A sense of rurality: Events, placemaking and community participation in a small Welsh town

1. Introduction

Rurality can be understood as a collective connection whereby people share social and cultural constructions founded in place and community traditions. Indeed, understandings of rurality tend to reflect discourses underpinning the development of spaces through the humanistic lens of place whereby a sense of community, interaction and symbolic connections that occur through behaviours, self-efficacy and local cultural and social experiences (Harper, 1987). Scholars have shown that the physical aspect of spatial interactions is one of the layers contributing to make up an understanding of place (see Adams et al., 2001; Cresswell, 2014; Manzo and Devine-Wright, 2013). This can be looked at as a visual reflection of part of the experiences lived by people within it (Adams, 2010; Mendoza and Morèn-Alegret, 2012). By using and experiencing a physical space, and by interacting with and within it, people tend to create meanings, values, and constructs contributing not only to building up other meaningful layers of the place but also to define their own identity (Adams, 2010; Halfacree, 1993).

The complexity, creativity and meaning embedded in staging events in rural areas offer locale-specific insight into the importance of community participation and placemaking (see Custódio, Azevedo and Perna, 2018; Low, 2017; Sharpe, 2008). Thus, by negotiating meanings that lend to the construction of place and those established relationships with it, people develop symbolic connections. Yet, this process is subject to change and different uses of the space can result in changing dynamics, or a (re)negotiation of meanings (Wise, 2014). The understanding of a place, and the associated makings and attachments which might derive from it, can vary across different contexts (e.g. temporal, spatial, social, cultural, political) leading to the development of senses of place (see Hay, 1998; Loureiro, 2014). In this paper we look at the ways in which events form an important function within a small town in Wales.

2. Framing the context: Rural Wales and Llanwrtyd Wells

Wales is a country that is known for its awe-inspiring landscape. This has been a key part of the marketing activities of Visit Wales for a number of years. The dramatic Welsh countryside landscape that surrounds Llanwrtyd Wells offers a picturesque setting in which to stage events.
The rugged landscape that the town sits within has become a key driver in the types of events that have been developed in the town. Milbourne and Kitchen (2014) argue the means and desires of consumption in places such as rural Wales are based on modalities that direct us to address complexities concerning flows of people into such remote locales. While such geographical constructs concerning mobility theories are beyond the scope of this work, the focus on events is underexplored when it comes to symbolic connections and interactionism. Llanwrtyd Wells is the smallest town in Britain and has a reputation for hosting quirky events. The local community, the town has a population of around 600 people, come up with ideas which, ipso facto, seem to attract the attention of people living in the region and of visitors from elsewhere in Wales and further afield. Over the decades, local business owners have organised out-of-the-ordinary events to attract visitors. Unusual competitions such as the Man versus Horse race and the World Bog Snorkelling Championships were developed in the town and used as a means of increasing tourism to the area (World Alternative Games, 2012). The World Bog-Snorkelling Championship was first held in 1985 and the inaugural Man versus Horse event took place five years prior to that. This helped make the town a place known for putting on quirky events.

The first World Alternative Games (WAG) took place in the summer of 2012 not long after the London 2012 Olympic Games. They were conceived and developed as something different to the mega-event taking place in Britain’s largest city (Author). London 2012 was promoted as being a ‘British’ games with football matches taking place in Cardiff (Wales) and Glasgow (Scotland). Yet many felt that there would be little impact in areas outside of the host city of London and some of those involved in event activities within Llanwrtyd felt that London 2012 offered a window of opportunity to do something different. This led to the creation of the World Alternative Games which was initially conceived as somewhat oppositional to the Olympic Games with a focus on the Corinthian spirit. The promotion of the WAG as a Welsh event is also important to note here and in addition to various ‘quirky’ events there was also a celebration of Welsh culture through other related activities. Competitions were held in different farms around Llanwrtyd Wells and in some public buildings like the local primary school. Established events in the town, like the World Bog Snorkelling Championships, were promoted under the broader umbrella of the World Alternative Games. The planning and development of this event also aligned with a ten-year strategic plan developed by the Welsh Assembly Government to use events as a tool to promote Wales as a tourism destination (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008). In line with this goal, the inaugural WAG in 2012 attracted international media coverage (e.g. in Ireland, USA, Australia and Russia) and helped raise the
profile of tourism in this particular part of Wales. The event was covered in a segment on the BBC’s *Breakfast* programme and also featured on *Transworld Sport* which reached an international audience across various continents.

