

James Pugh Richards – Dyffryn Ardudwy, Meirionnydd: Letters home from a First World War soldier



Photograph taken outside the Post Office in Dyffryn Ardudwy, Meirionnydd, in 1910. James Pugh Richards (then 15 years old) is the third one in from the left



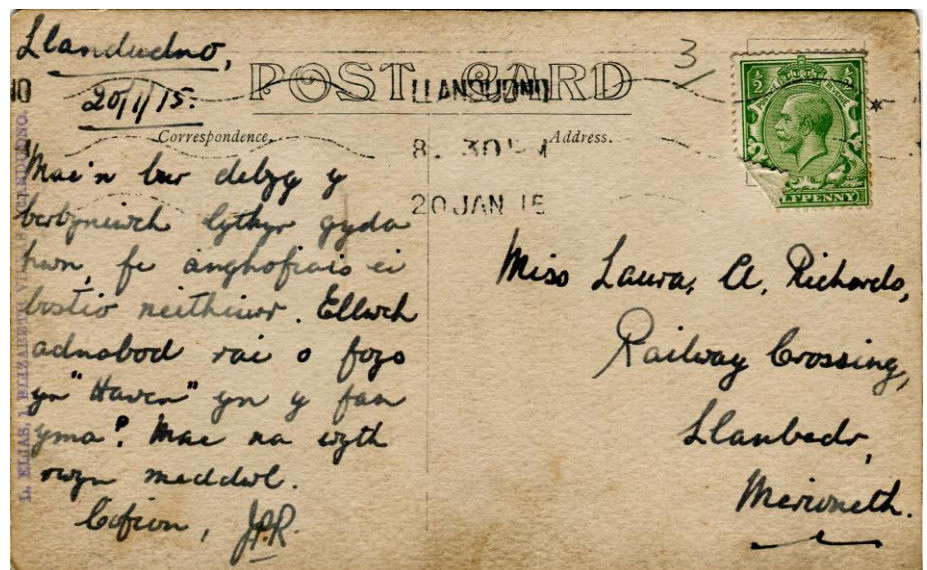
Front and back of a postcard sent by James Pugh Richards to his sister from Llandudno on 20 January 1915:

'Mae'n bur debyg y derbyniwch lythyr gyda hwn, fe anghofiais ei bostio neithiwr. Ellwch adnabod rai o foys yr "Haven" yn y fan yma? Mae na wyth rwy'n meddwl.

Cofion, JPR'

(It's quite likely that you will receive a letter with this – I forgot to post it last night. Can you recognise some of the boys from the "Haven" here? There are eight, I think. Regards, JPR)

[It is likely that the "Haven" was the guest-house where they stayed as they underwent their training]



James Pugh Richards (known as J.P.) was born in Dyffryn Ardudwy, Meirionnydd, in 1895. He volunteered to serve in the army two months into the war, on 7 October 1914, joining the 13th Battalion of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers (RWF). There is a photograph of him with dozens of other new recruits, taken outside the pavilion in Caernarfon, presumably in late 1914.



