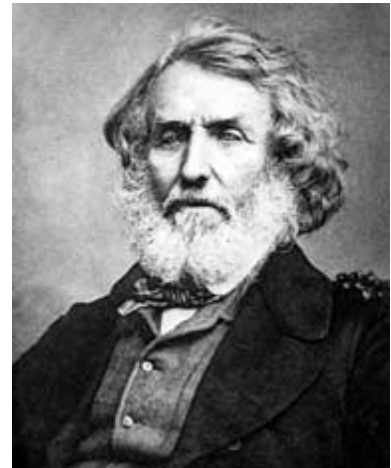


## Six geographical things you may or may not know about Wales

### 1. Everest is named after a Welsh geographer

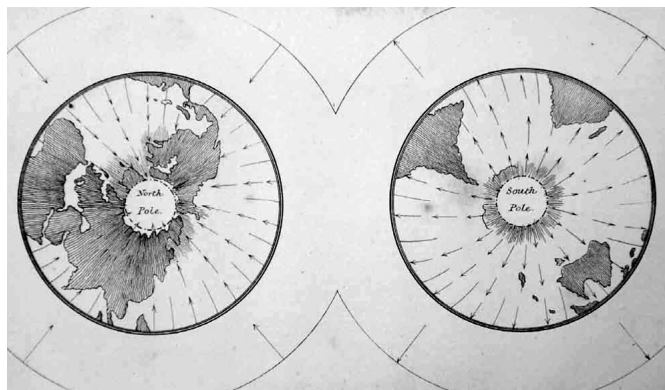
George Everest was born in 1790 in a manor house on the outskirts of Crickhowell, in what is now the eastern section of the Brecon Beacons National Park, where his family had a small estate situated at the foot of the Black Mountains. [His birthplace is now a hotel](#). He pronounced his name Eve – rest (two syllables). He was a geographer in the spirit of the nineteenth century, being in charge of the survey to map India. George seems to have spent his childhood in Wales and Greenwich, where the family lived for part of the year. After schooling at the Military Colleges in Great Marlow and Woolwich he became a cadet in the East India Company in 1806, later joining the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India (1818). He was appointed Surveyor-General in 1830 and in 1856 the Survey verified 'Peak XV' as the highest mountain in the world. The mountain was named after him in 1864 by his successor. Everest was elected Vice-President of the Royal Geographical Society in 1862, by which time he had retired to live in London.



Ironically, Everest never saw the mountain named after him, by all accounts he never wanted his name attached to the mountain and the world's highest mountain has always been mispronounced!

### 2. Continental drift was first proposed as a serious idea by a Welshman

Evan Hopkins (1810-1867), a native of Swansea, has been completely overlooked by historians of geography and geology. Hopkins spent his youth working in ironworks at Merthyr Tydfil but became a mining and ore geologist who traveled widely, gaining geological experience in Europe, Mexico, Australia, and especially



Central and South America where he was director of gold and silver mines. In 1844 Hopkins published a remarkable book, "[On the connexion of geology with terrestrial magnetism](#)", which presented a 'comprehensive view of the structure of the globe'. He claimed that continents had moved not only vertically, but also horizontally across the surface of the Earth, and that they were still moving in a steady- state process. This was a radical idea for at a time when the prevailing thinking was either (i) of a fixed world created by God, or (ii) of a steady-state earth subject to the same fixed processes as the present but with changing environments due to vast periods of time over which the land is either eroded or uplifted thus changing sea levels with the land remained in a fixed position. Nobody had yet dared to suggest environmental changes were due to continental drift and therefore changes in latitude. Hopkins argued for shifting continents, and moreover he provided a mechanism based on his understanding of magmatic fluids (from ore bodies) and suggestions of global scale electroplating-type processes to form and move continents. His 'theory' was coherent but ignored as it didn't fit the prevailing ideas of the time, although with our greater knowledge, it is possible to find echoes of it within the modern day theory of plate tectonics. Hopkins was certainly mobile in his mind as well as his vision of the Earth!

