

A time comes when changes are needed in order for traditions to continue into the future and to match the interests of younger audiences and participants. After 21 years, that time has arrived for the Malad Valley Welsh Festival. With the goal of “celebrating and preserving the Welsh heritage of Malad Valley,” the Festival began in 2005 with no budget, a dozen activities, and lots of volunteers. In 2025 the Festival was well funded with grants, donations, vendor fees, and sales at the Country Store. Nearly 40 events and activities took place over the two days with a fireside on Sunday. In addition to the 36 committee chairs, over 100 volunteers remained essential to the Festival’s success.

The Festival was cancelled in 2020 due to the COVID pandemic and was just an adult poetry competition/reading done mostly over Zoom in 2021. Therefore, the 2025 Festival was touted as the 19<sup>th</sup> Malad Valley Welsh Festival because it has not been an annual event.

Even before the 2025 Festival, some major committee chairs expressed their desire that this Festival be their last. With nearly half of the 36 committee chairs having worked on various aspects of the Festival for 10-15 years (with some serving nearly 20 years), it became evident that this was the time to make some major changes.

Luke Waldron has been part of the Festival from its beginning, mostly by offering activities at the Heritage Square in Samaria. His enthusiasm for Wales and Welsh pioneer heritage is well known throughout Malad Valley. Therefore, he was the natural choice to become the next chair of the Festival, replacing Jean Thomas, who has served as co-chair for 2 years and chair for 18 years. The Heritage Square Committee, chaired by Luke, will take over all planning and organizing of the Festival once the transition is complete.

As the founder of the Heritage Square, Luke naturally wanted the Festival to do more to promote the Square. Therefore, the Heritage Square Committee and the Welsh Festival Executive Committee determined that now was the time to move the Festival to the Heritage Square, even though that would mean major changes to the activities and events associated with the Welsh Festival. The official name of the Festival will be “Malad Valley Welsh Festival at Heritage Square.”

The combined committee members had a long discussion about the date for the Festival. The last weekend in June has been the date for the Festival since 2007, but there have been conflicts every year with church camps, scout camps, sports camps and games, and vacations. Therefore, other dates were considered. Owain

Glyndr is a celebrated hero in Wales throughout the month of September. The committees determined that the third Saturday in September would become the new date for the Festival, recognizing that some flexibility will be needed because of potential conflicts with school activities.

The Festival was a 3-day event for several years with a family history workshop and program on Thursday, followed by presentations, concerts, and other activities on Friday and Saturday. A fireside (presentation with musical numbers) or a concert has traditionally been held on Sunday evening throughout the history of the Festival. The Festival has been a 2-day event for the past 15 years with a Fireside on Sunday.

With the smaller venue at Heritage Square, the Festival will become a 1-day event on Saturday, perhaps with a kick-off on Friday evening and a fireside on Sunday. Details about the actual events and activities are being planned.

Some events cannot be held at the Heritage Square due to the lack of a large auditorium-like space. Therefore, the events that have traditionally been held in the church building adjacent Malad City Park will no longer be held, including youth poetry, concerts (youth, piano ensemble, choral), family history displays, the “Walk through Wales” displays, and presentations. Smaller musical events, displays, and presentations will be held in the cabins at Heritage Square.

Another reason for the program changes at this time are financial. Grants from the Idaho Humanities Council have paid for presenters from as far away as Wales to come to the Festival to educate and entertain audiences. Grants from the Idaho Commission on the Arts have paid for most of the musicians, especially Celtic and Welsh groups from out of town. Those Idaho organizations formerly received their money to award grants to small, local organizations (like the Welsh Festival) from their federal counterparts. The National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities have been largely eliminated as part of cuts by the Department of Governmental Efficiency (DOGE).

While poetry is essential to any Welsh festival, the advent of artificial intelligence (AI) has added a wrinkle to the poetry competitions that have been part of the Malad Valley Welsh Festival since 2017. Even last year, one entry to the Adult Poetry Competition was suspected as having been at least partially written with AI. And one 4<sup>th</sup> grader admitted that he used AI to write his poem when questioned about some of the words in his poem. Therefore, because of complications introduced by AI and the lack of a venue large enough for the youth poetry winners

to read their poems, the Youth Poetry Competition will not be held in 2026. The Adult Poetry Competition will be held as it attracts many fewer entries, all of which can be screened by Brandon Hall, reporter and editor of *The Idaho Enterprise*, who has some background and training in identifying AI-derived works.

While the Welsh Festival has always emphasized the Welsh heritage of Malad Valley, the focus seemed to shift in the last few years to just having fun, of the Festival becoming just another community fair. With the move to the Heritage Square, the focus on Wales and all things Welsh will return. Welsh crafts and Welsh pioneer skills will be taught, demonstrated, and displayed. Welsh games and pioneer activities for kids will be scheduled throughout the day. Music and poetry will continue to be a part of the Festival on a smaller scale. The smaller number of vendors will be encouraged to offer Welsh-themed items. The “Taste of Wales” booth will offer many traditional Welsh foods, including leek soup, bara brith breads, shortbread cookies, Welsh cakes, cawl, and rarebit.

The Festival committee recognizes that many community and school organizations will be affected by the change. Announcement about the changes is being made early so that the Oneida Quilters, Friends of the Library, the Presbyterian Church, Scout Troop #1776, and the Oneida Pioneer Museum can make needed adjustments. Perhaps the many school groups will be able to assist with the new Festival as they have helped with so many aspects of the Festival in the past. The leaders and advisers of the After-School Program, MathCounts Program, Academic Team, cross country team, football team, wrestling team, Dragonettes, and FCCLA (all groups that have received stipends for their help at the Welsh Festival) have been informed about the upcoming changes. It is hoped that all of these community and school groups will be able to continue to make the Festival successful.

The Festival has operated under the Malad Valley Welsh Foundation, a nonprofit organization recognized by the IRS. The Festival will simply move to operate as an event under the Heritage Square Foundation, which is also a nonprofit organization recognized by the IRS. The Welsh Foundation will allow the new Festival to use its awnings, especially for the covering over a stage area. The new Festival will be partially funded by a large donation garnered from the proceeds of past Welsh Festivals, giving the Festival at Heritage Square an opportunity to continue the tradition of not charging admission.

Luke Waldron and Jean Thomas met with the Oneida County Commission on October 14 to introduce the changes to the Festival and to explain the reasons for the changes. After discussing parking, traffic, and safety issues, the Commission advised Luke to seek a conditional use permit, as required by Oneida County ordinances.

The Welsh history, culture, and traditions that the Welsh pioneers brought with them to the Malad Valley will continue, just with some changes that will strengthen that focus. The Festival will continue to invite everyone – whether or not you are Welsh – to the Malad Valley Welsh Festival at Heritage Square.