

RESEARCH IN CONTEXT

BA GRAPHIC DESIGN 2023

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WORD COUNT:2,340

Question 6: With an emphasis on Welsh language, Culture or Identity chose a theme or focus on creative practitioners relevant to your field of study and critically analyse your choices.

Wales has a history of struggles and triumphs in its culture and language. To be Welsh brings together an understanding of its heritage, which is rich and comprises of a deeply rooted spiritual element that is expressed by its people through its art,

literature, music and design. There have been instances where invaders have tried to rob the country of its roots but have failed trying as the Welsh identity has been proven too resilient. In this essay, I will be researching into the perseverance of the Welsh language and the importance of the Welsh language as part of its identity and culture. As a student of Graphic Design, I will be looking at what it is to be Welsh and the history and traditions that have contributed to who we are today as a nation. I will also look at two aspects of design and the part it has played historically to diminish and devalue the Welsh language and in turn its cultural heart and what has been done in recent years to increase the use of the Welsh language to not only preserve what is often seen as dead language, but assist in its evolution as a living, spoken language, relevant and accessible to anyone.

Wales is a country rich in history and heritage; its language is one of the oldest languages of Europe resilient to the tests of time. Its people are dedicated to preserving their language as the proud and powerful emblem of their Welsh identity for centuries and still to this day. The country is full of lush green fields and is renowned for its agriculture and castles 'Wales is often called 'the land of castles' – there are 427 of them!'¹

There is a long tradition of poetry, songs and literature in the Welsh language. For example, the famous stories from The Mabinogion and The Black Book. Authors such as JRR Tolkien took inspiration from the Welsh language he was fascinated by the Welsh names he would see on goods wagons on railway tracks whilst on holiday

¹ *Castles of Wales* | Cadw (no date). <https://cadw.gov.wales/visit/places-to-visit/castles-wales>.

as a child in Wales. Alan Garner took direct reference from the legend of Bloddeuwedd in his childrens book; The Owl Service.

Wales is renowned for its poets like Dylan Thomas and Hedd Wen and Welsh artists are celebrated in a Welsh language and culture festival named the Eisteddfod. This festival goes back to the 12th century when a man named Lord Rhys hosted the very first eisteddfod in Cardigan Castle. He held two major competitions which were for poetry and music, and artists from all over Wales arrived to participate. It brings people together and connects people from, all corners of the country. the Welsh language is promoted so it all helps strengthen the language community by bringing all of these Welsh people together to celebrate the arts. The winners of the competition would get a wooden chair which was hand carved, and this tradition is still upheld to this day. The use of wood to produce a greatly valued prize is in direct comparison to The Welsh not, another wooden creation which was made in an attempt to decimate the Welsh language and in turn the heart of its culture.

This wealth of history and traditions have fuelled how modern day Welsh people see themselves. There is a positivity to being Welsh, promoted in the media as a land of creativity, with production companies such as Badwolf Studios producing world renowned programmes like Dr Who and His Dark Materials, which attracted international stars, but include iconic Welsh locations in their films, such as the Welsh Millenium Centre in Cardiff and The Brangwen Hall in Swansea.

Gavin & Stacey, filmed in Barry Island, proved hugely popular as the programme explored the differences between the Welsh and the English traditions and cultures and the wealth of humour that could be drawn from it. It also emphasised to both the

Welsh and non-Welsh audience, the aspects of everyday life that are unique to Wales. It promoted the Welsh identity to a global audience.

Wales is now a bilingual country, which I will explore further. The drive to promote the Welsh language by the Welsh government has proved very successful. There are now as of 2021, 440 Welsh medium schools in Wales with 110,142 pupils being taught in Welsh language.



