

THE HISTORY OF WELSH CINEMA

**by Heledd Wyn with additions
from Film Hub Wales**

1896 - 1910

Wales has a long filmmaking history, with its first films shot in 1896, just a year after the development of the [Lumière Cinématographe](#). The [first known film to be recorded in Wales](#) was by American [Birt Acres](#), documenting a royal visit by the Prince of Wales (later [Edward VII](#)) to the [Cardiff Fine Art, Industrial and Maritime Exhibition](#) in Cathays Park in June 1896. The production of Welsh films began in 1898, when Rhyl-based [Arthur Cheetham](#) began recording silent shorts of local events. His first [film of children playing on Rhyl Sands](#) was shown in January 1898.

The first Wales-based filmmaker of enduring stature was [William Haggar](#). Originally from Essex, he came to Wales via a touring theatre company and made over 30 fiction films between 1901 and 1908. Haggar's work received a worldwide audience mainly through the [Gaumont](#) and [Urban](#) companies. Haggar's most notable film was [Desperate Poaching Affray](#) (1903) which is recognised for its violence, iconoclasm and progressive editing. The film, along with Frank Mottershaw's [A Daring Daylight Burglary](#) and Edwin Stanton Porter's [The Great Train Robbery](#), has in the early twenty-first century, been credited with influencing the chase subgenre of American films.



© Edwin Stanton Porter - Own work
(Screenshot *The Great Train Robbery* 1903),

1910 - 1930

[David Llewelyn Wark "D.W." Griffith](#) was a pre-eminent director of the silent era, but is a controversial figure today due to the legacy of his film [The Birth Of A Nation](#), which is known for its deeply racist ideology. Born in Kentucky, with Welsh ancestry, Griffith came to Britain at the invitation of David Lloyd George's UK government to shoot [Hearts of the World](#) (1918), a propaganda feature aimed to change American public opinion on World War I.

Much of the cinema of Wales in the later 1910s and 1920s has been lost. In 1920 nine films were shot in Wales, all now gone. One of the most notable and celebrated of the films from this period is [A Welsh Singer](#) (1915), starring [Florence Turner](#) and based on the novel by [Allen Raine](#) (published pseudonymously by Welsh writer Anne Puddicombe). An [archived synopsis](#) reads: *Romance set in Wales. Shepherdess becomes opera star, shepherd becomes a sculptor.*

The director of *A Welsh Singer* [Henry Edwards](#) went on to film [Aylwin](#) (1920), from the novel by [Theodore Watts-Dunton](#), which drew into the world of travellers and a mythical, mystical Wales.

Wales' oldest animated cartoon character Jerry the Tyke was also developed during this period. It was first produced in 1925, by Cardiff-based animator Sid Griffiths and photographer Bert Bilby, who both worked as projectionists at Cardiff's Capitol Cinema. They were later joined by London-based co-animator Brian White. Inspired by the American animation Felix the Cat, Jerry the Tyke was a mixture of live-action sequences and animation, 40 animations were created between 1925 and 1927.



Jerry The Troublesome Tyke - © Sid Griffiths

1930 - 1940

The 1930s saw the first [Welsh-language](#) film, [Y Chwarelwr](#) (1935) directed by [Ifan ab Owen Edwards](#) (the founder of [Urdd Gobaith Cymru](#)). [Y Chwarelwr](#) depicts the life of a quarryman in Blaenau Ffestiniog. The original, incomplete version can be watched on the [BFI player](#). The National Library of Wales Screen and Sound Archive also created a restored version with TV company Cwmni Da, who recreated the last reel and made a new soundtrack for the whole film.

The decade also saw two important [agitprop](#) documentaries with underlying communist messages: [Today We Live](#) (1937) followed unemployed miners in the [Rhondda Valleys](#), and [Donald Alexander's Eastern Valley](#) (1937) focused on a co-operative scheme in Monmouthshire.



© 1938 MGM - Publicity material from movie distributor 1938 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer,



© Karoly Grosz - Scan via James Hancock (@colebrax) on Twitter.

