

# The Welsh language and the grammar of Welsh place-names

## 1. Phonology and orthography

Most of the sounds of Welsh are not hugely different from English. The main points to note are:

**c** In standard Welsh orthography always [k].

**f** [v] in Welsh orthography.

**ff** [f] in Welsh orthography.

**ll** [ɬ]. The familiar initial ‘hissed *l*’ of *llan*.

**dd** Welsh orthography for [ð], the *th* of *this*.

**th** Welsh orthography for [θ], the *th* of *thin*.

**u** Originally, and still in northern Wales, a high mid/rounded vowel half-way between [u] and [i]. In the south of Wales it is practically identical with [i].

**y** When stressed it is similar to Welsh **u**, and rendered as above. When unstressed (as in the def.art.) it is [ə] (schwa: the sound of *e* in unstressed *the*).

**w** Generally vocalic, as [u]; can also be the semi-vowel as Eng.

**au** In standard pronunciation [ai], but noted here because it is the most common plural termination (see further below), and there it is very frequently rendered [a], [e] or [ə], according to dialect.

Those are the values, as noted, in standard modern Welsh orthography. In studying records of place-names that go back centuries it is necessary to be aware that the early records of names were written by scribes who were either literate Welsh-speakers following (or inventing) earlier rules of orthography, or they were English or Norman non-Welsh speakers trying – with varying levels of concentration! – to transcribe or copy Welsh names that they did not understand. This causes *a lot* of disruption. **ll** is sometimes *th* or *thl* or *lh*; **th** and **dd** are often confused; **y** is perhaps the most common ‘casualty’, often being written *e*, *i*, *y* or *u*.

## 2. Compounding and word-order

Early Celtic/British usage mostly involved compound names in the order qualifier + generic (*generic* = the thing that’s being described by the qualifier). This is the normal structure also in Germanic place-names. Many such names survive in Wales. They come in two kinds: where the qualifier is an adjective and the generic a noun, e.g. *Sychnant*, *sych* ‘dry’ + *nant* ‘stream’, and where both qualifier and generic are nouns, e.g. *Llechryd*, *llech* ‘stone slab, slate’ + *rhyd* ‘ford’.

From the early middle ages onwards, for uncertain reasons, this order generally flipped into phrasal names in which the generic precedes the qualifier, sometimes – when the qualifier is a noun – with the insertion of the definite article ‘X of the Y’. So, with an adjective, *Nant-ddu* ‘black stream’, literally ‘stream black’; with a noun, *Bryneglwys* ‘church hill’, literally ‘hill [of the] church’; with the definite article, *Pont-y-cymer* ‘bridge of [i.e. at] the confluence’.

Whilst there is a general chronological shift here, however, it is not a straightforward guide to dating the names: ‘proper compounds’ of various kinds continued to be formed into the modern period. After certain terms, like **hen** ‘old’ and numerals, it remained and remains normal, in the language and in names, for a noun/generic to follow the adjective/numeral. Nonetheless, generally when dealing with late-medieval and modern names, it is safest to presume – without clear indications to the contrary – that the first element will be the generic.

### 3. Initial consonant mutation

In place-names the most common relevant feature is ‘soft mutation’ or ‘lenition’. Prehistorically, around the sixth century, these consonants lenited intervocalically (i.e. between vowels). The vowels which conditioned the lenition were subsequently lost before the period of recorded Welsh, but the sound-changes remain an important part of the language.

This affects the consonants termed plosives and some affricates. Principally:

**p** > **b** (e.g. *perth* ‘bush, undergrowth’ > *berth*)

**t** > **d** (*tomen* ‘heap, mound’ > *domen*)

**c** > **g** (*caled* ‘hard’ > *galed*)

**b** > **f** (*bron* ‘hillside, breast’ > *fron*)

**d** > **dd** (*du* ‘black’ > *ddu*)

**g** > **Ø** (*gwern* ‘marsh’ > *wern*)

**m** > **f** (*moel* ‘bald, bare’, also nominally as ‘bare hill’ > *foel*)

(Note that if you’re searching for the radical of a word beginning with lenited **f** [v], it could be **b** or **m**!)

There are three principal circumstances which produce the mutations we get in place-names.

