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PART ONE

1485–1780

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THE ECONOMY**Introduction**

There was no independent Welsh state at the end of the fifteenth century. In the tenth century Hywel Dda's authority reached to all Wales except the south-east, though the unity he imposed was precarious. Three centuries later a substantial part of Wales had been united under Llywelyn the Great, Prince of Gwynedd, whose overlordship over most of Wales had been accepted at Aberdyfi in 1216, though his hegemony, too, was limited. For a time it seemed as if his grandson, Llywelyn ap Gruffydd, might be more successful. Henry III acknowledged him as Prince of Wales in 1267. So the conquest of Wales by the English in the thirteenth century saw the end of a substantial political independence which flowered again, briefly, with the exploits of Owain Glyndŵr in the early fifteenth century. At least from the conquest in 1282–3 by Edward I, consolidated by the Statute of Rhuddlan, 1284 and the circle of monumental concentric castles around North Wales, there were many shared political and governmental institutions in England and Wales, based on the authority of the English king and marcher lords. Yet distinctions of a differently rooted society remained and the divide, blurred by conquest, was in practice still marked.

No great natural frontier ran from north to south, though the eighth-century Offa's Dyke bordered the central mountain ranges of Wales. So, when the Norman marcher lords progressed westwards into Wales in the eleventh and twelfth centuries they did so mainly along the great rivers and the southern coastal routes where land was low-lying and fertile. Along the north–south border they established their marcher lordships and there, and along the southern coast, the manorial system was firmly planted, with its characteristic Norman churches, castles, and nucleated farming villages. Along with a

feudal economic structure went a distinctively Anglo-Norman system of defence and administration centred on the castle. The influence of the Welsh princes was mainly to be found in the medieval Welsh principalities of Powys, Deheubarth and particularly, Gwynedd where traditional social structures and relationships persisted. In those areas of Wales, studded with mountain ranges and upland plateaux, with inhospitably high rainfall and low temperatures, political independence was vested in the Welsh princes for two centuries after the Norman conquest. With the Edwardian conquest a Principality was created in which the king's authority covered the shires of Anglesey, Caernarfon, Merioneth, Cardigan and Carmarthen. By the end of the thirteenth century a new divide existed in Wales, between shired Principality and the march with its quasi-independent lordships; and this was to remain until the reign of Henry VIII. Both areas still owed something to their princely origins, since both shire and marcher lordship were often based on ancient divisions. Either might coincide with a former independent *gwlad* as with Cardiganshire, while in the north, four *cantrefi* constituted the county of Caernarfonshire. Indeed, continuity was maintained in the union legislation of 1536–43 when, for example, the new county of Brecon was based on the original Welsh *cantref* of Brycheiniog.

In various ways their history continued to condition the Welsh. The area west of Offa's Dyke coincided roughly with a linguistic divide, for the Welsh spoke their own ancient language. The influential among them were sustained by a vital historical mythology. They regarded themselves as the true inheritors of the whole island of Britain, descendants of Brutus the Trojan, defeated by the Saxons, but only by treachery. In the Middle Ages Geoffrey of Monmouth provided them with high hopes for the future, a revival to be brought about by some new Arthur. Such notions were eagerly taken up by the influential Welsh bards, and continued to sustain the Welsh even after the conquest of 1282. Owain Glyndŵr's failure did not damp down such notions and indeed Henry Tudor would profit from this tradition.

Even the Welsh system of naming was distinctive – by patronymics, or abbreviated genealogies, rather than the Anglo-Norman system of surnames. Inhabitants of the sparsely populated, straggling settlements of Wales had no need to adopt surnames, though the estate-centred gentry of the sixteenth century accepted them eagerly.

Population

The Welsh method of personal identification is one reason why assessing population structure and change is particularly difficult. To the traditional problems of lack of adequate sources such as the absence of censuses before the nineteenth century and incomplete parish registers, is allied difficulty of identification which makes the technique of family reconstitution impossible. Our data for earlier centuries make possible only the most hazardous generalisations.

Estimates of the population of Wales in 1300 vary from about 180,000 to 250,000 but such estimates are little more than informed guesses. The Black Death after 1349 decimated the population, though here again the evidence is sparse. The population had recovered to possibly 250,000 by the early sixteenth century, compared with $2\frac{1}{2}$ to 3 million in England. Again bearing in mind that the historian is generalising from, for example, taxation returns or ecclesiastical records, it would seem that the population of Wales grew steadily between 1500 and 1750 (490,000), so that by the time of the first census of 1801 numbers had risen to about 580,000. The most likely pattern seems to be that of substantial growth from 1500 to mid seventeenth century (380,000), followed by stagnation till the end of the century, whereupon growth resumed, but more modestly.