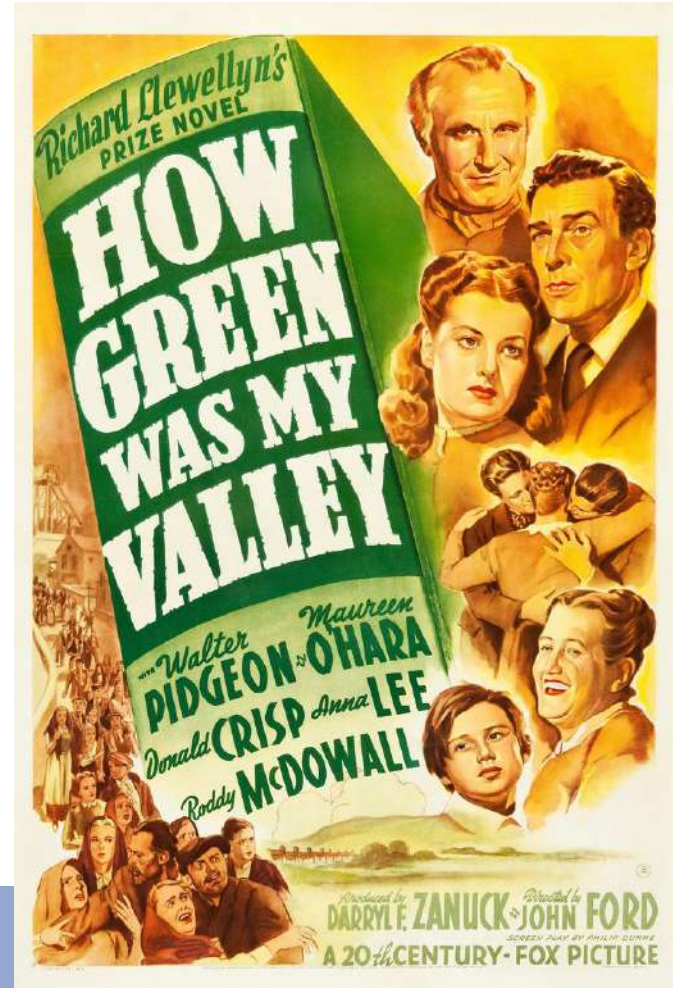
The coming of the [sound era](#) had little impact on Welsh cinema, though 1938's [The Citadel](#), an Oscar-nominated adaptation of [A.J. Cronin's 1937 novel](#), starring Robert Donat, brought Wales to a large audience. The first Hollywood 'talkie' to be set in Wales had been [The Old Dark House](#) (1932) from legendary horror director [James Whale](#).

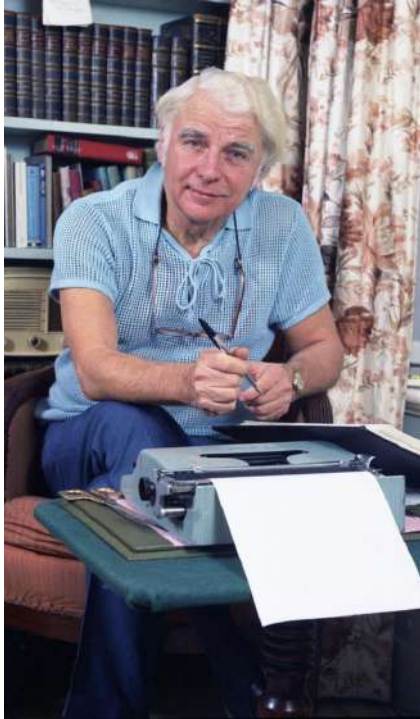
1940 - 1950

Wales was a common setting for American and British movies during this period, and two of the best-known examples were [The Proud Valley](#) (1940) and [How Green Was My Valley](#) (1941).

The Proud Valley was written specifically for its star, the African-American singer and political activist [Paul Robeson](#), who played a sailor who finds common cause with a mining community in South Wales. In years to come, Robeson would say that this was the film he was most proud of.

[John Ford](#)'s *How Green Was My Valley* won five Oscars including Best Picture and Best Director, but is notable for starring just one Welsh actor, [Rhys Williams](#), and for being shot in the United States.





Portrait Emlyn Williams © Allan warren - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0,

Although John Ford's view of Wales was based on a mythical and romantic view of the industrialised valleys, [Jill Cragie's *Blue Scar*](#) (1949), part financed by the [National Coal Board](#), raised serious and radical questions about the nationalisation of the coal industry and has striking location photography around South Wales.

