

WHAT LINDA KNEW

*A confession and a reflection
on eleven years of learning, loss, and the unlocking of Welsh heritage*



Graham Tudor Emmanuel

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Travel and Grief

Travel and grief, I have found, are two sides of the same coin. Both take you on a journey. Grief leads you through the winding roads of the mind, while travel carries you along the open paths of the soul.

My journey began on the 4th of July 2015, when grief entered my life and changed it forever. It was the day I lost Linda, my beloved wife, to a brain tumour. She faced it with a courage and grace I have never seen in anyone before or since. But before she went, she told me to travel. She said I could love again but needed to find that love on the road.

It took three long years for my heart and mind to catch up with her words.

In those three years I was lost. Not travelling. Just lost. I had a campervan built, mostly because I did not know what else to do. I had a dog, Lizzy, a small Jug who became my constant companion and, I think, the only reason I got up some mornings. The first year on the road taught me a great deal, but very little of it was about heritage or history or maps. It was about learning to move through the world again. Learning that the day would end, and another would come. Learning that you can cry on a road in Donegal, and nobody minds.

Then, on the 17th of April 2018, something shifted.

Lizzy and I left Carmarthenshire with no fixed plan. Scotland led to a dotted line on a Collins map, a ferry from Cairnryan to Larne, Northern Ireland, and eventually Derry and the discovery of the Wild Atlantic Way. For the next five weeks we travelled along one of the most extraordinary routes in the world. 2,950 miles. Breath-taking coastlines, rugged passes, ancient ruins, holy wells. People who became friends. A night at Ballycroy National Park watching Venus in the sky for the first time, learning that planets do not twinkle. A small chapel in Carrick-on-Shannon where a man named Edward Costello built a monument to his dead wife and was eventually laid beside her, both visible beneath glass, together still.

That chapel stopped me for a long time. I knew what he had done and why.

The Wild Atlantic Way is more than just a road. It is a path of healing, a canvas for memories, and a place where the unexpected can change everything.

I wrote those words in 2018. I still believe them. But what I did not know then was that the road had already started teaching me something else entirely. Something practical. Something that would eventually connect Linda's last instruction to Welsh history, to a churchyard in Trimsaran, to the names of 186 men and women carved in granite in Burry Port, to 272 crash sites across South and West Wales, to a formal archive in the national record of Wales.

I did not know any of that yet. I was just driving. Recording. Trying not to get lost.

<https://tinyurl.com/Magic-Wild-Atlantic-Way>

The Map

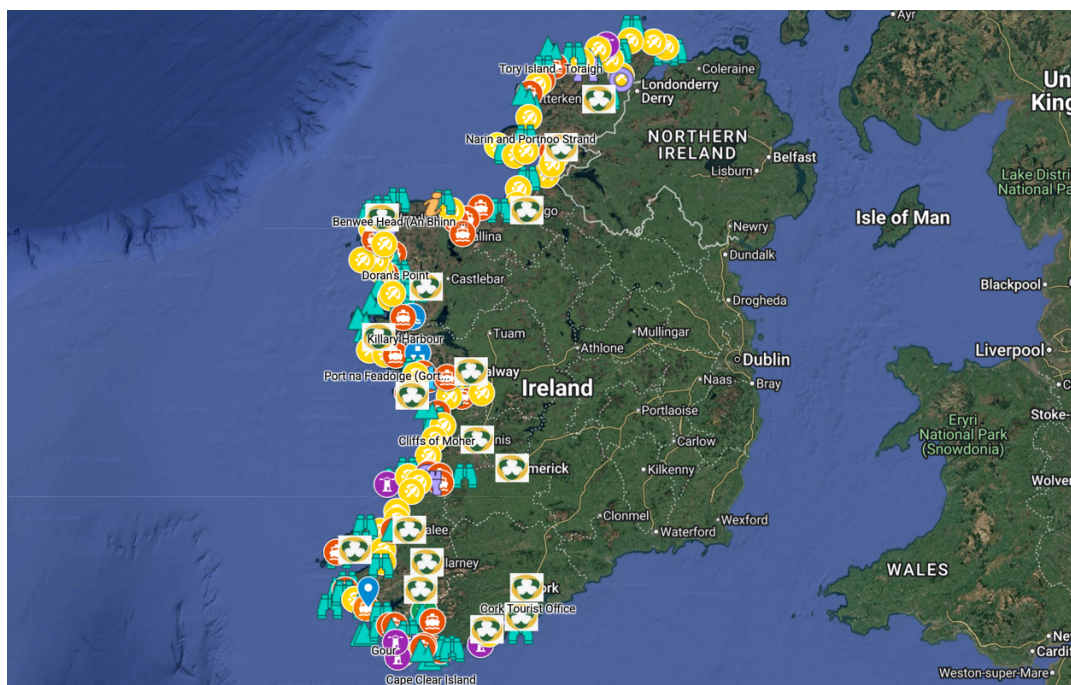
The first practical thing the Wild Atlantic Way taught me was that I needed a better way to navigate. I kept getting lost. Not metaphorically, though that too. Literally. On the roads.