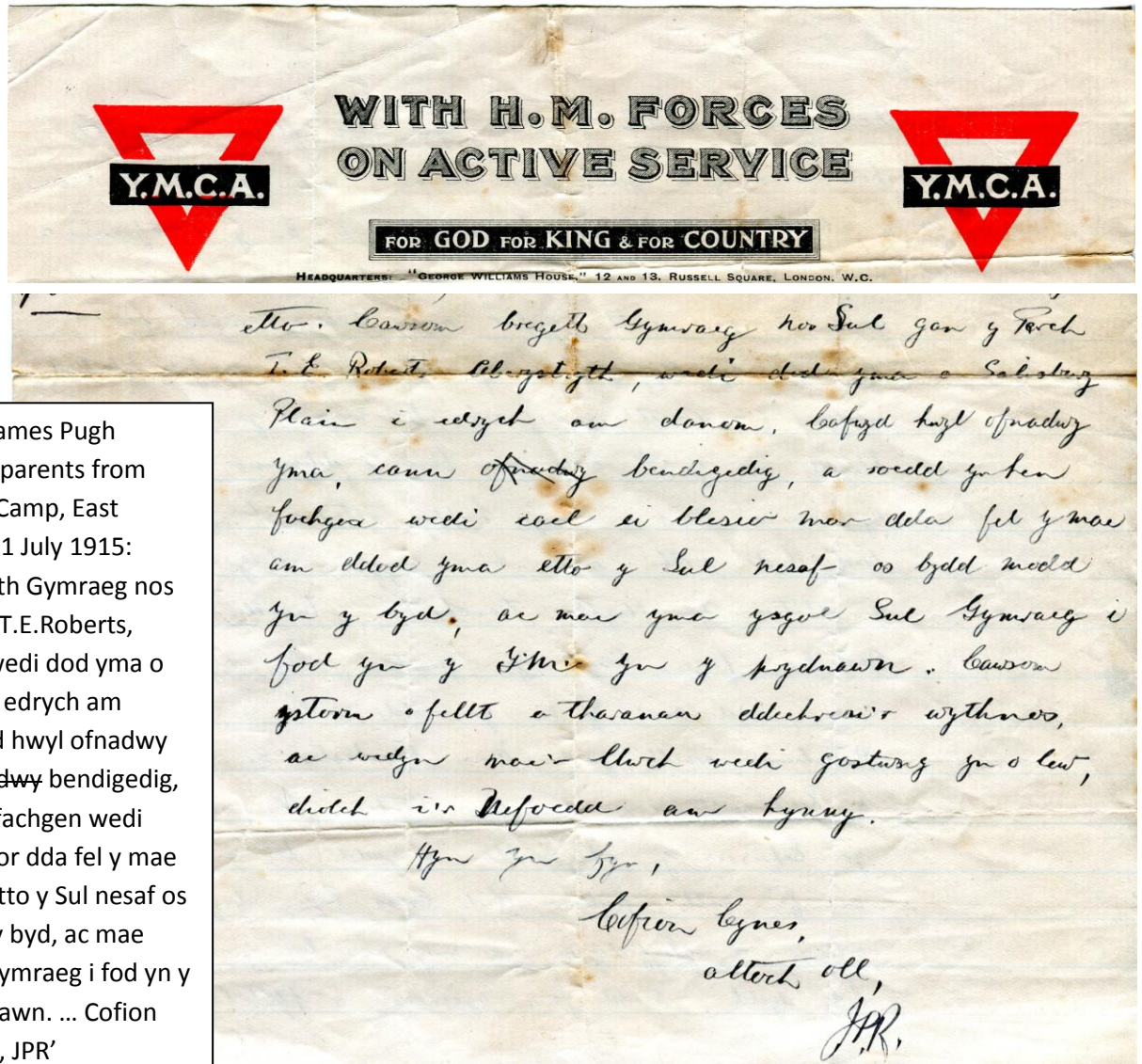
The family have also preserved a number of other items from this period, including a series of postcards sent home by J.P. while he was training in Llandudno. One includes an account of Lloyd George's visit to inspect the troops in March 1915:



'Dyma i ti lun y crowd yn rhedeg at y "Grand Stand" i weld Mr Lloyd George ar ol y march past ddydd Llun. Ond doedd dim siawns gael speech. "We have not finished our work yet" meddai, ond bu raid iddo ffoi i'r Imperial Hotel am noddfa rhag bonlllefaur' dorf. Cofion, JPR'

(Here is a picture for you of the crowd running towards the "Grand Stand" to see Mr Lloyd George after the march past on Monday. But there was no chance of a speech. "We have not finished our work yet" he said, but he had to flee to the Imperial Hotel for sanctuary from the acclamations of the crowd. Regards, JPR)

There are further letters sent from Winchester, where J.P. and his comrades underwent further training from June 1915. Despite being physically away from Wales, the Welsh recruits kept up various aspects of Welsh culture: it is clear, for example, that their roots in the chapels were important to J.P. and his comrades.