Population increase was probably irregular over Wales, with the remoter and harsher rural areas expanding at a slower rate than the more prosperous border lands and southern lowlands. The greater concentrations of population naturally lay in those areas which had been colonised by the Normans, where they had established their manorial structure with its emphasis on mixed farming, feudal tenures and the growth of towns or villages. The Principality of Wales and the Welshries of the march extended over greater areas of less friendly territory, accommodated a far sparser population and relied on a pastoral, more traditionally Welsh, economic structure.

The Welsh were a predominantly rural and scattered population at the end of the fifteenth century, though naturally the density varied and there were greater concentrations in parts of the southern and eastern areas and along the North Wales coast. This was particularly true of the market towns, serving the market and craft needs of the surrounding rural areas. Towns such as Caernarfon or Carmarthen, serving relatively rich country areas, prospered in the

sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, while those towns whose function had been predominantly defensive, decayed. Tudor legislation provided important administrative functions for some towns as centres for holding the courts of Great Sessions – Brecon, Denbigh, Carmarthen and Caernarfon. Swansea, Cardiff or Haverfordwest were ports and served modestly prosperous agricultural areas. The population of towns roughly doubled in Swansea or Caernarfon, but the scale was still small. Elizabethan Brecon or Carmarthen had populations of about 2,000. Towards the end of the eighteenth century there were hints of the dramatic changes which dominated the nineteenth century. In Holywell, Newtown, Pontypool, Neath, Swansea and, most dramatically, Merthyr Tydfil, population had started to increase due to industrialisation. Holywell, strategically placed in the North Wales coalfield, was a major town by the 1770s. By 1801 Merthyr Tydfil, with a population of 8,000, was larger than a major regional centre like Carmarthen. Population growth and distribution were to be revolutionised by industrialisation.

Gentry estates

In pre-industrial Wales wealth lay in land. After the Norman conquest land was in the hands of the Norman lords, the Church and the native Welsh. With Norman penetration came a manorial structure, though there was considerable diversity of settlement, tenure and agricultural practice, but the characteristic villeinage system embraced the native Welsh bondmen. In the areas which remained under Welsh control, either in the marches or under the princes, the tendency was towards a society of freemen.

Native Welsh freemen held land collectively, as kinsmen, in *gwely* or resting-place tenure. Gavelkind, division of land among all the family heirs, characterised the *gwely* system though it was practised in Kent and East Anglia as well as Wales. The system was breaking down by the beginning of the fourteenth century. The native landholding system had come under pressure, particularly after the Edwardian conquest when Edward I was concerned to maximise his revenue and traditional payments in kind were commuted to money payments. With the co-operative structure of landholding undermined, pressure mounted for the acquisition and consolidation of individual estates. Both the Black Death and the Glyndŵr revolt made

the land market more fluid and hastened the process of transformation, though of course it was a process which took centuries. By the fourteenth century can be discerned the origin of many of those substantial gentry estates which were often consolidated in the fifteenth century. The second half of the fifteenth century, particularly, provided further opportunities, and by the end of that century there were many gentry estates in existence. The economic organisation of the Norman manor had been modified, though its significance as a tenurial unit remained. In the Welshries the system of gavelkind had been undermined. The new order which was consolidated in sixteenth-century Wales was, in barest essentials, similar to that which obtained in England. Wealth – and power – were based on land owned by the aristocracy – few in Wales – and the gentry. That land was leased out by a variety of tenures, and estates were kept intact as they passed to the eldest son, a practice brought about not by Henry VIII's legislation but by long-term economic influences. The emergence of a gentry class in Wales, as in other European countries at this time, was of profound significance, both within Wales and outside.