Someone on the internet mentioned Google My Maps. I watched a YouTube video. Then another. Then I started plotting.

I mapped the entire Wild Atlantic Way from the Failte Ireland passport, every location, every stop, every recommended site. What began as a tool for not getting lost became something I could not stop doing. The map grew. The layers multiplied. I found myself adding historical notes to pins, writing descriptions of places, linking sites to their stories. The habit of recording what I found, placing it precisely where it existed, making it findable by anyone else who might want it, had established itself without my quite noticing.

By the time I came home from that first trip, I had over 100 pins on a map of Ireland that anyone in the world could open and use. I did not think of it as heritage research. I thought of it as making sure I could find things again.

That map now has over 300,000 views. I mention that not to boast but because it still surprises me. A man who could not find his way around Donegal in 2018 produced a resource that has since been used by over 300,000 people. The tool was simple. The decision to share it was instinctive. The consequence was something I had not anticipated at all.



<https://tinyurl.com/Wild-Atlantic-Way-2018>

When I came home to Kidwelly, I brought the habit with me. The habit of seeing a place and immediately asking: what is the history here, who was here before me, and how do I record it so it is not lost?

I did not know yet that this habit had a name. I did not know yet that it would lead me to the national archive of Wales. I just knew that I could not stop doing it.

Coming Home

Vernon, my father, died on the 28th of April 2016. Two days after what would have been Linda's 53rd birthday. She was born on the 26th of April 1963. He died nine months and twenty-four days after her.

He left behind a collection that I can only describe as a life's work: approximately 4,400 photographs of Welsh chapels, mines, and historical sites, along with colour slides, film negatives, and rare Welsh books, many of which he had already donated to the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales and the National Library of Wales. What remained came to me.

I started scanning it.

Not because I had a plan. Not because I knew what I was going to do with it. But because the material existed in a single physical form and I understood, without quite articulating it, that a single physical form is always at risk. A fire. A flood. A house clearance by someone who does not know what they are looking at. The images needed to exist in more than one place.

Scanning Vernon's slides and negatives was the first genuinely archival thing I did. Handling fragile material with care. Producing digital copies that could be stored, shared, and found by people who had never met either of us. The discipline of doing it methodically, not rushing, not skipping the difficult frames, came from somewhere I cannot quite name. Perhaps from him.

Vernon had spent decades photographing Welsh chapels that were closing, being demolished, being forgotten. He understood that if nobody recorded them, they would be gone. Not just the buildings. The communities they represented. The hymns sung in them, the marriages made in them, the dead buried from them. He went out with his camera because he knew that one day someone would want to know, and there would be nothing left to show them.

I did not realise until much later that I had inherited more than his photographs. I had inherited his instinct.

