

Analyze the Historical Evolution of the Welsh Language: Linguistic Influences, Changes, and Key Milestones

The Welsh language, a member of the Brythonic branch of the Celtic language family, has a recorded history stretching back well over a thousand years. It evolved from the Common Brittonic tongue of the Iron Age and Roman Britain into the modern language that can be heard throughout Wales today. Over its history, Welsh has absorbed influences from various languages - including Latin (due to Roman rule and later on the Christian church), Anglo-Norman (due to the invasions), English (due to the language developed because of the invasions and due to the proximity). Despite this, Welsh has undergone distinctive internal changes as well. Key literary and political events, such as the codification of native laws, the presence of medieval Welsh literature (mostly due to Poets, or Bards), the translation of the Bible,¹ the various cultural revival efforts of the 18th and 19th centuries, including the efforts to revive Druidic movements and most importantly, the modern day legislations, made to reinforce the Welsh language and improve its presence within Wales. All of these had various levels of impact on the language.

This work will focus on tracing Welsh through history, as well as its chronological stages (Proto-Welsh, Old Welsh, Middle Welsh, Early Modern and The Revival period). It will highlight how external contacts and internal reforms have shaped the structure, use and status.

To begin with, Welsh originated from Common Brittonic, the Celtic language spoken by the Britons across much of Great Britain during the Iron Age and Roman periods.² Modern Welsh as well as Cornish and Breton all developed from the ancestral 'Brythonic' speech. Common Brittonic was spoken from about the 6th century BC through the 6th century AD, after which it began to split into different, separate languages.³ By the early medieval period the speech of the Southwest parts of Britain had already diverted into early Welsh in Wales and other languages in Cornwall and the Continent.

During the Roman occupation of Britain (c. 43 AD - 410 AD), Latin left a mark on the Brittonic vocabulary, providing words for new concepts and institutions (the examples would include *eglwys* for church, originating in Latin *ecclesia*,⁴ *Pont* for bridge, from *pons*, etc.) Latin literature and tradition also influenced the language of the post-Roman age. After the Romans withdrew, the Brittonic-speaking people met the Anglo-Saxon migrations in the Eastern parts of Britain. From the 6th century AD onward, Welsh gradually differentiated itself phonologically (for example, through systematic loss of certain syllables) and lexically from its Brittonic cousins.⁵

¹ National Library of Wales, *1588 Welsh Bible*, <<https://www.library.wales/discover-learn/digital-exhibitions/printed-material/1588-welsh-bible>> [Accessed 13/08/2025].

² Thomas Mackay, *What Is Brythonic? Is It Britain's Native Language? Ancient Celtic Tongue Explained*, 2023, <<https://www.scotsman.com/heritage-and-retro/heritage/brythonic-language-of-britain-explained-4147943>> [Accessed 13/08/2025].

³ David Willis, *Old And Middle Welsh*, <davidwillis.net/old_and_middle_welsh.pdf>. p.1

⁴ Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru, <<https://www.welsh-dictionary.ac.uk/gpc/gpc.html>> [Accessed 13/08/2025].

⁵ David Willis, *Old And Middle Welsh*. p.1

The earliest two centuries of Primitive or 'Archaic' Welsh (6th to eight centuries) leave no continuous texts, making it impossible to strictly base opinions about it on literary evidence as such. However, records of it remain.⁶

Old Welsh can usually be dated from the middle of eight century to the middle of the twelfth century., Its earliest surviving examples include the Tywyn Stone inscription (dated between the eight and ninth centuries) and the Surexit Memorandum added to the Latin Book of St Chad (9th century). There also exists mentions of Old Welsh in Latin manuscripts, the glasses. These are crucial as they provide information on the early stage of the language in a context, even if limited.⁷

It is very hard to reconstruct the Old Welsh to provide the precise Welsh morphology and syntax. Because there is so little of the primary source material. That being said, the Old Welsh period is known for its distinctive form which would later on change during the period of Middle and later versions of Welsh.⁸

The Middle Welsh refers to the form of the language found in texts of the Middle Ages, roughly the 12th and 14th centuries. This period is much better documented than the previous one. Nearly all the surviving manuscripts of the Welsh prose tales (the Mabinogion) are in Middle Welsh, as are the chronicles, poetry collections and legal documents. The surviving Welsh law manuscripts (such as the White Book of Rhydderch, Red Book of Hergest, and so on) are also in Middle Welsh.

