

HUMANITIES — WELSH HISTORY · YEAR 5–6

Terfysgoedd Becca — The Rebecca Riots

Knowledge Organiser — Years 5–6

Key vocabulary

1

Rebecca Riots (1839–1843)

A series of protests by rural Welsh farmers against the tolls charged at turnpike gates (tollgates). Protesters disguised as women (Rebecca and her Daughters) attacked and demolished tollgates at night.

2

Turnpike trusts

Private companies that built and maintained roads, funding them through tolls charged at gates. By the 1830s, rural Wales had an excessive number of tollgates, creating severe hardship for farmers transporting goods.

3

Rebecca (Rebeca)

The name taken by the leader of each protest group — always a man disguised as a woman. The name came from Genesis 24:60 (Bible): '...and let thy seed possess the gate of those which hate them.'

4

Her daughters

The men who accompanied Rebecca — also disguised as women, often in white dresses. The disguise had both practical purposes (hiding identity) and symbolic power.

5

Tithe and rent

Beyond tollgates, the rioters also expressed grievances about tithes (taxes to the Church of England), Poor Law workhouses, and landlord rents. The tollgates were the trigger, not the only cause.



6

Turnpike Acts (1844)

Following the riots and a government enquiry, new legislation abolished many tollgates, reformed others, and created county road boards. The rioters achieved significant reform.

Rebecca Riots matter

Legacy and significance

- **RURAL PROTEST:** the Riots showed that ordinary Welsh people could force political change through direct action — even when they had no vote.
- **WOMEN'S DISGUISE:** the cross-dressing was more than a disguise. It was subversive and theatrical — mocking authority. It entered Welsh folk memory.
- **A GRIEVANCE SYSTEM:** the Riots were as much about the Poor Law, tithes, and rents as about tollgates. They expressed the deep unhappiness of Welsh rural communities.
- **SUCCESS:** unusually, the Riots worked — tollgates were reformed within a year. This was one of the few Victorian protest movements that achieved its direct aims.
- **WELSH LANGUAGE QUESTION:** the riots were conducted in Welsh. The Blue Books (1847) — a government report on Welsh education — followed shortly after, describing Wales as ignorant and immoral, and Welsh as a barrier to civilisation. The Blue Books provoked a fierce Welsh-language cultural response.
- **THE BLUE BOOKS (Brad y Llyfrau Gleision):** government commissioners who could not speak Welsh reported that Welsh immorality was connected to Welsh-language Non-conformism. Their report became a national insult — still remembered.