<https://rcahmw.gov.uk/vernon-david-emmanuels-collection-on-peoples-collection-wales/>

The Gate

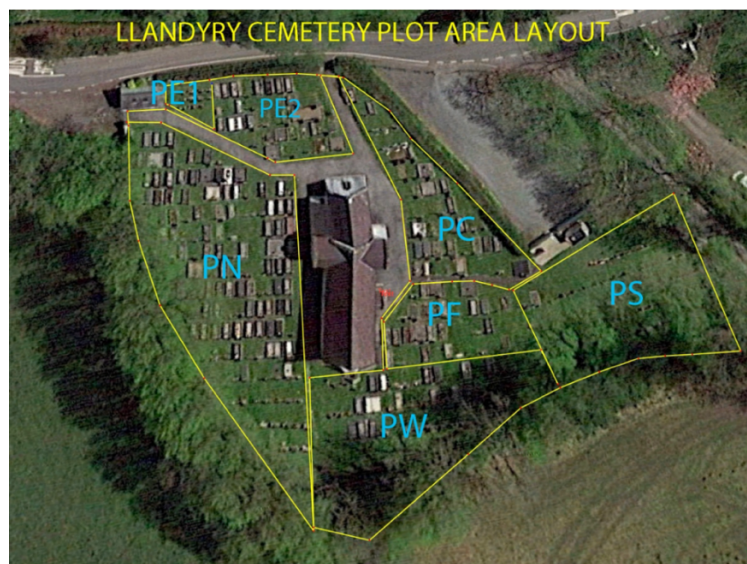
In 2023 I went to Llandyry Church near Trimsaran to have a look around the churchyard. I had been inside the church before but had never walked the graves properly. While I was there I got talking to the church warden, Declan Owens. He mentioned, almost in passing, that nobody had ever properly documented the graves. I said I would take a look.

What followed was months of work. Every stone in the churchyard, photographed and recorded. Welsh inscriptions extracted using Google Lens and translated using AI tools. Both original Welsh and English translation entered into a FindAGrave memorial record for each person. Weathered stones cleaned with specialist solution, re-photographed, transcribed. A sectioned grid map of the entire churchyard produced so that every grave had two means of permanent identification: a GPS coordinate and a grid reference.

I had never done anything quite like it before. The scale was different from anything I had attempted. But the habit was familiar. Record what is there. Place it precisely. Make it findable. Share it.

When it was complete I submitted the work to the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales. They formally accessioned it into Coflein, the national database. It was the first time my self-taught methods had received any kind of official recognition. I remember reading the confirmation and sitting with it for a while.

Declan had said nobody had ever properly documented the graves. Now somebody had. The record would outlast both of us. That is what mattered.



<https://coflein.gov.uk/en/sites/310153>

While I was working at Llandyry, I found the grave of Leonard Frater. I do not remember now exactly what made me stop at his stone, but I did. I looked him up. I found very little. A name. A date. A military connection. And in finding very little, I found the question that would change the direction of everything.

How many names on Welsh war memorials had never been connected to the people behind them?

The Stone

The Pembrey and Burry Port War Memorial stands in Burry Port. It carries 186 names. Men and women from those two communities who died in the two world wars. People walked past it every day. Most of them could not have told you who any of those people were.

I spent a long time with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission records, the National Archives service files, regimental histories, local newspaper archives, census data, and family records. I built a verified biographical record for every name on the stone. Where they were born. What they did before the war. Where they served. Where they died. Where they are buried or commemorated. One by one, the letters carved in granite became people.

The question was then how to connect that record to the stone permanently. Not a display board that would fade. Not a leaflet that would be lost. Something that would be there in fifty years, in a hundred years, in whatever form people use to access information by then.

The answer came through working with Darren at BM Memorials: a porcelain inlaid QR code tile, fired at high temperature to make it weatherproof and permanent, set flush into the granite face of the memorial itself. Scan it with any phone and you reach the full archive on People's Collection Wales. Every name. Every life. Every photograph where one survives.