Wales is a small nation, which, compared to the other countries making up the United Kingdom, has struggled to establish a strong presence in many international tourism and events spaces (see Harris, 2013; Pritchard and Morgan, 2001). Since the foundation of a Welsh tourist board, currently called Visit Wales, attempts in building up a distinctive image have led to the development of brands founded on concepts which mainly reflect and address the expectations of the target markets (Morgan and Pritchard, 2005). By pursuing the path of fostering and instilling emotional relationships between a destination, and its potential visitors, certain important aspects embedded in the local culture may be challenged (see Morgan and Pritchard, 2005; Pritchard and Morgan, 1998). In line with the arguments outlined by Pitchford (1995) when analysing the role played by tourism in Wales, such a practice is the result of the centrifugal force of the tourism industry which may create economic and social opportunities of development while debunking cultural meanings which are re-designed to be sold to others so as to affect and hurt nationalist sentiments.

Wales has also looked at its own heritage as an asset to take advantage of certain tourism trends. The growth of rural tourist markets, which affected the European tourism industry in the last few decades, along with the rise of environmental concerns and of particularly strong affiliations of rural places to healthy living styles, came to shape an appealing tourism context for Wales (Midmore, 2018). For some time now, opportunities have been created through connecting the idealisation of the nation as a rural place and culture (see Gruffudd, 1995; Halfacree, 1993) to the development of tourism initiatives involving local activities and institutional bodies working alongside Visit Wales. In order to distinguish itself from other rural destinations offering similar experiences, Visit Wales encourages and supports the local population (see McManus et al., 1995; Talbot, 2013).

With the dilution of both mining industries and agriculture, which used to fuel much of the Welsh economy, new revenue sources were needed (Pitchford, 1995). Tourism was looked at as a driving force for the local economy and for the renewal of rural areas and a tool for the promotion of culture and place (Pitchford, 1995; Pritchard and Morgan, 2001). As outlined in the work of the Wales Rural Observatory (2007), small towns occupy a distinctive social and economic position in Wales. A ten-year plan set up with the aim of supporting economic and tourism growth, engaging local communities in leisure and tourism activities, and enhancing the reputation of Wales in an international context was developed to centre around events.
(Welsh Assembly Government, 2008). Those involved in creating the World Alternative Games were successful in applying for funding from the assembly government to support this initiative. As noted above, the event was conceived as something that would promote and celebrate Welsh identity. The focus on the rugged landscape of the area was something that was important in the creation of some of the event activities. It also provided a good ‘fit’ for the wider work of Visit Wales and the marketing of the country as a tourism destination. The next section now considers the ways in which the rural environment is important to the specific case of the World Alternative Games.

3. Exploring meaningful layers of rurality

Based on the assumptions that a place is constructed by the individuals engaging with it and interacting within it, the rural is an entanglement of meaningful contexts (Cloke and Milbourne, 1992; Milbourne and Kitchen, 2014). The rural is oftentimes perceived as isolated and dispersed, but yet meaningful layers or context and community engagement define people’s connectivity and social cohesion (see Flora et al., 2018). However, more commonly accepted understandings of the rural seems to be driven by a comprehension of community which looks at it as a group of people framed into physical borders and categories of affiliations justifying social ties, a perspective adopted on several occasions when looking at rural communities (see Harper, 1989; Newby, 1985).

Despite the relevance of considering the physical aspect of a rural space as an important layer of meanings, the aforementioned view of the rural fails to seize the other components fostering and building it up. Changes over time encourage connections between geographical places and rural areas with other places (see Osman et al., 2016) and nurturing a different understanding of the rural which looks beyond its physical entities and its geographic boundaries and tends to focus on interactions and relations (Heley and Jones, 2012). Indeed, as a place made up of meanings resulting from the encounters, interactions and participation of people within a rural space, rurality can be viewed as a process which constantly changes (Edwards, 1998; Flora et al., 2018; Jones, 1995). In supporting this view, Philo (1993) suggests that rural spaces are ‘locales whose contents enter deeply into making of the social life that is lived through them’ (p.433). Based on all these reflections, a sort of interdependency and interrelation between rural space and the people living within it can be seized, as we have been and are still continually challenged to consider ‘the making of the rural experience’ (Harper, 1987, p.309). In other words, rurality can be understood as a discourse through which a rural
place is shaped through the development of symbolic meaningful connections mutually affecting rural space and people (Jones, 1995).