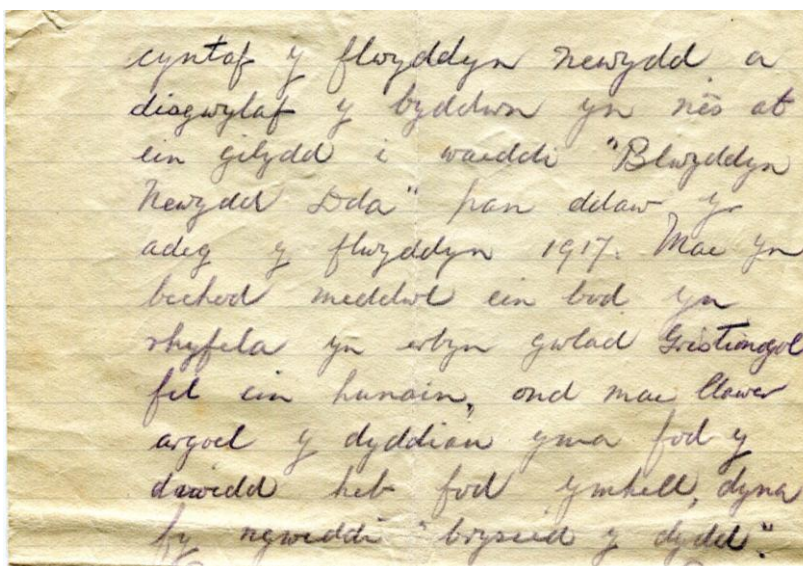
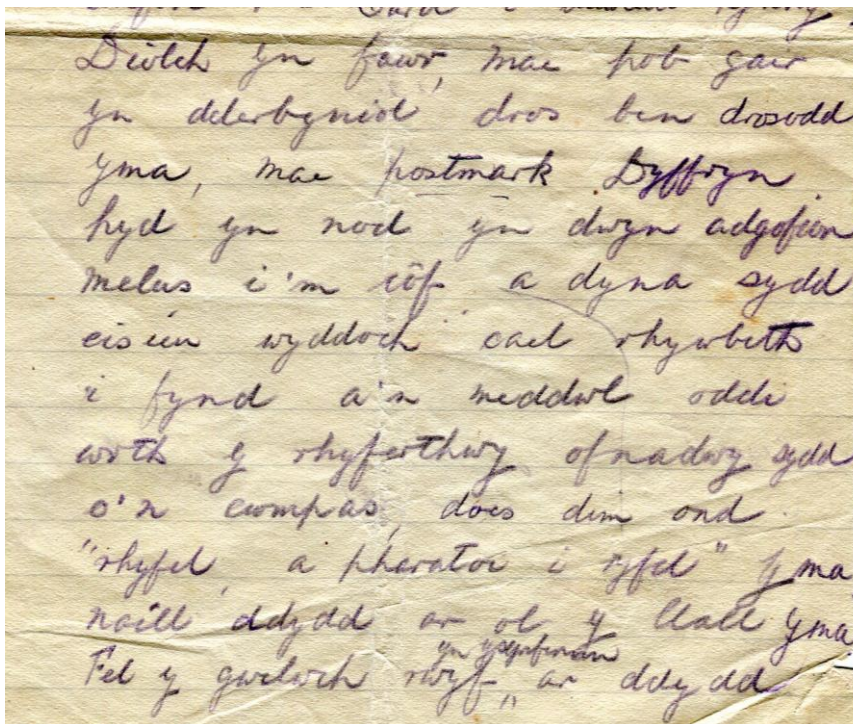


Letter sent by James Pugh Richards to his parents from 'Winnall Down Camp, East Winchester' on 1 July 1915: 'Cawsom bregeth Gymraeg nos Sul gan y Parch T.E.Roberts, Aberystwyth, wedi dod yma o Salisbury Plain i edrych am danom. Cafwyd hwyl ofnadwy yma, canu ofnadwy bendigedig, a roedd yr hen fachgen wedi cael ei blesio mor dda fel y mae am ddod yma etto y Sul nesaf os bydd modd yn y byd, ac mae yma ysgol Sul Gymraeg i fod yn y Y.M. yn y prydnewn. ... Cofion cynes attoch oll, JPR'

Atto. Cawsom bregeth Gymraeg nos Sul gan y Parch T.E.Roberts, Aberystwyth, wedi dod yma o Salisbury Plain i edrych am danom. Cafwyd hwyl ofnadwy yma, canu ofnadwy bendigedig, a roedd yr hen fachgen wedi cael ei blesio mor dda fel y mae am ddod yma etto y Sul nesaf os bydd modd yn y byd, ac mae yma ysgol Sul Gymraeg i fod yn y Y.M. yn y prydnewn. Cawsom hwyl ofnell a tharanau dddeudwr wythnos, ac welwn mor llwch wedi gostwng yn o lew, diddch i'r Defoddd am hynny.
Hyn yn hyn,
Cofion cynes,
attoch oll,
J.P.R.