RCAHMW formally accessioned the project into Coflein. They described it as a Fourth-Generation Memorial. It was the first time in Wales that a war memorial had been connected to a national heritage database through a permanently embedded QR code. A world first, in a small town in Carmarthenshire, produced by one man with a phone and a great deal of stubbornness.

I stood at the memorial after the tile was installed and looked at it for a while. I thought about the 186 names and the people behind them. I thought about Vernon and his camera going around the closing chapels. I thought about Linda telling me to go and travel. I thought about Edward Costello in Carrick-on-Shannon building a chapel so his wife would never be forgotten.

The dead deserve to be remembered with the same care and precision we would want for ourselves. I believe that as completely as I believe anything. Every piece of work I have built since has started from that conviction.



Vivit Post Funera Virtus — Virtue Lives On After Death.

The Mountain

Simon Pugh Jones asked me a question in 2024. He wanted to know what had happened to the B-26 Marauder that had crashed over the mountain above Pwll, between Burry Port and Llanelli. I said I would look into it.

I found out what happened. And in finding out, I discovered that the crash near Pwll was one of hundreds. That South and West Wales had been crossed and recrossed by military aircraft throughout both world wars. That young men from across the Commonwealth and from occupied Europe had flown from Welsh airfields and had sometimes not come back. That their crash sites were mostly unmarked. That their names were scattered across Air Ministry accident cards, squadron operational record books, and local newspaper archives that had never been brought together.

Nobody had mapped them. Nobody had connected the crash site to the airfield to the aircraft type to the crew biography to the memorial.

By the time the Wings of War project was complete it ran to 584 pages. 272 confirmed crash sites across South and West Wales. Seven interconnected layers: the crash sites mapped and GPS-verified, the crash reports compiled from primary sources, the aircraft technical specifications, the airbase histories with RAF Pembrey in full, the Polish squadron records for 304 and 316 Squadrons published in both English and Polish, the individual servicemen biographies, and three virtual cemeteries on FindAGrave.

One of the most remarkable things I found was the Collins Aero Diary of Corporal Jack Hawkins for 1942. A ground crew diary from a wartime RAF station. A daily record of life at RAF Pembrey written in real time by a man who was there. An exceptional primary source that had survived by chance and was published in full on People's Collection Wales where anyone in the world can now read it.

The Polish dimension grew in ways I had not expected. Men who had escaped the German occupation of Poland, made their way to Britain, and continued fighting from exile. Several of them died over Wales. Their families in Warsaw and Krakow and Gdansk could now find them in a virtual cemetery accessible from any phone, with their service history in their own language.

One question from Simon Pugh Jones about one crashed aircraft. 584 pages, 272 sites, three virtual cemeteries, and families in Poland finding the grandfather they had been looking for.

That is what the methodology does when you let it follow where the evidence leads.

Map:- <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/2143076>

Crash Reports:- <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/2165466>

Wings of War Project 2024:- <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/2165546>

Virtual Cemetery:- <https://www.findagrave.com/virtual-cemetery/1834844>

The Plaque

At Ballycroy National Park in County Mayo, during the Wild Atlantic Way trip, I walked around the grounds after a remarkable evening of Irish storytelling and stargazing. Lizzy was with me. It was late and quiet and the kind of night that stays with you.

I noticed a plaque dedicated to a Conservation Ranger named Brian Harran. I stopped and read the inscription carved into it:



In the end, we will conserve only what we love.

We will love only what we understand.

And we will understand only what we are taught.

Those words resonated deeply in 2018 when I first read them. They carry even more significance now.

I did not know it at the time, but that inscription contains the complete argument for the education proposal I would send to People's Collection Wales eight years later. We will conserve only what we love. Young people in Wales cannot love Welsh history if they have never been shown it in a way that speaks to them. We will love only what we understand. They cannot understand it if it is locked in archives they do not know exist, written in a language that does not include them. And we will understand only what we are taught.