The outbreak of World War II saw the backdrop of a mining valley in Wales being used as the setting for a war propaganda film, [The Silent Village](#) (1943). Designed as a tribute to the mining community of [Lidice, Czechoslovakia](#), which had suffered from Nazi atrocities, *The Silent Village* transposes the events to Wales and also draws analogies with the oppression of the Welsh language.

Another release from 1949 to make an important cultural statement was [Emlyn Williams' *The Last Days of Dolwyn*](#), the plot of which centred on the flooding of a Welsh village to create a reservoir to supply water to England, which has clear parallels with both the flooding of [Llanwddyn](#) in the 1880s and the later fate of [Capel Celyn](#) in 1965.



A still from the making of 'The Last Days of Dolwyn' © BFI.

1950 - 1970

The period directly following the end of the Second World War saw political and social commentary disappear from scripted Welsh cinema. The first few decades after the war saw few notable Welsh films; stand-out exceptions included [Tiger Bay](#) (1959), a crime drama set in the eponymous area of Cardiff, and [Only Two Can Play](#) (1962), a comedy which starred Peter Sellers as a frustrated librarian.

The main problems facing Welsh cinema during this period were a lack of a film production infrastructure, Welsh producers and finance. The fact that Wales was unable to produce films from within its own borders resulted in the stereotyping and common preconceptions of Welsh life formed by 'outside' filmmakers.

However, the 50s and 60s did see the output of two of the country's best documentary makers. [Jack Howells](#) and [John Ormond](#) dealt primarily with Welsh people and subjects. Howells is best known for his impressionistic, lyrical documentaries, including [Nye!](#) (1965) and [Dylan Thomas](#) (1962). [Dylan Thomas](#) is the only Welsh film to have won an Oscar (for [best short documentary](#)). It features [Richard Burton](#) as narrator, visiting the haunts of [Dylan Thomas](#). Ormond, a poet foremost, is remembered for his sensitive portrayals of writers and authors, and for documentaries concerned with the working class and with refugees, in particular [Borrowed Pasture](#) (1960) which follows two Polish ex-soldiers struggling to get by on a [Carmarthenshire](#) smallholding.



Dylan Thomas film Theatrical release poster (1962) © Television Wales and the West

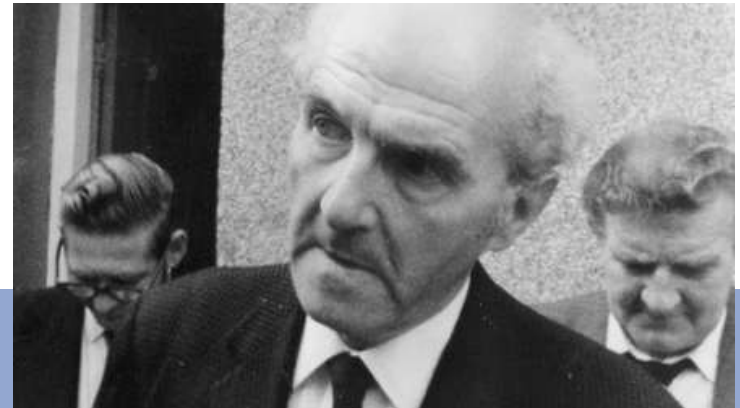
1970 - 1990

One of the few beacons of light for the industry came in the late 1970s with the output of left-wing producer and director [Karl Francis](#); whose uncompromising portrayal of contemporary life in the South Wales valleys was typified by his 1976 film [Above Us The Earth](#), which depicted the devastating impact of the closure of a local colliery.

Meanwhile, though Welsh-language films were few at the time, the visionary work of the Bwrdd Ffilmiau Cymraeg (Welsh Film Board) in the 1970s and into the 1980s ensured an important body of work, including cult titles such as *Gwaed ar y Sêr*. The Board's 'travelling cinema' scheme took Welsh-language films to audiences across Wales in locations such as village and school halls, acknowledging the importance of community viewing.








Above us Earth 1977 © BFI Player



Above us Earth 1977 © BBC Wales Arts

1982 saw the launch of [S4C](#), the Welsh-language television channel, which began producing and funding longer dramas and films in Welsh and English. Films of note from this period include the drama [Milwr Bychan / Boy Soldier](#) (1986), [Mam](#) from Red Flannel Films (1988) and the comedy [Coming Up Roses / Rhosyn a Rhith](#) (1986).