(We had a Welsh sermon on Sunday night from the Rev. T.E.Roberts, Abserystwyth, who had come here from Salisbury Plain to find us. We had a tremendous time, with wonderful singing, and the old boy was so pleased that he wants to come here next Sunday if at all possible, and there is to be a Welsh Sunday School in the Y.M. in the afternoon. ... Warm regards to all, JPR)

J.P. and his comrades in the 13th Btn RWF were transported to France at the beginning of December 1915, initially being stationed near Neuve Chappelle. On New Year's Day, J.P. wrote to his aunt (Jane Pugh) and family from 'Somewhere in France':



Extracts from the letter sent by James Pugh Richards on 1 January 1916 (note the instruction to the censor: 'Only personal matters') - 'Diolch yn fawr, mae pob gair yn dderbyniol dros ben drosodd yma, mae postmark Dyffryn hyd yn nod yn dwyn adgofion melus i'm côf a dyna sydd eisiau wyddoch cael rhywbeth i fynd a'n meddwl oddi wrth y rhyferthwy ofnadwy sydd o'n cwmpas, does dim ond "rhyfel a pharatoi i ryfel" yma naill ddydd ar ol y llall yma. Fel y gwyrddoch rwyf yn ysgrifennu ar ddydd cyntaf y flwyddyn newydd a disgwylaf y byddwn yn nês at ein gilydd i waeddi "Blwyddyn Newydd Dda" pan ddaw yr adeg y flwyddyn 1917. Mae yn bechod meddwl ein bod yn rhyfela yn erbyn gwlad Gristionogol fel ein hunain, ond mae llawer argoel y dyddiau yma fod y diwedd heb fod ymhell, dyna fy ngwedd "brysiad y dydd".'

(Thank you very much, every word is very welcome here – just the Dyffryn postmark is enough to bring sweet memories to mind, and that is what is needed you know – to have something to take our minds off the awful cataclysm that is around us, there is nothing but "war and preparing for war" here day after day. As you know I am writing on the first day of the New Year and I expect that we will be closer to one another to shout "Happy New Year" when the time comes in 1917. It's a shame to think that we are waging war against a Christian country like our own, but there are many signs these days that the end is not far away – this is my prayer "let the day come soon".)

This letter is typical of many sent by Welsh soldiers to their loved ones at home. The connection with home was very important for those on the front-line, and being able to send and receive letters and cards via an efficient postal system was vital in keeping up morale (at least on the Western Front: obviously communications were far more difficult for those on more remote theatres of war). The Christian sentiments shown by J.P. reflect not only his own personal viewpoint but also the deeply religious atmosphere that was prevalent in most of Wales – and particularly rural Welsh-speaking Wales – in this period.

The next letter that has survived (dated 4 June 1916 and again sent to J.P.'s aunt and family) again shows the influence of chapel:

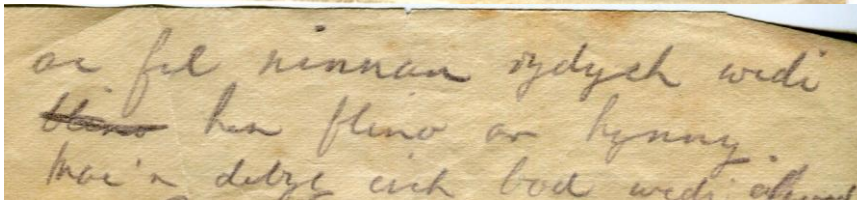
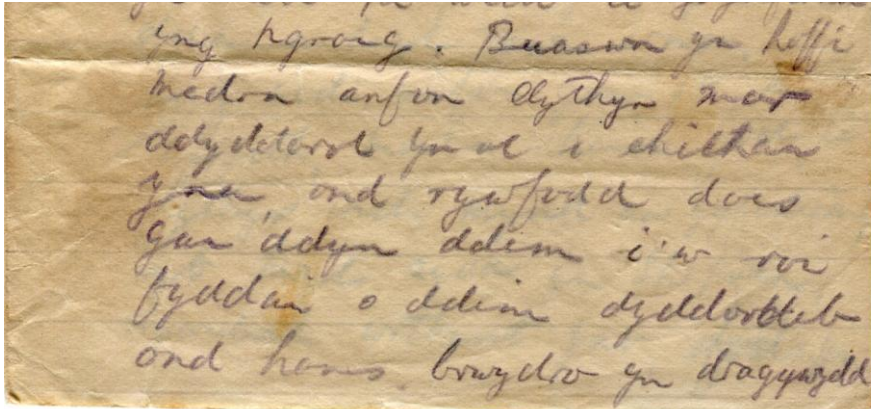
tonnau'r mor. Mae'r haf wedi dod
unwaith etto ond fawr o olwg fod y
Rhyfel ar ben yn hytrach mae'r cwffio
yn ffyrnicach nag erioed. Yn bersonol
rwyf yn alright, ac yn teimlo reit
dda, ac yn dod i ddeall y gwaith
yma yn iawn. Byddwn yn mynd i
mewn etto heno pan bydd W.M. yn
darllen yr emyn cyntaf yn Horeb. Rwy'n

hono i'r ch bysbyan o'r faith. Mae wedi
troi dan o'r gloch ac mae'n debyg mae
yn yr Ysgol Sul y byddwch chi yn y
Dyffryn, cawsom ninnau bregeth heddyw'r
bore gan un o'n caplaniaid - y gyntaf
er rhai misoedd ywan, a roedd hynny
yn gwneud i ni ei gwerthfawrogi yn
fwy. Ydy...

Extracts from the letter sent by James Pugh Richards on 4 June 1916: 'Mae'r haf wedi dod unwaith etto, ond fawr o olwg fod y Rhyfel ar ben, yn hytrach mae'r cwffio yn ffyrnicach nag erioed. Yn bersonol rwyf yn alright ac yn teimlo reit dda, ac yn dod i ddeall y gwaith yma yn iawn. Byddwn yn mynd i mewn etto heno pan bydd W.M. yn darllen yr emyn cyntaf yn Horeb. ... Mae wedi troi dau o'r gloch ac mae'n debyg mae yn yr Ysgol Sul y byddwch chi yn y Dyffryn, cawsom ninnau bregeth heddyw'r bore gan un o'n caplaniaid – y gyntaf ers rhai misoedd yrwan, a roedd hynny yn gwneud i ni ei gwerthfawrogi yn fwy ...'

(The summer has come once again, but there is no sign that the War is coming to an end – instead the fighting is more fierce than ever. Personally I am alright and am feeling really fine, and am coming to understand the work here well. We will go in again tonight at the same time as W.M. will be announcing the first hymn in Horeb. ... It's now turned two o'clock and it's likely that you will now be in the Sunday School in Dyffryn. We had a sermon this morning from one of the chaplains – the first for some months now, which made us appreciate it all the more ...'

The 13th Btn RWF were involved in the famous attack on Mametz Wood on 10 July 1916, part of the Somme Campaign: however, no letters or postcards have been preserved from this period. Disenchantment with the war is clear in J.P.'s next letter, dated 2 October 1916 (sent to his aunt, Jane Pugh):



Extracts from the letter sent by James Pugh Richards on 2 October 1916: 'Buaswn yn hoffi medru anfon llythyr mor dyddorol yn ol i chithau yna, ond rywfodd does gan ddyn ddim i'w roi fyddai o ddim dyddordeb ond hanes brwydro yn dragyngdd ac fel ninnau rydych wedi ~~hys~~ hen flino ar hynny.'

(I would like to be able to send as interesting a letter back to you, but somehow one here doesn't have anything to say that would be of an interest but descriptions of endless fighting and, like us, you are quite fed up with that)

Some postcards, taken in photographic studios in Belgium, were sent home in late 1916 and early 1917, including this one of J.P. (marked on the top left of the photograph) and six of his comrades. They were involved in the Passchendaele campaign from its first day on 31 July 1917 (but again, no letters home from this period have survived), and then the battalion was moved south to a trench near Armentières, right on the border between France and Belgium.