That is where the proposal begins. Not in a methodology document. Not in a formal submission to an institution. In a plaque on a wall in County Mayo, read by a man with a dog at night, who was still trying to find his way back to himself.

The tools are already in every young person's pocket. The phone that takes GPS-tagged photographs. The apps that extract text from a photograph and translate it from Welsh to English in seconds. The mapping platforms that turn a field survey into a publicly accessible interactive resource. The AI tools that synthesise research and produce finished documents to a consistent standard. They have all of it. They use it every day for everything except this.

If a 74-year-old man from Kidwelly, who taught himself every tool from scratch, who had no institutional support and no formal training, who started from grief and a campervan and a dog, can build a nationally archived heritage record using these tools, imagine what a classroom of young Welsh people could achieve with those same tools, a teacher to guide them, and People's Collection Wales as the platform for their finished work.

Welsh history has been forgotten for far too long. The tools to recover it and share it are already in every young person's pocket. They just need someone to show them what is possible.

What Linda Knew

Looking back across eleven years from where I sit now, I think Linda knew exactly what she was doing when she told me to go and travel.

She knew that I would not heal sitting still. She knew that movement would eventually become purpose, and purpose would eventually become work, and the work would become something that outlasted the grief that started it. She could not have known the specifics. She could not have known about the QR tile in the granite, or the 272 crash sites, or the Polish families in Warsaw, or the plaque in Ballycroy. But she knew the shape of what was needed.

My father Vernon spent decades photographing Welsh chapels so they would not be forgotten. I have spent eleven years building archives of Welsh heritage, so the same thing does not happen to people and places that deserve to be remembered. The instinct came from him, though I did not know it until much later. The instruction came from Linda. The road came from both of them.

Over 200 publications and contributions on People's Collection Wales. More than 1.2 million confirmed views across my interactive maps. Work formally accessioned by RCAHMW into the Coflein national database of Wales. A porcelain tile embedded in granite that will still be there long after everyone involved is gone. A 120-year parish archive for Llandyry Church. A 584-page record of the men who flew from Welsh airfields and did not always come home. A family archive tracing a direct line from 1130 to the present, with Linda's bloodline running back twenty-four generations to Gwenllian ferch Gruffudd.

None of it was planned. All of it grew from the same root: the conviction that the past deserves care, that the forgotten deserve to be found, and that a person with a phone and the willingness to look can do more than most institutions have yet imagined.

I am 74 years old. I work alone, from Kidwelly, on a phone and a Mac, without a salary or a grant or a supervisor. I am still learning. Last week I sent a proposal to People's Collection Wales suggesting that the methodology I developed by accident across eleven years could become a framework for teaching Welsh young people to unlock their own heritage using the tools already in their pockets. I do not know yet whether they will agree. But I know the proposal is right.

Because Brian Harran's plaque was right. We will conserve only what we love. We will love only what we understand. And we will understand only what we are taught.

Linda told me to go and travel. I went. I am still going.

And this is just the beginning.

People's Collection Wales

www.peoplescollection.wales/user/50601/discover

Wild Atlantic Way map 2018:

www.tinyurl.com/Wild-Atlantic-Way-2018

Pembrey and Burry Port War Memorial archive:

<https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/2290026>

Wings of War crash sites map:

www.tinyurl.com/WW2-SW-CS

Llandyry Parish Archive:

www.peoplescollection.wales/items/3023881

From a Churchyard Gate — methodology:

www.peoplescollection.wales/items/2239466

Digitally Mapping the Past

<https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/2266866>

900 Years of Kidwelly

<https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/2269716>

Wales Religious Heritage & Pilgrim Ways

<https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/3003821>

Welsh Fortresses Through Time

<https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/3023251>

A Timeline of Conflicts in Wales 616-1421 AD

<https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/3023246>

The Mills of Wales-Wind, Water and Tidal Heritage

<https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/3023231>

Workhouses of Wales

<https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/3023326>

Vivit Post Funera Virtus — Virtue Lives On After Death

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