S4C Logos

1982 - 1988	
1988 - 1995	
1995 - 2007	
2007 - 2014	
2014 - present	

Directed by Stephen Bayly and starring Dafydd Hywel and Iola Gregory, *Coming Up Roses* centres on the closure of a small town's cinema, and follows the projectionist's unusual attempts to make the best of the situation. The film was screened in the *Un Certain Regard* section at the 1986 Cannes Film Festival, and was the first feature in the Welsh language to gain a London West End cinema release.



Coming up Roses poster, © The cover art can be obtained from [Movieposterdb.com](#).

1990 - 2005

The early 1990s began with the release of Welsh-language film [Hedd Wyn](#) (1992). It won the [Royal Television Society](#) Best Drama award and became the first Welsh film to be nominated for the [Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film](#). Despite this it failed to gain a British distributor.

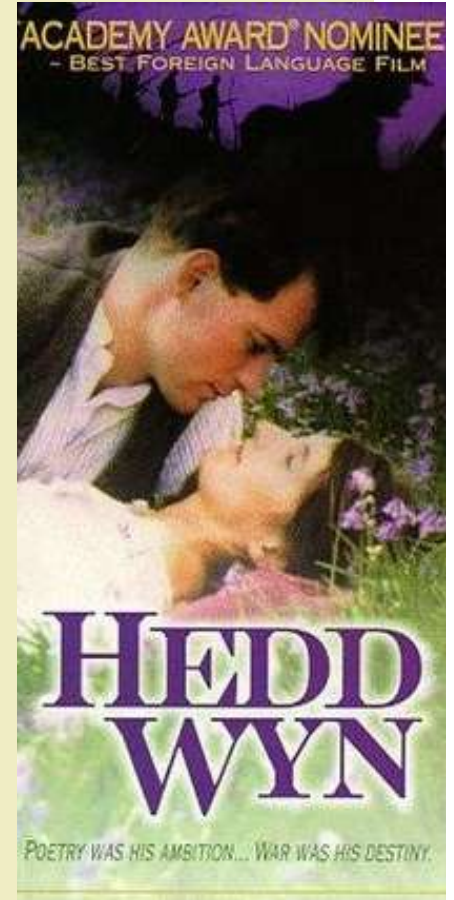
The 1990s also saw two important films from Endaf Emlyn: [Un Nos Ola Leuad](#) (1991) is seen as one of the finest Welsh films made, while his [Gadael Lenin](#) (1993) was voted by viewers at the 1993 London Film Festival as the most popular British film.

[BAFTA Cymru](#), the Welsh branch of the [British Academy of Film and Television Arts](#), was established in 1991. BAFTA Cymru holds an annual awards ceremony to recognise achievements in Welsh cinema, but unlike its parent body, the television and film awards are contested together for each category.

In 1992 the Wales Film and Television Archive was formally established in Aberystwyth, and in 2001 it was merged with the National Library of Wales' sound and moving image collections to create [the NLW Screen and Sound Archive](#). The archive's aim is to preserve, promote and celebrate the sound and moving image heritage of Wales, and it's home to a huge collection of films, television programmes and videos, as well as sound recordings and music.



Award image © H Raybould



Hedd Wynn poster

S4C's 1995 policy, to produce up to two feature films a year, to be released to cinemas before television transmission, allowed Welsh filmmakers new opportunities. Yet the reluctance of London-based distributors to handle Welsh-language films made it difficult for Welsh films to reach a wider audience.

Sgrîn, a new Media Agency for Wales, was set up in 1997, whose remit included feature funding, short film schemes and the Cardiff Screen Festival.

The later 1990s saw three English-language films that found a home in mainstream British cinema. The first of the three was Marc Evans' [House of America](#) which drew comparisons to the realism of Karl Francis' work. Then in 1998, [Kevin Allen](#) produced [Twin Town](#), a bawdy comedy satirising the older cultural traditions of Wales. This was surpassed at the box office by [Justin Kerrigan](#)'s [Human Traffic](#) (1999), a stylised comedy focusing on the club and drug culture of Cardiff. 1999 also saw the release of [Paul Morrison](#)'s [Solomon & Gaenor](#), Wales' second film to be nominated for the foreign language Academy Award.