Welsh Not. (n.d.). Welshnot.com. <http://www.welshnot.com/about/>

The Welsh not was introduced in 1852, it was a plank of wood worn by pupils in schools as an attempt to stop the Welsh language. The Not would be passed around from pupil to pupil for speaking Welsh and the child who ended up with the Not at the end of the day would be punished. The Welsh language at the time was seen by the UK government as a sickness that was harming the nation. So the politicians based in London made efforts to try and eradicate the use of the language in schools with the ultimate aim of killing the use of the Welsh language off altogether. Although the Welsh not was created before graphic design was recognised as we know it today, there are elements of graphic design in the device. There was a definite thought process that went behind the production of this item and although there are

sometimes differences in the size and shape of the designs, the desired result by the creators was singular. The Welsh not was designed and used to shame and punish children for the use of the Welsh language. The design is stark and utilitarian, the lettering looks like it has been branded into the wood and is comparable to the branding of cattle, or slaves. It was designed to threaten, demean and instil fear into a child for speaking their natural tongue. There are several examples of Welsh not designs, alongside the one I've shown above, which is the largest and most blatant design I've found. Others are also made of wood and are smaller but still have crude, branded lettering on them. It was designed to be worn at the front, on the chest, with the letters, clearly emblazoned, to be seen by the rest of the class, who would be encouraged, through the sight of it, to speak English. It was seen as an emblem of shame. The Welsh not brought about genuine fear of being able to exercise freedom of speech and can be seen nowadays as a form of oppression that the UK government used over Wales. The Welsh not decreased the number of Welsh speakers significantly through the systematic physical and psychological abuse of children and played a major part in how today, lots of people in the rest of the UK consider that Welsh is a dead Language. However, like other oppressive regimes, the use of the Welsh not brought communities together who united against the attack on their language and culture. Although the language was banned from schools, a minority of people managed to continue to use it in their homes and it is through their determination to keep their identity and language alive, that it is still spoken today. At the time, the UK government thought their actions were justified in their belief that by allowing a different language to be spoken, criminality and rebellion would be encouraged. The suppression of the language was an ill-informed attempt to reduce crime. It is clear that today the Welsh language is thriving, through the efforts of this

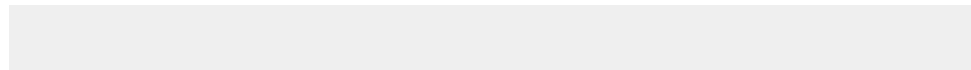
minority group years ago. Organisations since this time have been set up to promote the language as a positive aspect of Wales and have brought the country together and changed the viewpoint of many Welsh residents. The Welsh government created a scheme back in 2017 where they aimed to have a million Welsh speakers by 2050 the plan was titled “Cymraeg 2050”.

‘The percentage of the population that speak Welsh daily and can speak more than just a few words of Welsh, to increase from 10% (in 2013 to 2015) to 20% by 2050’²

One Way they did this was by hiring a Company named Smorgasbord Studios to Brand Wales in order to enlighten people on their Welsh heritage and language.

Smorgasbord studio is a graphic design studio based in Amsterdam, Netherlands. They have three key principals which are Rigour, Resonance, and Reward.

“Motivated by problem-solving our strategic capability coupled with rigorous art direction results in strong brand narratives, compelling content and memorable, engaging design.”³



Cymru Wales sans. (n.d.). Smorgasbord Studio.

As a project in 2017 Smorgasbord designed typefaces for Wales as an idea to brand Wales. The typeface is inspired by old Welsh lettering the most iconic one being the

² GOV.WALES. (n.d.). *Cymraeg 2050: Welsh language strategy action plan 2022 to 2023 [HTML]*. [online] Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/cymraeg-2050-welsh-language-strategy-action-plan-2022-2023-html>.

1.
2. www.smorgasbordstudio.com. (n.d.). *Smörgåsbord*. [online] Available at: <https://www.smorgasbordstudio.com/about> [Accessed 23 Nov. 2023].

lettering for d. The aim for the typeface was to reference the heritage of Wales and pay homage to its history and culture.

The business investigated the history and heritage of the Welsh language.

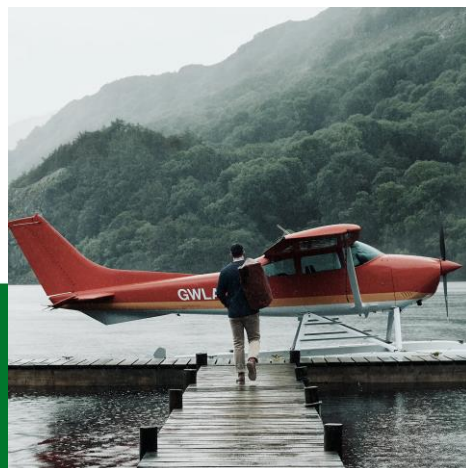
*'Our bespoke typefaces takes cues from the Welsh typographical heritage, designed specifically to work in a bilingual nation.'*⁴