However, the necessity to make sense of and justify the impact of certain global trends (e.g. urbanization, mobility, economic growth) on the rural space can lead to the development of meaningful categories of the rural which tend to focus on and synthetize just some spatial and/or social rural components (see Harper, 1989). Across the past few decades, both the widening of global economic exchanges and increased urbanisation have contributed to the decline of agricultural economies which rural places rely on, thereby spurring depopulation (Tacoli et al., 2015). In such a context, meanings attributed to the rural tend to emerge as opposed to those attached to urban spaces. The discrepancy between positive rural meanings and negative urban ones seems to be marked by the perceptions of decline (see Shucksmith, Silva et al., 2016). As such, generalisations of rural meanings which focused, for example, on traditional activities like farming is creating speculative positivity of rural areas, a sort of idyllic trend to commodify the rural (Overton, 2019; Roberts et al., 2017). Based on these arguments, where the rural idyll embodies meanings related to traditional uses of its physical components, the understanding of rurality looks at trends and changes occurring in the world. There is a need to change because those places that seek ways to make themselves distinct create a new advantage whereas those places that resist will continue to stagnate (Wise et al, 2019). Thus, new meaningful contexts, which, in addition to other contexts and layers of meanings of the rural, foster the (re)negotiation of meanings of places and communities (see Jones, 1995; Roberts et al., 2017; Shucksmith, 2016).

The attention that the rural landscape is receiving in the event context seems to be connected to a particular trend which sees rural areas establishing their place in the tourism industry (see Sharpley and Jepson, 2011). These areas tend to look at tourism as a new opportunity for revitalising the decaying rural economy as a result of the decline of agriculture as a sector of the global economy and tackling issues such as the shortage of essential services and facilities and the displacement of younger generations (see Eusebio et al., 2017). Furthermore, these small-scale remote areas can provide relevant dimensions for organising and promoting a small-scale event. In fact, rurality can be used as a theme of some small events, provide scenery to festivals where history and celebration of local traditions (see Bertella, 2014; Gibson et al., 2011).

Some events can be brought into being not only as forms of celebration of local rural traditions and communities, but also as tools to regenerate rural areas (see Gibson et al., 2011). However, a few issues may emerge when a small-scale event is periodically held and reaches
its maturity stage. Long-term, the celebration of the local (rural) identity (e.g. culture, history, traditions) can take second place with all its meanings (e.g. community placemaking) when it simply turns into a sort of hook aiming to attract more visitors and accelerate tourism development in the area (Gibson et al., 2011). Placemaking from an events standpoint involves interactions among both local residents and eventgoers to fulfil the purpose of uniting people through participation (Reid, 2011). Embedded in the concept of placemaking is community participation, involving how people perceive and receive support for an event, and if desired socio-cultural event impacts can be achieved. Ooi et al. (2014) explain that managing different stakeholder expectations can be analysed through an event’s poetics and politics, where ‘poetics’ include presenting the event in an attractive manner to both gain local support and attract outside attention, and ‘politics’ is about legitimacy, mobilising the community and managing dissatisfaction. Contemporary planning challenges posit intentions to stray from solely physical aspects of placemaking to more “purposeful event staging” (Richards, 2017, p. 9).

Placemaking endeavours are often rooted locally, and helps people associate through shared identities and influence, which reinforce community bonds among those who participate across socio-spatial milieus (Pierce et al., 2011; Wise et al., 2020). As places stage events, especially in rural areas, it is important to explore meanings into why people participate in activities—as this provides directions and scope into the making of place (Low, 2017). The core basis of explaining placemaking is based on planning and participation. Lew (2017) argues too often placemaking is guided by top-down place planning, influenced by destination planners and economic policy-makers for fundamental place marketing and image promotion/enhancement. Richards (2017), building on Manzo and Devine-Wright (2013), suggests researchers explore bottom-up considerations, which require validation by locals who live/interact in such everyday spaces, as well as visitors who engage in event activities—which challenges researchers to consider placemaking as it is experienced, opposed to planned. Local identity can have an impact on participation, and it offers scope into community placemaking. In this study the notion of wackiness is also important here (see Author) as this is a component of placemaking and place promotion, which may be what contributes to the successful development of the event itself. This can also foster some locals’ disagreement or rejection of running events in their own locale especially when tourists can be perceived as disruptive or as a threat for the environmental balance (see Cloke and Perkins, 1998; Mason and Beaumont-Kerridge, 2004). Having outlined some of the ways in which the rural has been considered in
the study of event management and associated disciplines, the next section now explains the methodology that underpins the case study presented here.

4. Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative research approach as it focused on how people construct meanings of rurality through their engagement in the WAG. Postmodern constructivist assumptions provided the critical and conceptual foundations of the case study. The relevance of considering the social constructivist perspective was based on the fact that an event was viewed as a system of meanings, social constructs, that tended to be created and shared by the individuals encompassed in a given spatial and temporal frame (see Crespi-Vallbona and Richards, 2007; Getz, 2008). Berger and Luckmann (1966) advocate the necessity to dwell on how meanings attached to the social world are constructed before becoming common-sense in the interpretation and the understanding of the social reality and defining human behaviour.

