

DAVIES, GWILYM PRYS (1923 - 2017), Lord Prys-Davies of Llanegryn, lawyer, politician and language campaigner

Name: Gwilym Prys Davies

Date of birth: 1923

Date of death: 2017

Spouse: Llinos Davies (née Evans)

Child: Catrin Waugh (née Davies)

Child: Ann Davies

Child: Elin Davies

Parent: William Davies

Parent: Mary Matilda Davies (née Roberts)

Gender: Male

Occupation: lawyer, politician and language campaigner

Area of activity: Law; Politics, Government and Political Movements; Activism

Author: D. Ben Rees

Gwilym Prys Davies was born on 8 December 1923 in Oswestry, Shropshire, the son of [William Davies](#) (1874-1949) and his wife Mary Matilda (née Roberts (1888-1974)). His parents had moved from Llanegryn in Merionethshire in 1921 to run a guest house in Oswestry. He had one sister, Mairwen (1922-2004). The family moved back to Llanegryn when Gwilym was five, and he was brought up in Pen-y-Banc, a lively, socialist Welsh home where the parish post office and the Parish Council office were situated and Workers' Association lectures were held. The family worshipped at Llanegryn Congregational Chapel, and Gwilym was educated at Llanegryn Primary School and Tywyn Grammar School.

The advent of the Second World War posed a difficult issue for his parents and he was persuaded to leave school to work on his aunt and uncle's farm. After two years, he took the decision to give this up, and enlisted with the Navy in 1942. On 4 August, he was posted to *HMS Collingwood* in Portsmouth. He was trained in radar and served on the submarine *Excalibur*. He never spoke about the war years but we know that his sense of Welsh identity was greatly strengthened and that he, like his parents, wanted [Gwynfor Evans](#) to win Merioneth in the 1945 election.

In September 1946 he enrolled in the Law Department at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth. He believed that his first duty was to establish a branch of Plaid Cymru, and secondly to campaign for the cause in the villages of north Ceredigion with John Legonna and his close friend Huw Davies. He edited the college magazine *Y Wawr* and wrote for *Y Faner* and *Y Fflam*. He gained an LLB degree in 1948 and went on to do research on the Laws of [Hywel Dda](#). He was elected president of the Students' Union in 1949 and as an eloquent debater drew large audiences to the Examinations Hall.

The death of his father in June 1949 was a big blow, especially as he was involved in controversy with Plaid Cymru at the time. Gwilym Prys Davies was a powerful personality, and in 1948-49 he was largely responsible for the Republican Movement within Plaid Cymru. The aims of the movement were independence for Wales, promotion of socialism, and the creation of a people's government. [Gwynfor Evans](#), [J. E. Jones](#) and [Wynne Samuel](#) were unsympathetic to the movement and expelled its members from the party in July 1949. Fifty left and in a meeting in Neath in May 1949, chaired by [Trefor Morgan](#), they formed a new political party.

During this time Gwilym met Llinos Evans, a student from Abercynon, and on 29 September 1951 they were married at Bethel Chapel, Hirwaun, with the [Reverend J. Eirian Davies](#) officiating. They had three daughters, Catrin (b. 1957), Ann (b. 1959) and Elin (b. 1963). They made their first home in Llanbadarn Road, Aberystwyth, where he got to know the young politician, John Morris. He also became a good friend of the University's Principal, [Ifor Evans](#), and President [Dr Thomas Jones](#).

He was disappointed in the Republican Movement, because the medium of debate was English and because they supported Ithel Davies rather than [Trefor Morgan](#) as parliamentary candidate in Ogmere in 1950. He withdrew from them, and when the Movement's days came to an end he decided to join the Labour Party.

Having qualified as a solicitor he joined the company of Morgan, Bruce and Nicholas in Porth and Pontypridd. He got to know the prominent trade unionists of the south Wales coalfield, and was invited to share a stage with [Aneurin Bevan](#) in 1959; he also came into contact with [Goronwy Roberts](#), [Cledwyn Hughes](#) and most importantly [James Griffiths](#), who regarded him as a son and urged him to stand for a seat at Westminster. But before that he had been invited by Cledwyn Hughes and James Griffiths to prepare a memorandum on local government reform and the place of the elected council in the plan. The booklet *A Central Welsh Council*, published in 1963, was a first step in the discussion of devolution. His failure to win a nomination for the Swansea West and Merioneth seats was a disappointment, but he had the chance to stand in the Carmarthen by-election in July 1966. Plaid Cymru seized the opportunity in a memorable campaign, and to the astonishment of all, their candidate Gwynfor Evans took the seat. Alwyn D. Rees expressed the feeling of all parties: 'The only unfortunate thing about this by-election was that Mr Gwilym Prys Davies had to lose for Gwynfor to win.' But in October 1966, Davies and his partners did important work in gathering evidence and representing parents of the children who died in the Aberfan disaster at the tribunal.

