

The Patagonia Adventure

This is a story about Welsh adventurers. When I say adventurers, what do you think of? . . .

The adventurers we're meeting today aren't a bit like the present-day adventurers. They don't have fancy all-weather gear or amazing high-tech boats to protect them from extreme weather, they haven't had lots of time to train and get fit, and they aren't lone adventurers.

Our adventurers are children like you, mums and dads, aunts and uncles, people of all ages and shapes and sizes, even tiny babies. These adventurers are ordinary people from all over Wales, and they aren't leaving home just for a short, exciting expedition, they're leaving their homes forever . . . to find a new home far, far away on the other side of the wild Atlantic Ocean.

Why do you think they are going? The truth is that our story takes place 150 years ago, which is about when your great-great-grandparents were alive – that's quite a long time ago – before electricity and cars and central heating and computers. Life in Wales for many ordinary people was very hard back then.

I want you to imagine that you are one of these people. Your name is Daniel Lewis, and like most ordinary Welsh people at that time, Welsh is your everyday language. Your older brothers and your



Dad work in the local coal mine. You live in a village called Mountain Ash, in a tiny house, and you share a bedroom with your Mum, your Dad and your brothers and sisters. There's no indoor toilet and certainly nothing as grand as a bath or hot water. Your Dad and brothers walk a long way to work every morning, work underground all day, and then walk home. You're still just about young enough to be at school, but school isn't much fun. You're not

allowed to speak Welsh at school, and there are harsh punishments if the teachers catch you speaking Welsh to your friends.

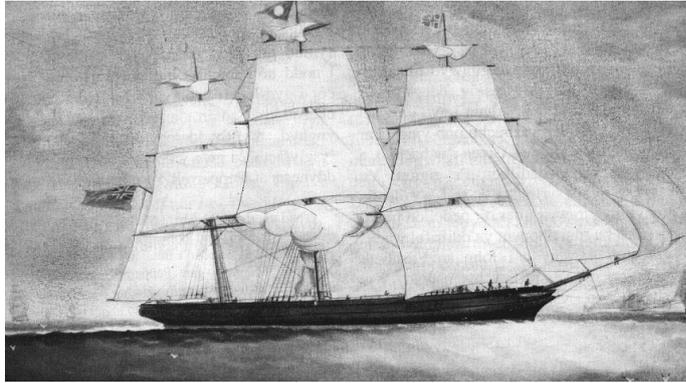
From one end of your village you can just about see, over on the far hill, a massive house, so big it's called a Castle. The man who owns the coal mine where your Dad and brothers work lives in this Castle with his family. You don't see him or his family in Mountain Ash. Their life couldn't be much more different from yours – it's very grand, it's very luxurious, and his family wants for nothing that money can buy. They have made a lot of money out of owning their coal mine.

Now one day, you go with your family and lots of the neighbouring families and you crowd into the chapel in Mountain Ash because Edwin Roberts has come to tell you all about Patagonia, a land far



away across the Atlantic Ocean – it's part of Argentina, a country in South America. Edwin Roberts speaks in Welsh to you all and says, "Patagonia is a beautiful place, full of trees and rivers. Life will be much easier there than here in Mountain Ash. Join me on an amazing adventure and we'll build a new Welsh community there together."

You can't believe what you're hearing, and neither can your parents. The chance to leave behind all this hard work, coal dust, and being endlessly exhausted and poor, feels like a wonderful opportunity, even though it will be very hard to leave friends, cousins and grandparents.



So, this is how you come to be on the ship *Mimosa*, in Liverpool Docks, one day in 1865, alongside 150 half excited and half terrified Welsh women, men and children, waiting to set sail across the Atlantic to make a new home.

The *Mimosa* is no fancy cruise liner with posh cabins, swimming pools, cinemas and bars. It doesn't even have an engine – the *Mimosa* is a wooden sailing ship with very basic facilities. Although the

adventure is exciting, it's also scary and cold, and the ship heaves from side to side. The weather is wild, and there are storms on your journey, with many of those around you getting very sick along the way. The smell gets pretty horrible. The voyage takes eight weeks – that's longer than the whole of your school summer holidays – but you finally arrive at your destination on 28th July 1865.