Based on the social constructivist perspective, the spatiotemporal context defined the peculiarities of the case study and it was within it that the key stakeholders constructed and shared their views on Llanwrtyd Wells and the WAG (see also Baxter and Jack, 2008).

The dynamics of the ontological and epistemological assumptions of social constructivism informing this study predisposed the research to a relevant approach of enquiry: a case study. Stake (2005, p.443) suggests that:

Case study is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied. If case study research is more humane or in some ways transcendent, it is because the researchers are so, not because of the methods.

As the aim of this study is to investigate a small-scale event in a rural geographical locale, the particularity of this study lay in looking at the case as an open system interacting with external forces (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2009). Through this perspective, the uniqueness of the case to explore was rooted in its particular features. The geographical location was one of the most important in that it contributed to define the context of the event itself. This factor along with others—small town, limited number of participants, event activities, involvement of community—interacted with external forces so as to bring about a distinctive product (see also Stake, 2005).

The research methods adopted involved semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observations with the aim of developing an understanding of rurality based on the views of
those involved with the event. One of the researchers had established contacts with the event organisers having attended the inaugural event in 2012 and was able to facilitate access for the other researchers to attend the event in 2014 and 2016. The sample identified through purposive and convenience sampling techniques was quite diverse given the main informants represented at least one or more groups of people that were involved in the event: community members, event organisers, volunteers, media people, owners of local businesses and lands, councillors, participants and spectators. Observations were conducted at different sites in Llanwrtyd Wells across two weeks during the third edition of the WAG in 2016 by the first author. Holstein and Gubrium (2008), in laying out the differences between naturalist and constructivist ethnographies, point out the endeavours of a constructivist observer in keeping away from taking for granted the reality observed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in the locations of the event, in local businesses, public sites (e.g. a museum), and private dwellings. Each one of those was shaped on the basis of specific themes, ‘event development’, ‘community development’, ‘relationship of people with the landscape’, ‘relationship of the event with the landscape’, ‘relationship of people with the event’ (see Flick, 2009). Other relevant prompts were used to further engage the interviewees in a more in-depth discussion about the above-mentioned themes (see also Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). Given the number of components and activities making up the WAG and the inseparability of the case from its context (see Yin, 2014), some stakeholders could not be approached. These limitations are discussed in the conclusions. All names used are pseudonyms and informed consent was obtained from interviewees following standard ethical approval. The results of the study were analysed using narrative and thematic analysis.

5. The landscape of Llanwrtyd Wells and the rural gaze

All the physical components making up Llanwrtyd Wells and the surrounding environment are in many ways not that different to any other rural areas. During interviews, participants would routinely discuss the somewhat rugged terrain and being hidden away in a sparsely populated part of the country are notable features here. However, the physical appearance of the place is the only one providing clues of its rurality, clues which seemed to reflect anybody’s reference of physical rurality. At this stage, interpretations of the local rural could only rely on forms of generalisations of the space which, by being driven by visual components, could only refer to a sort of categorisation of the rural. These interpretations would further support discussions on the production and construction of place and the rural (see Cloke and Milbourne, 1992)
according to which the physical and visual aspects of a place are those which contribute to placemaking. Milbourne and Kitchen’s (2014) research on nearby Llangamarch has also highlighted similar findings.

Apart from providing a setting for the event experience, the rural landscape is an essential condition for certain games to take place. Harry explained how some of the physical elements of the surrounding natural environment have become essential for event organisation:

You’re gonna have bog snorkelling where there’s a bog! You know, ‘bog’ literally, in the true meaning of ‘bog’ is a peat bog and these two trenches are cut into the peat bog. Peat bogs always float on a lake of water. [Then there’s] Man versus Horse, that couldn’t happen anywhere flat because the horse would always win, whereas the terrain here is such that a horse, and this is coming from a horse stoner, would not run down the side of the hill, so the whole thing equalizes…so 26 miles, it produces an equal playing field. So, yeah, and most definitely the things that are happening here have evolved because of what we’ve got where we are.

Certain characteristics of the place inspired some locals to give rise to unique competitions. Many people pointed out the fact that there would not have been any reason for the Man versus Horse to take place if it was held in a flat green area which would have guaranteed a victory for horses over the runners. The World Bog Snorkelling competition was devised when “one farmer said having a big bog in the back field, so they thought ‘let’s dig a hole and try to swim in’” (Clara). This supports the arguments that Bertella (2014) and Loureiro (2014) use to outline the relevance of certain physical elements defining the rural setting within which a particular tourism experience or a small event takes place. Indeed, the setting of the WAG was not artificially or purposively created in order to run events and did not respond to the logic of the experience economy aiming to build up spaces to instil emotions. The geomorphologic characteristics of the rural area are such that competitions could develop and an engagement of participants or spectators could be stimulated.