Gwilym Prys Davies pioneered the use of the Welsh language in the courts, and on 8 December 1967, taking advantage of the new Welsh Language Act, he made history by defending members of the Welsh Language Society in the City of Cardiff Magistrates' Court entirely through the medium of Welsh. He was appointed Chairman of the Welsh Hospital Board in 1968 and did great work for the health service, fighting for recognition of the Welsh language and often clashing with the Secretary of State for Wales, [George Thomas](#). The Board was dissolved in 1974 and in the same year he was invited to serve as special adviser to John Morris and the Welsh Office for two days a week. Gwynfor Evans and other nationalists wrote to congratulate him and he was regularly invited by constituencies to lecture on devolution. He was appointed in January 1976 as a member of the Welsh Committee for the Assembly. Meeting with John Mackintosh, Vernon Bogdanor and Richard Crossman to discuss the implications of devolution,

he played a key role in the campaign for a Welsh Assembly. As a member of the European Economic and Social Committee in Brussels he successfully argued for the establishment of a European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages which proved to be of benefit to the Welsh language. He was also an effective voice for a Welsh television channel on the Silberry working group, and had considerable television experience as a member of the Independent Television Authority's Welsh Committee.

He was made a life peer in 1982, and at that time changed his name to Gwilym Prys Prys-Davies. He was the first member of the House of Lords to take the oath in Welsh. In the House of Lords he was given responsibility for the Opposition front bench on Wales and Northern Ireland as well as Health from 1987 to 1995. Together with the Leader of the Opposition in the House of Lords, Lord Cledwyn Hughes, and Lord Elystan Morgan he was part of a small but powerful team. He kept a close connection with Ireland, north and south, and knew the country's history at his fingertips.

The failure of the Referendum vote on 1 March 1979 was a bitter disappointment to him, but he listened to his college friend **Jennie Eirian Davies**, editor of *Y Faner*, that a permanent body should be established to promote the language. Nicholas Edwards and the Welsh Office were opposed to the proposal, and Gwilym Prys Davies was a source of annoyance to them in the 1980s. He considered a new Welsh Language Act, and produced a pamphlet on the subject in 1984. He was extremely busy between 1983 and 1987 working with Dafydd Wigley and other friends of the Welsh language. There was some hope when Peter Walker replaced Nicholas Edwards to work with **Wyn Roberts** in the Welsh Office. Davies felt uneasy when the non-statutory Welsh Language Board was set up and with the influx into the Welsh-speaking areas. He continued to draw attention to this crisis for the rest of his days and it became apparent that he was a politician and activist whose arguments could not be silenced. He welcomed the establishment of a statutory Welsh Language Board following the Welsh Language Act of 1993, and maintained close contact with the chairs, members and officers. He worked tirelessly to strengthen the 1988 Education Bill and through his tenacity won the trust of a number of prominent Welsh people such as the poet **R. S. Thomas**, Gwynedd County Council chief executive Ioan Bowen Rees and educator Dr Derec Llwyd Morgan.

Dr Meredydd Evans, **Cledwyn Hughes**, John Morris and Ken Hopkins took advantage of his expertise in the preparation of important documents to facilitate campaigns for Wales, and he used his knowledge of the law to assist the Welsh Language Society, the Glyndŵr Fund, the Welsh Sunday Schools Council, Modern Welsh Publications (of which he was the first chair) as well as individuals such as Eileen and Trefor Beasley and many Labour politicians. He was a huge asset in the House of Lords on bills relating to Wales, and was a prominent member in Westminster of the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments. He was Chair of Cymdeithas Aelwyd (Housing Association) and the National Playing Fields Association of Wales which was established in 1999.

He took a firm stance on the crisis in the Welsh-speaking areas, and led a delegation in November 2001 to meet with two Assembly ministers on the issue. The response was disappointing, but that day it was evident that he was still passionate in defence of Welsh-speaking Wales. In his opinion, a simple act was needed, restricting the housing market and curbing prices.

He published an autobiography, *Llafur y Blynnyddoedd*, in 1990, *Turning a Dream into Reality* (Welsh Political Archive Lecture, National Library of Wales, November 1999), and *Cynhaefaf Hanner Canrif: Gwleidyddiaeth Gymreig 1945-2005* (2008). In 2002 he translated his father's book, *Hanes plwyf Llanegryn*, (*A history of the Parish of Llanegryn*) into English and arranged a meeting in his native village to launch it.

His life was shattered in February 2010 by the death of his wife Llinos. He experienced great loneliness at his home in Tonteg, and eventually moved to live with his eldest daughter Catrin Waugh and her family in Dulwich. He retired from the House of Lords in May 2015. Gwilym Prys Davies died on 28 March 2017. His funeral was held at St Mary's Church, Llanegryn on 8 April 2017.

Author

D. Ben Rees

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Personal acquaintance

Further reading

D. Ben Rees, *Cymro i'r carn: cofiant Gwilym Prys-Davies* (Caernarfon 2022)

Wikipedia Article: [Gwilym Prys Davies](#), [Baron Prys-Davies](#)

Additional Links

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Published date: 2023-02-09

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Rees, D. B., (2023). DAVIES, GWILYM PRYS (1923 - 2017), Lord Prys-Davies of Llanegryn, lawyer, politician and language campaigner. *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*. Retrieved 14 Nov 2024, from <https://biography.wales/article/s14-DAVI-PRY-1923>

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