[Very Annie Mary](#) (2000) was the second feature from [Sara Sugarman](#), the Rhyl-born director and actor. A musical comedy starring [Rachel Griffiths](#) and [Jonathan Pryce](#), it also featured early roles for [Ioan Gruffudd](#) and [Matthew Rhys](#).

Despite an improvement in film production in Wales, finance remained an issue with very few films being created without external funding. [House of America](#) took its funding from six different sources while multinationals funded both [Twin Town](#) ([PolyGram](#)) and [The Englishman Who Went Up a Hill But Came Down a Mountain](#) (1995) ([Miramax](#)).



Twin Town, © ffatti fFilms / Music Film Network

Human Traffic, © BFI Distribution

Very Annie Mary, © Canal+

Presented by Ben STILLER

SUBMARINE

2005 - 2020

In 2006 Sgrîn was succeeded by the Film Agency for Wales (later [Ffilm Cymru Wales](#)), providing funding for features and shorts, training for screen creatives, and supporting audience development.

Dylan Thomas featured in several films around this period, beginning with [The Edge of Love](#) in 2009, which followed the complicated relationship between Thomas (Matthew Rhys), his wife [Caitlin Macnamara](#) ([Sienna Miller](#)), and his first love Vera Phillips ([Keira Knightley](#)). This was followed by [Set Fire To The Stars](#) (with [Celyn Jones](#) as Thomas) and the TV film [A Poet in New York](#) (starring [Tom Hollander](#)) both released in 2014, the centenary of the poet's birth.

One of the most acclaimed Welsh films this century is [Submarine](#) (2010), [Richard Ayoade](#)'s adaptation of [Joe Dunthorne's novel](#) about an eccentric teenager growing up in Swansea. [Craig Roberts](#) starred in the lead role, and has since gone on to direct several features himself ([Just Jim](#) in 2015, [Eternal Beauty](#) in 2019, [The Phantom Of The Open](#) in 2021, [The Scurry](#) in 2026), all of which have filmed in Wales and/or employed Welsh talents.



Submarine poster, © MoviePosterDB



Pride poster



I Am Not a Witch, © Criterion Channel

In quick succession, director [Marc Evans](#) released [Patagonia](#) (2010), a road movie set in the Welsh settlement in Argentina, and [Hunky Dory](#) (2011) a musical set in a comprehensive school, and remains one of Wales' most prolific filmmakers.

[Gruff Rhys](#), the multi-talented musician (and composer of *Set Fire To The Stars*) set out on his own cinematic journeys around this time, with the documentaries [Separado!](#) (2010) and [American Interior](#) (2014) both receiving cinema releases and screening at prestigious festivals worldwide.

[Pride](#) (2014) retold the true story of the origins of the [Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners](#) campaign during the strike of 1984-1985. It was both a critical and box office success, though like many notable features set in Wales, has received some criticism for casting non-Welsh actors in lead Welsh roles.

[I Am Not A Witch](#) (2017) marked the debut feature of Zambian-Welsh filmmaker [Rungano Nyoni](#), building on her successes in shorts (including through the [It's My Shout](#) scheme). A striking, occasionally surreal story of a young girl accused of witchcraft, it premiered at the Cannes Film Festival, as did her subsequent film [On Becoming A Guinea Fowl](#) (2024).

2020 -

The global COVID pandemic has had huge ramifications for the film industry, and [Dream Horse](#) (2020) was one of the unlucky features whose release plans were affected by the closure of cinemas worldwide. Adapting the documentary [Dark Horse: The Incredible True Story of Dream Alliance](#) (2015), about a working-class community who formed a syndicate to buy a racehorse, *Dream Horse* premiered in the Sundance Film Festival in 2020, but had to wait until the summer of 2021 before its theatrical release in the UK and the US.

Also inspired by true events, Sara Sugarman's [Save The Cinema](#) (2022) dramatised the heroic efforts of hairdresser Liz Evans to prevent the closure of the Lyric in Carmarthen in 1993, ultimately reaching out to Steven Spielberg for help.

Director/ animator [Joanna Quinn](#) and writer/producer [Les Mills](#) were nominated for an Oscar for their short film [Affairs of the Art](#) (2022). It took six years of hard work to create the latest showcase for their long-running protagonist, art-lover and factory worker, Beryl.