Pamela, one of the local event volunteers, suggested that:

For people who come and do the events, in the between times, they go out and enjoy the countryside and go for walks and go for horse rides, they go out and see the reservoirs…they enjoy the events and they enjoy the whole area at the same time, and I think, most people try to do that, you know try to fit everything in.

Nick, a volunteer from outside of the local area, noted that:

If people come here in Llanwrtyd for the weekend to join in the WAGs, they haven’t got just the WAGs. As we talk now, we can see beautiful scenery, lots of greenery, lots of hills…It’s very picturesque. If you are a keen walker or keen cyclist and you come here, you can do a multitude of things. It’s not just about…you know the world alternative games hopefully attract a lot of people here. When they are here they ‘wow’ they realise
then what such beautiful scenery… It is, it’s fantastic and that is one of the main reasons why I love being here.

In describing the beauty of the rural landscape, Jen (an event competitor), suggested that:

It is just the beautiful countryside. Certainly, the weather is not really reliable but it does not matter. So it’s the countryside, the clean air, the hills, I do a lot of running and mountain biking while I am here I go out and explore as well. Yeah, it just, it just feels like a ‘bolt-hole’ what we call a ‘bolt-hole’ is somewhere to run to and have two weeks away from everyday life and stress and work, it feels like, I cannot think of a word now... refuge, a refuge somewhere you go to get away from everything and that is what this town looks to us.

Whether the WAG was the main reason or not why Jen and other people who shared her views went to Llanwrtyd Wells, the natural landscape tended to define their presence there. Feeling completely immersed in the wilderness while hiking or cycling tended to be the main aspiration of many.

This strongly supports Sharpley and Jepson’s (2011) research explaining the spiritual experience of rural tourists in the Lake District in England and the development of attachment to the rural area. Certainly, a sort of subliminal connection to the landscape of Llanwrtyd Wells was searched and the natural elements shaping it were such that a sort of attachment to it developed. However, the deep sensorial engagement aimed in order to create a detachment from the urban habits seemed not to be entirely fulfilled through hiking, cycling, or running. Indeed, it seems that the natural landscape was such that a deeper engagement with it could be searched for by visitors and eventgoers. The Wales Rural Observatory (2009) work on ‘deep rural localities’ shows how important local people were to developing these communities and a sense of place.

The rural landscape was the main reason for many tourists and eventgoers to be in Llanwrtyd Wells. Yet, they would spectate or even participate in certain activities like bog snorkelling, ditch racing, stone skimming, and hay bale throwing (See Images 1 and 2).

Image 1: Ditch racing course at Llanwrtyd Wells

Image 2: The bog at Llanwrtyd Wells

They would dive in the dirty and smelly water of the bog, they would make a stone skim on the local pond or throw a hay bale. Certainly, some event activities stimulated the senses of
these people in a different way. This supports Bertella’s (2014) study on the sensorial experience of event participants in rural events. The use of the rural space in event activities also seemed to instil a sense of attachment to it and defined a sense of rurality and place-identity. In particular, bog snorkelling, ditch racing, and stone skimming gave people the opportunity to become familiar with other physical cues of the local area which they would not have had if they had focused just on immersing themselves in the wilderness. In other words, the events contributed to the development of the attachment to the landscape. This is certainly a different way of connecting to the landscape compared to what the more commodified rural tourism areas offer. Indeed, in providing opportunities to connect to the physical landscape, Llanwrtyd Wells also offered perspectives to the rural environment itself which tended to be constantly (re)negotiated with or by the locals. Locals and visitors negotiate their views of the rural, and these perspectives seem to set a distance from looking at the landscape as an asset and the main focus of planning for and delivering events in such areas (Bakas et al., 2019; Peng et al., 2018).

6. Sense of rurality making a new place

The scale and remoteness of the place itself tends to drive relationships between people in Llanwrtyd Wells. This reflects both geographical and sociological views about one’s physical proximity that when, within rural spaces, relationships that exist between people and encourages multiple encounters which tend to shrink social distances between them limiting local conflicts (see also, Milbourne and Kitchen, 2014; Wales Rural Observatory, 2009). The type of interactional process occurring across their multiple encounters affected their way of approaching people and of establishing relationships and symbolic connections with them to understand local cultural and social experiences in place. Such interactional process, based on proximity, encounters and communication also echoes Jones’s (1995) arguments related to how social interactions lead to the production and negotiation of meanings of the rural. It seems the engagement in interactions in Llanwrtyd Wells not only encouraged local community development, but also enabled many locals to communicate and build their own sense of the rural.