In the early sixteenth century the major landowners tended to be identifiably Welsh, whatever their diverse origins. Some were descended from Welsh princes or members of their courts; some had originally held office in the Principality of Wales; others served marcher lords and prospered. Many were Norman or English in origin, particularly in the lowland areas. Office-holding, trade or war had enabled other families to progress. Those Welshmen who had been in royal service had often prospered. There were wider opportunities for estate-building in the sixteenth century, while traditional avenues remained. Following the dissolution of the monasteries the amount of crown land on the market greatly increased. The best of Margam Abbey land in Glamorgan was acquired by Sir Rhys Mansel who had grasped his opportunity through service to Henry VIII in his Irish wars. Monastic land was not all immediately sold off and crown land was on the market throughout the century. Time-honoured expedients such as judicious marriages remained important – when Sir Thomas Gamage of Coity, near Bridgend, died without male heir in Elizabeth's reign suitors for his heiress, grand-daughter Barbara Gamage, were numerous, influential and very keen to acquire her estate.

Land was also concentrated into fewer hands by an inexorable process of engrossment and enclosure. Extensive enclosure of freehold land meant that by the early seventeenth century many manors were almost completely enclosed by hedge or ditch, though in others the old open-field system remained throughout that century, and about a quarter of Welsh land was still common by the end of the eighteenth century.

Enclosure consolidated estates but it was also a defensive measure. There was a severe inflation in the sixteenth century, with some prices rising fivefold. The most defenceless groups – the labourers of town and country – could not withstand consequent pressures since rises in wages never matched those in prices. Begging and vagabondage increased and poor-law legislation became essential. But even once prosperous estates were under pressure and there were always land-hungry neighbours ready to pounce. So, analysis of the consolidation of estates is scarcely separable from that of their protection. Wise estate-management, husbanding of resources, providing surplus produce for an increasing population were all essential. Resort to a variety of courts was common. Sir John Wynn, who inherited the Gwydir estates in Caernarfonshire in 1580, was found guilty by the council in the marches of using violence to eject tenants and was fined, initially, 1,000 marks. Similar cases concerning Welsh gentry from all counties occurred in the courts of Star Chamber, Requests and Chancery.

In the centuries between union and industrialisation Wales was a land in which economic resources were dominated by the gentry. There were few members of the aristocracy. Most important were the Earls of Worcester, resident at Raglan but with extensive lands in other parts of Wales, including Gower; and the Earls of Pembroke, particularly important from the mid sixteenth century, based in Cardiff but soon to leave Wales for Wilton. As absentee landlords they were particularly vulnerable; the fourth Earl of Worcester claimed in 1590 to have lost 3,000 acres to one thousand of his tenants. He exaggerated, but it was a significant claim, hinting at the size of the estates involved. The Earl of Pembroke remained the largest landowner in Glamorgan – he was lord of six boroughs and thirty-six manors.

The gentry were a far from homogeneous class. There were those of large estates and commensurate prestige – the Wynns of Gwydir,

the Maurices of Clennenau, the Bulkeleyes in Anglesey, the Salusburys of Llewenni, the Vaughans in Breconshire, the Perrots of Carew, the Griffiths of Penrhyn, the Herberts of Cardiff and the Mansels of Margam. Such gentry were lords of numerous manors, farmed many hundreds of acres and reckoned their estate revenues in many hundreds of pounds in the sixteenth century. At the other end of the scale there were gentry worse off than prosperous yeomen, though it is impossible to quantify the amount of land which either might farm. Yeomen farmers in Wales normally farmed smaller holdings than their English counterparts but their larger acreages distinguished them from the ordinary farmer and gave them some buffer against the exigencies of poor harvest or drought. The Welsh gentry remained generally poorer than their English counterparts. Very few estates in Caernarfonshire or Merioneth yielded the £1,000 per annum of a first-rate English estate in the 1670s, though in Glamorgan about fifteen families could count on this level of income. The wealthiest Welsh gentry – the Morgans of Tredegar, for instance – could count on a wholly exceptional £3,000 to £4,000 per annum at this date.

Large estates in Wales were farmed under a variety of tenures. Manorial tenures, whether freehold, customary or leasehold, survived, with freehold tenures of land held in perpetuity common in the Welsh areas and customary tenures in Normanised areas. Commonest of the customary tenures was copyhold but the form of tenure most encouraged by landlords during the sixteenth century was leasehold, normally for three lives. Tenants with even the smallest holdings were more secure than landless labourers who worked for a wage which, in real terms, fell steadily, particularly in the inflationary sixteenth century, with the rise in population making their bargaining position yet weaker. They lived at subsistence level and spent the greatest proportion of their wages on food and drink.