Dream Horse, © Warner Brothers



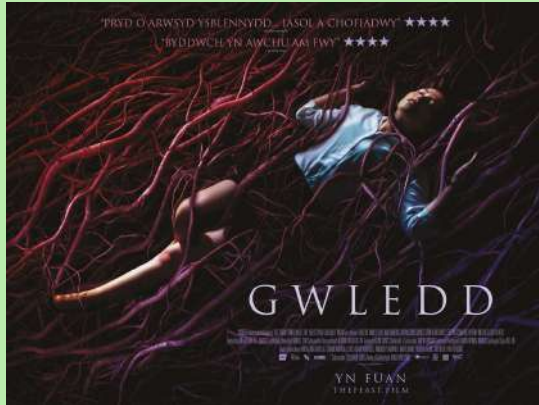
Save the Cinema, © Sky Cinema



Affairs of the Art, © Les Mills

This decade has seen the release of two high-profile Welsh-language features, both from writer [Roger Williams](#) and director [Lee Haven Jones](#): [Gwledd / The Feast](#) (2022), and [Y Sŵn](#) (2023). *Gwledd* is a dark horror centred on a wealthy family's dinner party in the remote countryside, and received UK-wide distribution from Picturehouse Entertainment. *Y Sŵn* dramatises the creation of S4C in the early 1980s, and was released to coincide with the channel's 40th anniversary.

From 2024-25 diverse international titles such as Rungano Nyoni's second feature *On Becoming A Guinea Fowl* (2024) released, as well as ie ie Productions' *Brides* (2025). We also saw Wales based stories such as Janis Pugh's *Chuck Chuck Baby* (2023) and Severn Screen's *Mr Burton* (2025). The National Library of Wales Screen and Sound Archive also worked with Film Hub Wales to re-scan and tour 2000 classic [Oed Yr Addewid](#) in 2025, highlighting the need to maintain access to important heritage titles.



Gwledd poster, © FilmBankMedia



Mr Burton, © Icon Films



Oed yr Addewid poster, © The Screen and Sound Archive of the National Library of Wales

Conclusion

Upcoming films highlight that there is plenty to be discovered about cinema and film life in Wales, beyond our rural landscape. Welsh filmmakers have globally significant stories to tell, which can inspire both new talent and local audiences. Some challenges in 2025 clearly reflect those of Welsh filmmaking as early as the 50s, notably the few Welsh language titles in production, limited finance in comparison to other territories, as well as stereotypical representations of Wales and its people on screen.

However, there are a host of filmmakers working on large scale productions, with anticipated titles in 2026 including [Madfabulous](#) and [H for Hawk](#), as well as [The Scurry](#) and [Proud](#). There are also circa 270 film exhibitors in Wales working to meet the community demand for Welsh stories on local cinema screens and resources such as [Made in Wales](#) (a Film Hub Wales project) which celebrates films with Welsh connections through podcasts, video interviews, editorial and a [catalogue of over 1000](#) film titles to help film exhibitors find rights to Welsh films.

The future of Welsh cinema depends on:

- Audiences - making sure that they have awareness of and access Welsh stories on screen,
- Creative talent and support for the pipeline in Wales, including skills development,
- Revenue, with investment into all stages of the film chain (development, production, distribution and exhibition).

References and wider reading:

Find out more about film Welsh heritage in the following links, including an in-depth resource called [Picturing our Past](#) from the National Library of Wales Screen and Sound Archive.

- **The Welsh Academy Encyclopaedia of Wales** (2008) - John Davies, Nigel Jenkins, Menna Baines, Peredur Lynch. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, ISBN978-0-7083-1953-6.
- **Wales and Cinema, The First Hundred Years** (1996) - David Berry, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, ISBN0-7083-1370-1.
- [The National Library of Wales Screen and Sound Archive](#)
- [Clip Cymru](#)
- [Wales on Film Learning Resource](#)
- [Britain on Film](#)
- [BFI 10 Great Films Set in Wales](#)
- [Film Hub Wales List of 50 Welsh films](#)
- [Screen Organisations in Wales](#)
- [Made in Wales](#)
- [Film Hub Wales Welsh Film Catalogue](#)