Andrea, a business owner, explained the reasons behind her decision to move to Llanwrtyd Wells:

It seems to be a ‘Mecca’ for eccentric people, there’s some really strange (laugh). People just come here with their quirks and, and don’t hide them and I don’t know why they
don’t… you know, we just came here for two days and decided that it was where we belong to be… We just came here and we walked into a bar or café, I think, and you know, and the head teacher started chatting to us and one of the kids he was helping with maths came in, you know, we were, you know, he started chatting to us which was not happening in the city, you know, you… people do not talk to strangers… and I think everyone was so willing to welcome you and to present this like… not consciously, they just genuinely had this willingness to present the place as they saw it themselves which was a really natty community.

On her first visit in Llanwrtyd Wells, Andrea admitted being caught up in the interactional process outlined above. Lucy explained a similar experience:

When we moved here, we thought… we’d seen the property online, and I thought it was in Llandrindod Wells I had never heard of Llanwrtyd Wells. We eventually pitched up here, I wasn’t sure that it was for us and we went and looked at some other buildings in different places. But we came back here and learnt a little bit more about the town and I could see that it had this atmosphere of fun really, it just had an atmosphere of fun. We met a few people who we really really liked, you know, there was a certain vibrancy and I-can-do, you know. So we looked at the potential, I guess, of this building which hadn’t been doing, it had been converted but the business hadn’t been running for a couple of years and it seemed to me that this town could offer us enough to keep us going.

Lucy admits that this “is the story for a lot of people who come to visit, they think, wow, this is a nice place”. In describing her experience, another lady, originally from an English city, admitted having felt immediately attracted by the history of the town and the community always celebrating in the local pubs with music and drinks or engaging in daily activities not necessarily related to profit-making. Lucy explained that:

I think people connect with what’s happening, with the atmosphere that’s here and if you connect with it you want more of it. I wonder if you were in a certain point of your life when you think you can make a change and you have, maybe, just a small sense of adventure of doing things a little bit differently, just a little bit and this attracts people. People do not stay if they don’t feel they fit in and there is a certain craziness about the town.

Amy suggested that:

This is an area where the community almost expect alternative, different things to happen here which possibly makes them, as a community, more open to accept things which comes from one of them having good ideas because that is what happens here.
The local way of life for many of the population tended to also be characterised by quirky activities like the WAG, which turned the town into a place where certain activities drove relationships and interactions with the surrounding space and the people. However, this is a process which might not involve all the inhabitants of Llanwrtyd Wells especially when they did not desire engaging in most of the activities, as some people admitted. Andrea explains the reasons on the basis of the negative perceptions of the WAG:

Possibly, because it’s too wacky and they prefer a quiet life. Lots of people don’t like change and yeah, I am not really sure what they do not like to be honest with you. I suppose, it can be a little bit noisy and things like that.

Other research on migration in and out of rural Wales has highlighted some of the challenges associated with this subject, but a key consideration here is movement to rural Wales is an escape from the daily disturbances of urban life, and events in a rural locale (event if temporary) can disrupt this idyllic lifestyle. The strong attachment to the local heritage is such that anything which was not perceived to be somehow connected to it tended to be denigrated or ignored. By denying any change, a group of locals tended to set some sort of boundaries framing a farming community who stubbornly clung on traditional values. George’s view about the games seemed to hinge upon his perceptions about the loss of perceived Welsh culture and traditions: He suggested that This is not really the real Wales! Bog snorkelling is not, is not Wales’.

Embracing meanings related to the WAG activities represented the desire on the part of some inhabitants of Llanwrtyd Wells to boost a sort of change and to shape a new sense of rurality which tended to distance itself from meanings which had characterised the place and its population for many years. This echoes Sharpe’s (2008) reflections related to the capacity of event activities to boost social change and to provide the opportunity to build new meanings drifting away from those dominating in the spatial and symbolic context within which people tend to identify to a given group. Sharpe (2008) showed how meanings of freedom, fun and enjoyment within the event space are used to drive the process of shifted communities which, through festival activities, shape a new space by developing different meanings while distancing themselves from other processes of identification which they do not recognise or accept anymore. Similarly, the local supporters of the WAG engaged in a process of renegotiation which openly rejected those crowding in the traditionalist space.
Meaning production, deriving from symbolic interactions between people (individually and collectively) and spaces, is not only the main point driving discussions related to placemaking (e.g. Stedman, 2003), but reinforces factors enacting a placemaking process and the development of a sense of rurality. Physical attributes identifying and defining the natural environment of a destination and then of a tourism or event experience can act as triggers of symbolic connections between individuals and a place (see Bertella, 2014; Cloke and Perkins, 1998; Derrett, 2003; Loureiro, 2014). However, symbolic connections can unfold and be successful when there is an active participation of a variety of stakeholders (Binkhorst and Dekker, 2009). The extent to which event attendees engage in such a sensorial connection is linked to their desire to participate (Richards, 2017). Therefore, encounters and (inter)actions of people with the physical and symbolic space of an event not only tend to shape an event place but also enable all the stakeholders involved to make sense of their participation and presence within it (see de Geus et al., 2015; Kirkup and Sutherland, 2015; Pettersson and Zillinger, 2011).