### 3. Don't expect to get a free carrier bag from shops or supermarkets in Wales

In October 2011 the Welsh Government introduced a levy of 5p payable by customers on every single-use plastic bag issued by shops in Wales, with the exception of bags used for loose fruit and veg. A report of an [evaluation survey](#), commissioned by the Welsh Government in June 2012, found the carrier bag charge has increased own-bag use in Wales but hasn't led to any change in other environmental behaviours, although more people in Wales now regard themselves as waste-conscious.



The charging policy and debate is not without controversy. There is much argument (In Wales and elsewhere) about the relative merits of 'bags for life', which have been shown to carry a higher carbon footprint (or global warming potential). An [Environment Agency Report](#) in 2011 demonstrated that the conventional supermarket plastic bag has the lowest impact on global warming potential, whilst cotton re-useable bags have the highest impact and require vast quantities of water for the manufacture process.

The report concluded that reusing lightweight carrier bags as bin liners produces greater benefits than recycling bags due to the benefits of avoiding the production of the bin liners they replace. In Wales, perhaps not surprisingly, there has been a decrease of carrier bags used as bin liners since the introduction of the 5p charge.

Apart from the 'green' debate, some other geographical issues linked to the 5p carrier bag charge have been reported, mainly through anecdote.

When the charge was first introduced shops reported an increase in shoplifting and supermarkets noted the theft of baskets.

Some shops on the border with England have complained they are losing out as some Welsh residents are now journeying to England for their shopping.

There has been a reported increase in dog fouling, as there are no 'free' plastic bags to clean up mess. It would be interesting to discover if the 5p charge has any impact in different areas of Wales. There seems to be much potential for fieldwork investigating the geographical effects this policy.

### 4. A place name starting with Aber has a specific geographical (topographical) meaning in Wales

All geography teachers should be able to name a town or village in Wales that starts with Aber. You may have thought of Aberystwyth, Abergavenny, Aberdare or Abergele. A number of Welsh towns that have anglicised names are properly Aber- something; Swansea's 'proper' Welsh moniker is Abertawe, whilst Brecon's is Aberhonddu. So what is the geographical significance?

Many teachers will know Aber as a prefix equated with 'mouth of the river'. However, more technically it means 'confluence'; and even more specifically, the attached suffix is always named after the tributary running into the bigger river, lake or the sea. It seems likely that the original geographical significance of the term was as a navigational aid in the days before route ways were mapped on paper. The appellation of the tributary name gives more locational/directional information to the traveller rather than only knowing the name of the main water body. The significance of Aber is sometimes 'lost' in the present-day because smaller tributaries are culverted or 'dominated' by modern development and the prominence of the trunk river, lake or



the sea afforded by their bigger scale. Thus, [Abergavenny](#) is at the confluence of the River Gavenny (Welsh = Afon Gafenni) with the River Usk (Welsh = Afon Wysg), but not many people notice the Afon Gafenni as it is relatively small and has all but 'disappeared' under the built up area of the town. Aber as a toponymic prefix is not confined to Wales, it occurs in Scotland (e.g. Aberdeen) and occasionally crops up the West country and Brittany, indicating its ancient origins; in Ancient British it is 'od-ber' meaning 'out pouring'. However, nowhere else is it as common as in Wales. Why this should be so is not clear, but it may be a result of the resilience of the Welsh language to later linguistic and cultural influences, linked with the importance of topography in the geographical imagination of the people of Wales.

## 5. There is more than one Wales

Yes, most people will say there is North Wales and South Wales, following the traditional division of Wales with the 'border' along the Dyfi-Severn line. The BBC is a little more sophisticated and add Mid-Wales as a region by which they mean the rather large nebulous rural area that lies across the centre of Wales. The cross-over to the South arrives at the 'Heads of the Valleys' where contrasting views north and south reveal big shifts in land use which gives rise to a regionalization of 'Rural Wales' vs 'Industrial Wales', although the geographical 'neatness' of industrial Wales is much more messy if the former coalfield area in North East Wales (around Wrexham) is also included!