Gentry estates survived for centuries, despite inflationary pressures and the turmoils of Civil War and Commonwealth. Yet there was constant modification of the landowning pattern. Some estates were sequestered under the Commonwealth in the seventeenth century. Some new landed families emerged at the same time. It was, however, in the eighteenth century that far more substantial changes occurred in the ranks of the gentry and a more obvious demarcation became evident between the largest landowners and those with more modest resources. The traditional methods of estate extension – purchase,

lease, exchange, engrossment, judicious marriage – continued and there was an increasing tendency for small estates to be absorbed into larger units. While some families with their origins in the fifteenth century survived to the end of the eighteenth and beyond, there was a remarkable transformation in gentry ranks. The Vaughan estate of Golden Grove, at 40,000 acres, one of the great estates of South Wales, was disposed of to John Campbell, Lord Cawdor. A remarkable social change caused the failure of the male line in family after family. The age of gentry marriage in the eighteenth century became far later than in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the size of families smaller. As a result, in eighteenth-century Monmouthshire the male line failed in about half the gentry families, in Glamorgan it had failed in ten of the twelve leading families by 1780. Consequently many estates were taken over by families with no previous Welsh connections. The Margam estate, acquired by Sir Rhys Mansel of Penrice after the dissolution of the monasteries, was inherited by a Wiltshire rector. Another consequence was that estates were concentrated in fewer hands as they were acquired by existing landowning families. By the end of the eighteenth century great estates not only survived but had often been augmented. Their fifteenth- and sixteenth-century creators, in South Wales and in at least some of the North Wales counties, had often disappeared. There was more evident conspicuous wealth concentrated in the hands of fewer families and a concomitant social cleavage between this small class of anglicised families and smaller landowners, while exploitation of estates through agricultural improvement and development of mineral resources trebled income on some great estates.

Farming practices

It was the geography of Wales which largely determined how agricultural land was exploited. Extensive areas of the country, over 700 feet above sea level, inaccessible, infertile, with high humidity and high temperature loss during the growing season, were inimical to any arable farming. A concentration on pastoral farming was inevitable in upland Wales, that area which saw least pressure from Norman invaders, least anglicisation and least agricultural improvement in succeeding centuries. The pattern of Norman manorial penetration, from eastern lowlands into southern lowlands,

was repeated in many waves of English agricultural influences in later centuries. Here was a light loam soil, well-drained, fertile, the basis of high yield and high income from colonisers, Norman or English. Here were 'pleasant meadows and...pastures, the plains fruitful and apt for tillage, bearing abundance of all kinds of grain'.

Stock-rearing characterised the farming of the hill areas, upland Glamorgan and Pembrokeshire, Denbighshire, Caernarfonshire and Montgomeryshire, for example. Beef and dairy cattle were always centrally important while sheep were reared for their wool, meat, tallow and skins. Horse-breeding became more important in the seventeenth century as horses tended to replace oxen for ploughing. Cereals were grown in upland areas where possible. Oats were a hardy crop and particularly important for winter feeding. In lowland Wales mixed farming was characteristic, with the emphasis in the most fertile areas on the cultivation of wheat, barley and oats. Herds of cattle might be thirty to eighty strong in the sixteenth century, complemented by upwards of 500 sheep although a few estates had three times this number. Dairy cattle, for breeding and the production of milk, cheese and butter, were remunerative. Store cattle were important and oxen were kept as draught animals. Small numbers of horses, pigs and poultry were found in lowland and upland areas, while the demesne of larger estates saw deer herds for venison, orchards for fruit, and the cultivation of vegetables. Flax and hemp, essential for spinning, were also grown in small quantities.

George Owen of Henllys, whose sixteenth-century description of Pembrokeshire is so informative, criticised primitive techniques of soil preparation and the relative unimportance of corn in a predominantly pastoral economy. He mentioned the use of lime, highly thought of as a fertiliser, and sea-sand and seaweed in soil preparation. Lime was still widely used in the eighteenth century but, by then, improving landlords were preoccupied with bringing more land into cultivation by drainage and improving yields. By that time the border lands and coastal areas saw some experiments in the four-year rotation of crops – turnips, clover, barley, wheat – and in cross-breeding and pedigree herds. Welsh agriculture remained conservative, both in implements and techniques, but from the 1750s county agricultural societies sprouted in Breconshire, Glamorgan, Cardiganshire and Pembrokeshire. The wealthier landowners benefited most since they could best afford to implement new ideas. They had become 'improvement-