7. Llanwrtyd Wells: A rural community

In line with Philo (1993) and Jones’ (1995) reflections related to the connection between rural place and social life, the sense of rurality emerging from the interconnection of all spatial and interactional components discussed seemed to nurture a bond within the community of Llanwrtyd Wells. Percey stated that:

The farmers in town know there is no future in farming because… it’s not easy for the sheep farming, and the sheep are not getting the same amount of money they used to do because the economy of the world is different at the moment.

Likewise, Amy added:

It happens in many rural areas… all is going back down into decline again but that’s nothing to do with what’s happening here, that’s to do with recession, you know, it’s hard in rural areas.

The local sense of rurality acted as a strong motivator as outlined above, but there seemed to be more than that to justify in the determination to remain in Llanwrtyd Wells. Clara described an important aspect of her life in the town:
It’s such a community here and what is beautiful about it is that everybody works together. I think that is quite special. Well, it was a bit calm when we moved here, you would not even think about asking people but people would come to us.

The welcoming attitude of the people was certain a relevant trait of the local community but, according to the respondents, that was not the only one. In describing how difficult it can be socialising with and relying on people in urban areas, Andrea told about her different community experience:

I remember, William (Andrea’s son), one day, he… he must have been down in the river, he walked up straight from here and they were outside a house on the edge of the village in the river and a person in the house called my house and said ‘do you know that your son is in the river outside my house?’. So, everyone is looking up for everybody and so and so… like there’s a man talking to your son and I don’t know who he is and I would say ‘is it your uncle, he is just here from…’ you know, everybody is one big family keeping an eye on everyone, you know. Even the teenagers who might graffiti the wall would be polite by saying hello, put bags in your car. You know, there is no… the local drug dealers, if there is one, would just come and, you know ‘hi, Andrea, how are you today?’ (laugh). The diversity of people you get to engage with and socialise with is crazy compared… because when you live in a city, you socialise with the people you work with and… so your own class and your own circle.

In comparing her life in Llanwrtyd Wells to her past experiences, she highlighted the simplicity of the relationships binding the locals which were not arranged according to status or any other labels. This tended to nullify social distances and created the conditions for trust and other values to develop in spite of the diversity of people living in town. She continued with a story of a former soldier:

He came to the village; the pub would feed him, no charge, to make sure he was alright; he would sit in my shop with his book in a brown envelope and then I would make coffee and we’d sit and chat, he’d got stories… you know, there have been a lots of people who passed through here and it’s… it’s life for me. I found it, this place it’s just exciting all the time!

There was no charity set up to help the most vulnerable in town. Caring about the other people and showing understanding and support were not institutionalised practices in Llanwrtyd Wells but they were acts shaping the community life on a daily basis. According to Lucy:

People are also extremely supportive of each other without living in each other’s pockets. You know, I mean, I know that if I was left on my own or my husband was left on his own, there’s enough people that we know now who would keep an eye on the one left
behind and help and support us. We do it with a lot of older people who are here, that’s how it works.

Also, in order to make her view clearer, she explained why she desired to remain in Llanwrtyd Wells instead of going back and living in her English home city:

For the fact that I am within a community and I know there’s always somewhere I can go, probably on my own if I want to have a pint or a café and meet somebody. Well, I can also sit in the corner if I want to, you know, yes so, why would I want to go back? No, I wouldn’t want to go back.

Feeling part of a community, being able to count on it in any moment, and giving a contribution whenever it is needed tended to be strong daily life motivators for many locals, as Lucy and many others admitted. Any single act, value or attitude seemed to fuel a sort of community process which provided purpose and meaning to the life of the people in the town and to their engagement in the development or preservation of the community itself.

Jim, a local-born man very fond of his community, mentioned that a non-profit project based on a community centre with the aim of preserving the rural community was set up a few years before. The project encompasses many activities (short trips, festivals, workshops, meetings) designed to involve especially the youngsters or the elders and to help them with enhancing their participation in the community. The community centre was located in a red bricked building in the train station. He explained:

This centre is giving the chances for people to meet without going far. Rural isolation is the biggest cancer we have in the UK at the moment in rural areas. People are just forgotten, they are just abandoned and it’s growing worse every day they wanna cut something else. I mean, I do know a lot of people who do not go out of their house for a year, they can’t because they cannot afford the transfer and they live in rural isolated properties with no bus services.