The type faces they created have reverse letters which could have been problematic and be very confusing to foreign tourists and possibly people with certain conditions like dyslexia who struggle to read certain fonts. Smorgasbord created this typeface to help promote Wales and a country through the use of history in its language. In order to ensure that a wide selection of audiences could be reached, the studio researched into the history of Welsh and created a typeface alluding to the Welsh heritage and history. Their lettering is inspired by Welsh typographical heritage like the Black Book of Carmarthen they also took inspiration from other languages such as Icelandic and Arabic and looked at their cursive character forms. The designers took into consideration the fact that the Welsh alphabet had connecting letters and so they connected them in their typeface. They were inspired by how the lettering would have originally been written, which is why the D of the Cymru Wales Sans flows out from its starting point. As it would have been written in ink by using just one hand motion. The letters contained in the type faces they created included the double letters of the Welsh alphabet, for example ch, dd and ff. This gave equal

status to both languages. As the aim was to bring in more tourists and visitors to the country, it was essential that they gave careful consideration to the shape of the letters, in order to be accessible to tourists who may not have English or Welsh as their first language. Through their research they looked at what type faces were more recognisable but still referenced the Welsh culture. Their findings showed that:

*‘Independent accessibility research has proven that the core characters of ‘Cymru Wales Sans’ are more legible than ‘Arial’ whilst those of ‘Cymru Wales Serif’ are more legible than ‘Times New Roman’.*⁵

So, the lettering fulfilled what it was designed to do, providing a clear functional, attractive, culturally linked type face which is accessible for foreigners to differentiate the lettering making it easier to read.



⁵ www.smorgasbordstudio.com. (n.d.). *Smörgåsbord*. [online] Available at: <https://www.smorgasbordstudio.com/work/cymruwalestypeface/>.

Smorgasbord studios have also created numerous visual graphics for their Wales branding. This includes the 'horizon line concept' the idea is that their visual graphics use the horizon line seen in the Welsh flag in order to in a way replicate the flag; tying the graphics to Wales as a country. The example I have shown is from an advert made with Welsh Actor Luke Evans and is the best example of them alluding the Wales and the Welsh flag in their visual graphics. As you can see from the picture, they also try to incorporate the colours of the Welsh flag into their visuals. They incorporate the luscious green pastures of the Welsh country sides and the grey skies. The red plane replicates the Welsh dragon and brings a very familiar and appealing light to Wales by incorporating what would be considered dreary weather. Their clever use of a Welsh celebrity brings an authenticity to the Welshness of the advert. Luke Evans is well known globally and in Wales so there was a broad appeal to people across the world and in the UK who have seen Luke Evans, who might not have realised where he comes from. This could then inspire his home and international audience to come and visit Wales and the places he mentions. The Typeface can be seen on Visit Wales website but can also be seen on the Cadw Website which is an organisation dedicated in preserving Welsh heritage like the welsh castles.

⁶ <https://www.smorgasbordstudio.com/work/cymru-wales-campaign>

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In conclusion Wales has a strong and rich heritage, culture and identity which has been formed by the triumphs and battles in its history. I have explored two of these aspects. I focused on the Welsh language as a vital part of the Welsh identity and that we are a bilingual country today is because of the individuals who fought to retain its use. 'The Welsh not' was a significant struggle in Welsh history and its effective design and implementation almost succeeded in eradicating the Welsh language which could easily of destroyed a massive part of its identity.

Conversely, the move by the Welsh Government to employ a Scandinavian company to look at Wales as a brand and to define what Welshness is; is a great positive and the typeface can be seen across the whole country. This is a triumph, an succeeds in helping to restore the positive aspects of being Welsh and celebrates the bilingualism that we have now embraced. As a company based outside of Wales, they had an ability to analyse and explore the fundamental elements of Welsh culture and its language. Their references to Welsh literature in the shape and form of the type face they produced, strikes a chord with me as a welsh person who loves

my country and who is deeply interested in the myths and legends, I found this use of shape really appealing and effective.

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