Here in November 1917 J.P. was badly injured in an ill-fated attack on the German front-line.

Company.
In October, our Headquarters had come to the conclusion that the line opposite us was not held by the enemy and that a VERET LIGHT KING walked along the empty trenches at night to fire Veret Lights. A score of "B" men were picked to capture this daring German and amongst them the finest men ever "B" possessed. They were rashly lead and before they realised where they were, they were facing a party of Germans, who seemed to await their coming. Both sides opened fire at point blank range and the Germans fled. Our casualties, W. R. Black, dying on reaching our line, J. P. Richards and Dan Timothy being very badly wounded, but such was the loyalty of one member to the other in the party that all were carried back to our line, a distance of several hundred yards. Abel Williams and Sgt. F. A. Jones (the London man) received the Military Medal.

Extract from an account by Tom Davies of the activities of "B" Company, 13th Btn RWF during the War (NB In this account he mistakes the month)

16. XI. 17. 13 R.W.F.
France

Dear Mrs. Richard,

I write to say that your son was badly wounded in a raid this week and is now in hospital. I left the trenches this morning went some 10 miles to see him & found him wonderfully bright. It was found necessary (to preserve his life) to amputate his right leg & the other leg is very bad too as the knee joint is affected.

Extract from a letter sent to J.P.'s mother by the battalion's chaplain, W. F. Crosthwait: 'Dear Mrs Richards I write to say that your son was badly wounded in a raid this week and is now in hospital. I left the trenches this morning & went some 10 miles to see him & found him wonderfully bright. It was found necessary (to preserve his life) to amputate his right leg & the other leg is very bad too as the knee joint is affected. ...'

Yours sincerely,
W. F. Crosthwait, C.F.
Chaplain att. 13 R.W.F.

Of course, this marked the end of J.P.'s active service: he was sent back to a hospital in Manchester, where they managed to save his left leg.



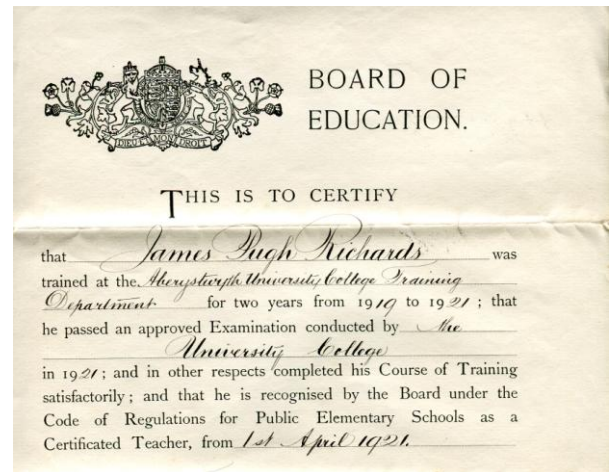
Postcard showing the Military Hospital at Weaste (Manchester), sent by J.P. Richards to his sister, Kit, on 23 December 1917



Photograph of J.P. Richards recuperating: behind him stands Cpl D. J. Rees, 2nd Welsh Regt.

He remained in uniform until the end of the war, being discharged on 22 November 1918.

There is an unexpected silver lining to this story of sacrifice and suffering during the war. As an ex-soldier, J.P., whose formal education had been cut short, was eligible to study at college for a teaching qualification. But first, at the age of 23 he had to return to Barmouth County School to gain the necessary certificate. In 1919 he entered the University College of Wales Aberystwyth for a two-year course, after which he was appointed a teacher at the Twyn Senior Boys School, Caerphilly.



Left: J.P. Richards with friends at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth; Below: J.P. Richards with his pupils at the Twyn School, Caerphilly



He died in 1956 at 61 years of age. His daughters remember him as a cultured man with a great sense of humour, active throughout his life in the Welsh community and chapel. His letters from 1914-18, only recently discovered, reveal a part of his life of which they were aware but about which he never talked.

Gethin Matthews, Ben Rees, Sean Kenny, Alys Rosser

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