His concern for the community seemed to be also related to a very deep understanding of the declining situation of rural communities which, according to him, were not adequately supported by political institutions. He continued:

With this, as you see, it’s not huge, four or five people are now in the room… they get on… it’s a chance for them to get in, we bring them in, with our transportation, somewhere where they can sit and talk and then we’ve broken their isolation because they’ve got three four people, they do phone. So, when they got a problem, they are united, Charles brings them here at 10-12 o’clock in the morning and talk. This is a way
they, you find friends, and they also can rely on shoppa busses, they don’t pay us, they
don’t pay economically but it brings entertainment together and then they have
entertaining friends they can bring around…and there are a lot of… at 3 in the morning
when they got problems or health problems they can call somebody and talk to them who
would be probably there by themselves, that helps a lot, that’s a… This centre is part of
that, is part of the process.

The components and processes shaping the community of Llanwrtyd Wells seemed to
be naturally embedded in the community development process. Somehow, it could appear as
an anachronistic community when considering certain trends currently affecting rural
communities. Where the displacement of people and the information and communication
technology development create bridges between rural areas and other geographical places, rural
communities and the meanings and values attached to rurality tend to be affected and
(re)shaped by encounters and interactions with other communities (see Heley and Jones, 2012;
Osman et al., 2016). However, this did not seem to be the case. Instead, observations related to
how the crossed and overlapped contexts of socialisation within rural areas encourage and
support community development and a sense of rural community seem to find further support
in the case of Llanwrtyd Wells. Also, the interconnectedness and active community
participation of the Llanwrtyd Wells population seemed to occur almost naturally as they were
not the result of purposively structured and institutional plans of rural regeneration or with
profit-making agenda. Where the capacity to ‘keep going’ was just sufficient for people to
support themselves beyond any expectation of achieving a more comfortable way of life, the
willingness to contribute to and feel part of the community development took most of their
energy and emerged as a quite strong common interest. The community of Llanwrtyd Wells
seemed to remain clung onto non-logical values and onto community sentiments shaping their
daily life and fuelling a rural community. Rurality and community based on all the components,
both spatial and interactional, has come to define this community.

8. Conclusions
A sense of rurality that transcends traditional uses of space has emerged. The sense of identity
developed and showcased by many in the town tended to shape an image of rurality which
constantly changed and diverged from the rural idyll that still represents a pillar of many
tourism products. Through embodying such rurality, many residents tended to justify their
commitment in the local community to foster and define Llanwrtyd Wells. A flexible event
portfolio contributed to provide people with the opportunity to co-create the desired event experience and to attract varied niche markets.

The contribution of this study is to show that it is by co-creating and attributing meanings within the event space that people tend to construct community and meaning. Further research could delve more deeply into aspects of rural events already outlined in the exploration of the WAG. In order to extend findings within the scope of this project, future research could address issues related to how event mechanisms and stakeholder logics contribute to the development of a sense of place within an event context. Also, in relation to this, other case studies could shed light on how other senses of place emerge from participating in rural event activities. There is also scope to further explore the significance of inward migration to a town such as Llanwrtyd Wells and to examine the ways in which the event portfolio established here plays a role in this.

The WAG represented the impulse of a rural locale which wants to have a distinctive voice by conceiving and showing an event space and activities which did not abide by established standards but were shaped on and project the characteristics of its rurality. The events were the result of a rural community who used its own interpretation of the rural space to set its members and eventgoers free from processes and impacts fostered by the global homogenisation transcending diversities and affecting individuals, their needs, and interests.

When reflecting on the epistemology and methodology informing and underpinning this study, some limitations can be acknowledged. The peculiarities of this research emerged as a result of a case study based on a social constructivist stance which framed the construction of meanings of the case within a specific spatiotemporal context. If the dynamics through which constructs of meanings of the place and the event observed tend to change across the contexts of study (see Baxter and Jack, 2008; Guba and Lincoln, 2005; Yin, 2014), conducting further research in Llanwrtyd Wells across other editions of the WAG would mean producing different findings.

This case study has highlighted the different ways that a community has developed its activities through focusing on events. It has clearly highlighted the important ways in which the natural landscape has contributed to the ever-expanding event portfolio and a strong attachment to place. It also reflects on the importance of community and the ways in which the rurality of Britain’s smallest town has shaped the (re)creation of tourism development in a particular locale.
References