Arguably, the most influential geography of Wales in recent years is based on culture and identity, which in 1985 precipitated political analyst Denis Balsom to propose a three-part Wales. Balsom's regions were (i) the Welsh-speaking heartland of the north and west, Y Fro Gymraeg; (ii) a consciously Welsh - but not Welsh-speaking - 'Welsh Wales' in the South Wales Valleys; and (iii) a more ambivalent 'British Wales' making up the remainder, largely in the east and along the south coast. Some interpretations of the 2001 census have suggested that these areas are now less rigid with the Welsh language becoming spread more uniformly than previously, although others argue this is due to political pressures rather than significant cultural shifts in identities. Recently there have been some interesting studies of children and identities in Wales, which indicate that many children develop plural identities that are much broader than any simple regional place-based divisions. Perhaps the most explicit representation of the three regions is through road signs.

A Welsh Government law passed in 2010, required that all road signs become bi-lingual by 2012. However, the priority of language shown on the signs usually reflects the dominant cultural characteristics.



Bilingual sign on the A5 in North Wales (Menai Straits) - with Welsh priority, even though this is where most tourists will be from across the border. North Wales is the traditional terrain of Y Fro Cymraeg, along with west Wales.



Bi-lingual sign in Monmouth - with English priority. Monmouthshire has traditionally been ambivalent about the Welsh language and culture e.g. see [Monmouthshire village names removed](#)

## 6. How to pronounce those Welsh place-names

The Welsh language can seem rather obscure and off-putting to anyone not practiced in its pronunciation - including non-Welsh teachers and students. It might even prevent some from using some of the excellent geographical case studies to be found in Wales. However, given the right instruction, the sounds of the language can easily be mastered, as Adam Sedgwick, (a Yorkshireman and Cambridge Professor of Geology in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century who spent a lot of his time doing fieldwork in Wales) demonstrated very clearly in a letter to his niece explaining how to pronounce unfamiliar spellings. It is clear that Sedgwick had great respect for the Welsh language (unlike some of his contemporaries), as he points out that place names should not be anglicised. It is not certain what fluency Sedgwick had in the language, but if you follow his instructions, then your Welsh should be something near the authentic pronunciation.



To Miss Fanny Hicks

Tremadoc July 23<sup>rd</sup> 1846

"...The miserable damp weather made me rheumatic and low-spirited, so I nursed one day in Carnarvon and then drove to Pwllheli. What a charming name! In order to pronounce the first part (Pwll), you must blow out your cheeks just as you do when puffing at a very obstinate candle; then you must rapidly and cunningly put your tongue to the roof of your mouth behind the fore teeth, and blow hard between your cheeks and your tongue, holding your tongue quite steady all the while, as a man does a spade just before he is going to give it a good thrust with his right foot. With such a beautiful direction you cannot fail to pronounce Pwll quite like a Celt. Should the word be Bwlch, take care to observe the previous direction, only, in addition while the wind is whistling between your rigid tongue (sticking forwards spade-fashion), and your distended cheeks, contrive by way of a finale to give a noise with your throat such as you make when an intrusive fishbone is sticking in it. So much for my first Welsh lesson, Take care, dear Fan, that it not be thrown away.

I remained two days in Pwllheli. Yesterday I packed my baggage and drove to this place. I have now been eleven days in Wales, and not once seen the tops of the mountains; they are covered by trailing clouds.

If you write by return of post you may address me at Dolgelly, North Wales. (N.B. this word is by no means to be sounded like our maid Doll's jelly-bag.. The ll must always be blown, in the way I have told you, between the tongue and the cheeks). If you put off writing for a day or two, why then address me at Post Office Machynlleth, North Wales. What a charming word again! Mach has the bone-in-the-throat sound; yn is sounded as the grunt given by a broken-winded pavier, when he is using his rammer; lleth you already know how to sound, if you have cared for my lessons."

Source: letter to Miss Fanny Hicks, reprinted in: Clark & Hughes, 1890 'The Life and Letters of the Reverend Adam Sedgwick' Vol. 2, pp 105-106

And...if you want to know what those 'charming' Welsh place names mean, then a definitive source for Welsh geographical toponyms is the Ordnance Survey's [Glossary of the origin of Welsh origins of place names in Britain](#).

This document owes its origins to the geographical sensitivities and printing practicalities over how places in Wales should be named on maps, which occupied much time, attention and headache for the early mapmakers of the Ordnance Survey. You can read more about this in Rachel Hewitt's book about the origins and development of the Ordnance Survey: 'Map of Nation' (Granta Books 2010).