Here in Wales, July is summertime. But Patagonia is south of the equator – and that means when it's summer for us, it's winter there. So, when you arrive, exhausted and starving after your long voyage, it's freezing cold. Even worse when you step onto dry land you can't see any villages or houses. There's not even any woodland where you could take shelter.



All you can see is bleak wilderness, not the lovely green land of trees and rivers that Edwin Roberts talked about in the chapel in Mountain Ash. While you huddle in the cold with your brothers and sisters and your Mam, the men head off, searching desperately for shelter along the coast and inland. Eventually they come back and say they've found some caves that you can shelter in for now.

Living in caves doesn't feel like the wonderful new home you and your parents were promised, and it feels like forever until eventually the valley of the Chubut River is discovered.



It's here that everyone from the *Mimosa* sets about making a home. Everyone is busy – building houses, building a school, and building a chapel. The grown-ups divide the land around the river fairly and equally among themselves. They call their new community 'Y Wladfa', which is a Welsh word from 'Gwlad' which means 'Country' – Y Wladfa is the new country.

But there's still one last major challenge to making a success of this new life in Patagonia, Y Wladfa. The river Chubut is fed not by rainfall but by the melting snow from a range of beautiful high mountains called the Andes.



Instead of having a steady supply of water through the year, there are long periods of drought when the land is too dry to grow anything and then, when the snow melts, the river floods, destroying any crops you're trying to grow. So even after all the hard work of building the houses, parcelling out the land, planting seeds, tending your crops, your family, and your neighbours around you are really struggling to make a living, and you know that if you can't feed yourselves the community won't survive.

What do you think they did? . . .



As they struggled to get to grips with these huge challenges, the settlers were helped by the local native American tribes. Instead of being angry that these incomers had settled on their lands, the native Americans were friendly and generous.

They showed them how to hunt for wild animals which they could use for meat and clothing. The settlers also got some emergency supplies of food from Buenos Aires, a big city north of Patagonia in Argentina that could only be reached by boat. But this help couldn't last for ever, and they knew they must learn how to work with their natural environment if they were to become independent.

It was Rachel Jenkins who came up with the solution. She realised that all that water streaming down from the Andes didn't have to be their biggest challenge – it could be the answer to their prayers. She realised that if they could dig out channels leading off the Chubut River, the water would have somewhere to go rather than bursting the banks and flooding their fields. And by digging out the channels, instead of having some crops destroyed by flooding, and other crops destroyed by drought, now they could have a steady supply of water all around the cultivated fields, so that their crops could grow and thrive over a large area.

The new system meant that their crops grew really well, and they became world famous for their wheat. Daniel's family and the community were able to sell it not just locally to the native American tribes who remained good friends, but much further afield.



They built a watermill with a big turning wheel so that they could mill



the wheat and create flour. The community that grew up around the mill was called Trevelin, which is Welsh for 'the town by the mill'. Demand for the wheat and flour kept growing, and they had to build a railway to transport it to the local port – Porth Madryn – so that it could be shipped to countries around the world. The community formed a co-operative company where everyone had their say in how the business worked, and they all shared in the profits – very unlike the owner of the coal mine back in Wales.

You can still visit the original watermill in Trevelin, and there's a museum there now that tells the story of how the Welsh settled in the Chubut Valley and learnt how to work with the natural landscape – a landscape so different from where they had come from. You can also still hear the Welsh language being spoken in Trevelin and in other towns and villages across Patagonia. Because the Welsh settlers were so successful in developing their community and their businesses, many other people moved from across Argentina and South America to settle in Patagonia.

Over time, the descendants of the original Welsh settlers have mixed with those who live alongside them in Patagonia, so you'll find that those people who speak Welsh also speak Spanish – the main language in South America. And although this means that Patagonia today isn't *just* a Welsh community, if you visit the region you'll still find plenty of Welsh in the place names, in the street names, in the schools, in the chapels, and in the businesses. And even in the chapels, where the services are now in Spanish, you may well find the congregation are still singing Welsh hymns.