One is in the ‘proper compounds’ mentioned above. The second element of such compounds shows lenition: e.g. Rhuddwaun (*rhudd* ‘red’ + *gwaun* ‘marsh, moor’), Hirdir (*hir* ‘long’ + *tir* ‘land’). [The reason for this is that when Welsh had a system of case-endings, rather like Latin or modern German, there would have been a vowel between the two elements of the compound, producing lenition. The endings, including these vowels, were lost in the early post-Roman period.]

The other two, particularly common, conditioning factors involve feminine nouns. After the definite article feminine nouns show lenition: *craig* ‘rock’, *y graig* ‘the rock’, etc. And, in phrasal names, after a feminine generic all qualifiers – adjectives or nouns – show lenition: *erw ddu* ‘black acre’, *erw bant* ‘valley acre’.

(Incidentally it is worth noting that a few common adjectives have distinct feminine forms that are not just lenited but also involve a change of vowel: e.g. *gwyn* ‘white’, fem. (*g*)*wen*; *crwn* ‘round’ > fem. *gron*; *bychan* ‘small’, fem. *fechan*; *dau* ‘two’, fem. *dwy*.)

There are various exceptions or oddities, however. One is that feminine nouns have a tendency to appear in lenited form whether the article is expressed or not. So *Waun fawr* ‘big moor/marsh’ is a common name: the lenition of *gwaun* > *waun* implies the definite article in *y waun fawr*, but the article is frequently neither spoken nor written. Another is that feminine plural nouns do *not* condition the same changes: so *dôl* ‘meadow’ is often (*y*) *ddôl*, but plural *dolau* should not become \**ddolau*; red ones should be *dolau coch* (or better *dolau cochion* – a few adjectives have an inflected plural form) and not \**dolau goch(ion)*.

#### 4. Plural

Welsh marks plural nouns (and occasionally adjectives) in a range of ways, which fall into three categories:

1. With inflectional endings. The most common of these is *-au* (e.g. *cae* > *caeau* ‘fields’, *dôl* > *dolau* ‘meadows’, *sarn* > *sarnau* ‘causeways’). There are various other endings including *-i* (e.g. *perth* > *perthi* ‘bushes’, *llwyn* > *llywni* ‘copses’), *-ydd* (e.g. *erw* > *erwydd* ‘acres’, *ffôs* > *ffosydd* ‘ditches’) and *-oedd* (e.g. *mynydd* > *mynyddoedd* ‘mountains’, *ffridd* > *ffriddoedd* ‘upland pastures’).
2. With the alteration of the root-vowel (cf. English *foot*, *feet*; *mouse*, *mice*) (in Germanic linguistics this is termed *mutation*; in Celtic linguistics for some reason – perhaps because mutation is used for consonants – it is generally termed *affection*) of the root. Examples are *march* > *meirch* ‘horses’; *coll* > *cyll* ‘hazels’.
3. With a combination of an ending and affection, especially before *-ydd*: *maes* > *meysydd* ‘fields’, *gwaun* > *gweunydd* ‘marshes’, *nant* > *nentydd* ‘streams’; also *-i*: *gardd* > *gerddi* ‘gardens, enclosures’.

In fact, many Welsh nouns show variation in the way that they form their plurals: recorded plural forms of *cwm* ‘valley’ are *cymoedd*, *cymau*, *cymydd*; meadows can be *dolydd* as well as *dolau*, etc. (To some extent this may be due to the total loss of final syllables in the early medieval period; this meant that many words lost their ancient plural markers, and new plurals were then formed in different places and at different times.)

Lastly, there are some circumstances in which Welsh and Germanic languages use plurals differently. After numerals a noun is always singular: *un nant* ‘one stream’, *dwy nant* ‘two streams’. And there is a class of words, especially for animals and vegetation, where the unmarked form is plural/group in sense, and a single example is distinguished as a singulative. Thus *coed* ‘wood, woods’ > *coeden* ‘a tree’; *onn* ‘ash, ash-trees’ > *onnen* ‘an ash-tree’; *adar* ‘birds’ > *aderyn* ‘a bird’; *moch* ‘pigs’ > *mochyn* ‘a pig’.