (The Treasury of Words) of 1795 and 1796 respectively, both established to promote

the democratic principles of the French Revolution to the monoglot Welsh-speaking majority.

However, in 1799 Thomas Charles of Y Bala and Thomas Jones of Denbigh established *Trysorfa Ysprydol* (A

Spiritual Treasury) and by doing so set a pattern for the Welsh denominational press. These pioneering years for what are today regarded as newspapers set the tone for Welsh language publishing in the nineteenth century. Unlike their English counterparts, the national Welsh language papers were mostly aligned along religious denominational lines historically failing to cross-over and create a secular national press, much to detriment of the language.

Exactly two hundred years ago the first newspaper in Wales was launched, the weekly English language *Cambrian* of Swansea. The *Cambrian* appealed to the emerging bourgeoisie of the market towns and growing industrial centres. Swansea was also the location of the launch of the first daily in Wales, the *Cambria Daily Leader* in 1861. As the nineteenth century progressed, the economies of scale of the English language press from both Wales and over the border were stronger than the Welsh press. The secular and exciting content of the English papers were more attractive to readers - even to the religiously obsessed Victorian Welsh.

Although the socialist writer R.J. Derfel spelt out as early as 1864 how a Welsh-language daily might be created and sustained, the strength of the denominational press as well as problems of distribution militated against it. As in so many other matters, Wales and other ‘non-historic nations’ of Western Europe were once again behind so-called backward eastern Europeans and other marginalized peoples. With a smaller number of native speakers, the majority of whom were a mere generation on from landless peasants, Estonia saw its first daily, *Postimees* in the 1860s (it is, incidentally, still Estonia’s leading daily). The Latvians launched *Dienas Lapa* (Daily Leaflet) in 1888. Malta, like Wales, a country where English was the official language, saw its first Maltese language daily, *Il-Berqa*, in May 1930 although far fewer people spoke Maltese than Welsh. Today there are two daily newspapers in Maltese and two in English for a population smaller than the number of Welsh-speakers in Wales. Even the Faroe Islands in the rain-swept North Atlantic with a population smaller than



WORLD VISION: Y BYD founder Ned Thomas

Ceredigion sustains two dailies, and the oldest, *Dimmalactting* is over 120 years old. This is no mean feat for a nation and language with less than 50,000 hardy, runny-nosed inhabitants!

Of course, Ned's dream could all go pearshaped in the usual Welsh way; panting and plodding along, becoming a burden and bore to all, before dying a sad and lonely death. But Ned Thomas's *Y Byd* has taken inspiration and learnt lessons from these and other nations, which, he believes puts the paper in good stead. One of the most notable is the importance of subscriptions, a concept not so prevalent in Britain. Almost every minority-language newspaper has at its core people who agree to buy the paper on a daily basis rather than depend on casual sales. This guarantees financial stability. In some places – take, for example, the

“ **Through Y BYD we can erase the grotesque indignity of being one of the few European nations without a daily newspaper in our own language** ”

Danish minority daily in Germany – many of the subscribers are also shareholders, thus helping to ensure the paper's independence.

“*Y Byd* needs a core of 5,000 subscribers (plus casual sales) to have any chance of success. We have therefore set up a *Clwb Cefnogwyr* (supporters club)” says Thomas. “For a one-off payment of £25 members will receive a reduction of £30 on the subscription fee for the first year. The paper will also remain a private company, *Dyddiol Cyf.*, which invites individuals who share the aims of the founders to become shareholders. Shareholders therefore have first to become members of the *Clwb Cefnogwyr*, though it is of course possible to be a member of the *Clwb* without being a shareholder. While the company is keen to have a large number of people on board, a Rupert Murdoch might find that simply being a member of the *Clwb* did not necessarily guarantee an invitation to invest!” explains Thomas, who has taught literature in the University of Wales, and for periods been visiting lecturer or professor at the University of Salamanca, Spain, Moscow State University, and more recently at EHESS in Paris.

Shares in this category are £500 each and the target is to raise over £300,000. In my view this target is a conservative estimate. The Welsh-speaking community in Caerdydd should, on its own be able to reach such a figure – if, that is, they can be persuaded to give up a few trips to IKEA for the sake of their language. The paper will need to generate revenue (after grant aid) of over £2.5m during the first two crucial years. This sounds a lot, but is only

the price of three big houses in modish Cyncoed.

Surprisingly, the past year has been the best ever for newspaper publishing in Europe's down-trodden indigenous languages. After the fascistic closure of the Basque language daily, *Egunkaria*, a year ago, the Basques have hit back by publishing *Berria*, which now has more subscribers than did its ill-fated predecessor. Despite the sad history of the decline of the Irish language, for so long a bleak portent for Welsh language activists, *Lá*, ('Day') an Irish-language weekly set up in Belfast in the 1990s, became a daily last Spring. *Lá*'s success seems to have produced a new theory of social dynamics which states that daily versions of a weekly paper (surprisingly) sell twice the number of the weekly. This is good news for *Y Byd*, as 4–5,000 is the weekly number of copies sold by both *Y Cymro* and *Golwg*.

Outside the Council Chamber of The National Library of Wales there is a bronze bust of D. Lleufer Thomas. As part of a mass campaign in the late nineteenth century, Lleufer Thomas stood outside colliery gates asking miners to donate their precious pennies towards the foundation, not of a hospital or convalescent home, but

towards a National Library – when one thinks of it, a slightly existential concept. 150 years ago, Welsh people gave their pennies towards the foundation of a university for Wales. The publication of *Y Byd* will be a massive shot in the arm, not only for Welsh language culture but, because of the cultural osmosis of our country, to Welsh culture in English also – just as *Cambria* has so manifestly helped to do as a bi-monthly magazine.

Who knows, it might inspire a similar venture for an equally badly-needed new English-language daily in Wales. Investing in *Y Byd* is part of a glorious Welsh tradition, and with it we can erase the grotesque indignity of being one of the few European nations without a daily newspaper in our own language. ■

#### WEB LINKS & FURTHER INFORMATION

**[www.ybyd.com](http://www.ybyd.com)**

[*Y Byd* 's multilingual site or you can telephone Cwmni Dyddiol Cyf. on 01970 621998]

**[www.llgc.org.uk/drych/drych\\_s040.htm](http://www.llgc.org.uk/drych/drych_s040.htm)**

[*Y Brython*, an influential non-denominational weekly from the mid-nineteenth century]

**[www.berria.info](http://www.berria.info)**

[*Berria*, Basque daily with news item in English (scroll-down on right hand side for news in English)]

**[www.aber.ac.uk/~merwww/Mercator](http://www.aber.ac.uk/~merwww/Mercator)**