

# Case Study 4: Vietnamese Boat People

(Adapted from [Wales for Peace hidden history](#))

'Vietnamese boat people' refers to almost 800,000 refugees who fled Vietnam by boat and ship after the Vietnam American War, especially during 1978 and 1979, but continuing until the early 1990s. Many hundreds left Vietnam in the flimsiest of craft, trusting their lives to the waves and the humanity of others as they fled the change of regime following the 'fall of Saigon'. Many of them failed to survive the passage, facing danger and hardship from pirates, over-crowded boats and storms.

Welsh communities played their part, with some reaching Wales. Two stories, adapted from fuller versions, are outlined below. You can access the full stories by going into the title links.

## 1. **Barmouth:** [Welsh haven for Vietnamese 'boat people'](#) (Guardian Archive, Sept 1978):

In a quiet Welsh seaside town 27 Vietnamese are learning how to live with the British. It is proving a happy, if slightly unreal experience. Few of the Vietnamese speak English, let alone Welsh, and the Welsh have not yet been persuaded to take up Vietnamese.

It is hoped that these 27 people — in two families of 16 and 11 — may become a model example of how an immigrant people can be successfully assimilated into a host community. After a few months in Britain they are beginning to settle. A daughter is training to be a nurse; another wants to be a hairdresser. Some younger men have applied to join a Government training scheme to turn them into motor mechanics. Their children go to school locally and the older ones play football with the local boys in the park. The Ockenden Venture, which owns the houses they live in and arranged to take them all out of hostels in the South in which they have been living, want to show that by grouping immigrants in a community large enough for them to hold on to something of their traditional culture and yet small enough for a small town to accept them as part of its people, something new and worthwhile might be achieved.

So far all the signs have been good; the boys and girls are reported to be doing well at school: the older girls have started to take an interest in European cooking. The people of Barmouth have joined the Vietnamese for social evenings and there is even talk of a local women's association to act as a support group for the families.

Barry Denton, regional organiser for the Ockenden Venture, says: "We consider it very important not to create ghettos....." The Barmouth community, by restricting numbers, may become a success story.

## 2. **Penygraig, Rhondda:** Vietnamese orphan given a home in Wales goes back to his roots (Wales Online, 2013).

Le-Thanh was one of 99 babies rescued as part of 1975's Operation Babylift in the dying days of the Vietnam War, and found himself in the care of Canon John Thomas and his wife Binkie at their home in Penygraig, Rhondda. The operation was organised in just six hours and saw youngsters gathered up from homes in a panic after rumours that the Vietcong intended to massacre them caused widespread panic. The babies were found homes across Britain and grew up leading separate lives.

"I have no history and no means to trace my blood relatives," he added. "Their reasons were noble but it means that I and so many others will never really be able to find their families.

Despite having travelled to Vietnam on a number of occasions, Le-Thanh says he feels he is Welsh. "I've lived in Wales for the most part of my life, I even sport a hint of a Welsh accent. Wales is my home, every time I cross the bridge I know I'm back home," he said.

But his childhood was not always easy. The family moved from their home in Rhondda in 1983 and Le-Thanh spent most of his childhood in Pontypridd.

Both his father, a canon in a local church and his mother, a magistrate, were open about his early years, but he found growing up in the South Wales Valleys as a Vietnamese boy during the 1970s could be difficult. He said: "I had my friends but I also had an equal number of bullies too. Being different, kids found that easy to pick on.

"Even as a teenager or young adult I only had to walk down the street and I'd have people shout racial comments. They didn't see it as racist, they saw it as a joke. "There was obvious stuff, such a Chinkie and Fried Rice. I worked in one place where one of the managers wouldn't call me by my name, they would only call me Charlie Chan."

He would often find himself crossing the street to avoid groups of people who would make comments. "People seemed to genuinely think it was acceptable to make these comments just because I looked different to them. Even now you get it sometimes, usually in pubs when people have had a few, but it is nothing as severe as it used to be," he said.

Social historian Peter Stead said it would have been difficult for any Vietnamese orphan to have come to Wales at that period. "It would have been a tremendous difference for them to cope with," he said.

But he explained that Wales has often played host to refugees from around the world, including Greece, Italy and Chile. "There is a record of Wales being a place where people come to. One of the most attractive features about Wales is that it takes refugees in. "

## Further Information

**More information** about the Vietnamese Boat People can be found here:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vietnamese\\_boat\\_people](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vietnamese_boat_people) and

<https://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/vietnam-war/vietnamese-boat-people/>

## Follow-up Activities:

### 1. Class discussion / Circle time:

- a. No-one would want to be forced to leave their family and home and flee to another country, but does the Barmouth story represent an example of 'good practice' in helping refugee communities to feel at home? If so, why do you think this is?
- b. What does Le-Thanh's story tell us about the difficulties of integrating into a society that is very different from your own? Do you think that attitudes towards people from outside your local community have changed? What can we do to counteract prejudice and stereotypes personally, and as a society?
- c. What is the difference between a refugee, an asylum seeker and an economic migrant?
- d. What is an 'acceptable quota' of refugees and asylum seekers in a community? Do you think that attitudes have changed towards refugees and asylum seekers? If so, why?



### 2. Creative Writing:

- a. Imagine you are one of the Vietnamese Boat people who have been settled in Barmouth. Write some diary entries with your first impressions of the town and its people. How does your attitude change over time? How do you see your future? What do you miss about your home in Vietnam?
- b. Write a blog as the teenage Le-Thanh, describing a typical day at school, including being teased and bullied because of your appearance and accent. How does this feel? Are you able to talk to anyone about it?

### 3. English/Welsh/PSE

Hold a class debate on the following topic:

***'This House believes that policies on immigration to Wales should be devolved to the Welsh Government'.***

For guidelines about holding a class debate see:

- WCIA's Top Tips for Debaters
- <http://noisyclassroom.com/oracy-ideas/five-steps-for-preparing-a-debate-with-a-class/>
- [http://news.bbc.co.uk/cbbcnews/hi/newsid\\_4450000/newsid\\_4458000/4458081.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/cbbcnews/hi/newsid_4450000/newsid_4458000/4458081.stm)

**What do you think about the idea of Wales becoming a Nation of Sanctuary?** Find out more about this movement:

- <https://welshrefugeecouncil.org.uk/news/09122015-1436/nation-of-sanctuary-action-briefing>
- [http://www.walesforpeace.org/wfp/theme\\_refugeesandsanctuary.html](http://www.walesforpeace.org/wfp/theme_refugeesandsanctuary.html)