This was also an important age of Welsh literature. The bards or poets, composed poetry in strict meter (cyghanedd) upon request of their employers, if they may be called that. It was also the period in which a lot of prose was composed compared to the previous period (Ystorya Brown de Hamtwn, Dares Phrygius).⁹ The vocabulary was then expanded upon through borrowings and orthography began to stabilise. By the 13th century a somewhat stable, standard literary form was developed. The grammar was full of inflections, even if set, and simplifications continued. The Middle Welsh also contained more mutation rules (the initial consonant of a word changing in accordance with the context), as can be seen in later forms of Welsh.

This is also the period influenced by the French language due to the Norman Conquest of the 11th century. In addition to the French influence on the language, the Church, with its Latin rites continued to influence the language.

The Early Modern Welsh, dated between the 15th and 17th centuries includes the Tudor rule and Wales being brought, formally, under the English rule. In that period, Welsh was still a language of the Welsh, especially in the countryside. Regarding the poetry, Dafydd ap Gwilym wrote his work, mixing older and newer forms. His works show how the language was evolving. By the 16th century, the Welsh scholarship became more widespread. It is also a period in which the Parliament passed an Act, ordering both the Bible and Prayer Book to be translated into Welsh.¹⁰ Therefore 1563 was a crucial year with its own influence on the development on the language. Nevertheless, it was not due to the translation itself, as that did not happen, despite the Act, a translation of the New Testament did happen in 1567,

⁶ Ibid. p.1

⁷ Ibid. pp.1-2

⁸ Ibid. Pp. 2, 19-22

⁹ Ibid. pp.2

¹⁰ National Library of Wales, *1588 Welsh Bible*.

just as the translation of the Prayer Book did.¹¹ Both were done by William Salisbury and showcase many flaws, archaisms and idiosyncratic orthography.¹²

It was in 1588 that a complete translation of the Bible appeared, done by William Morgan. It took him 10 years to complete. The 1620 brought a revision of said Bible with appropriate corrections. It remained in use until the end of the 20th century and:

No other book has been as influential for it is also a work of immense linguistic and literary significance. The translator not only produced a version of unfailing accuracy but also skillfully moulded the classical language of the poets into literary Welsh known to us today.¹³

It was also a period of heavy linguistic development with many publications, often bilingually Latin being released. Many English loanwords entered at this time, especially religious and political terms (including *cynulliad* for assembly and *enant* for enough) The Acts of Union (1536 and 1542) passed by Henry VIII, forbade Welsh in courts, making English the official language.¹⁴ The Church's influence, contrary to the previous latinisation of the language, or rather its influence on it, this time helped keep the language alive, in no small part thanks to the Welsh version of the Bible. By the 1600s Welsh speakers were to some degree bilingual due to necessity.

The 18th and 19th centuries provided a period of decline and cultural revival. The industrial Revolution and change within the society created challenges as well as brought on a transformation for Welsh. Welsh language declined in everyday use in many areas, even as its cultural profile grew.¹⁵ The growth of industry and coal mining in South Wales brought large numbers of English speaking workers. The immigration, together with English schools, meant that Welsh continued to decline, while the use of English rose.¹⁶ The 'Blue Book' education reports of 1847 reflect the change. The British felt threatened by the language spoken by the Welsh, as it did not fit their idea of Imperial power.¹⁷

Despite this, the 18th and 19th centuries were also the time of Welsh cultural Revival, including the Druidic revival as an expression of nationalist ideology. The rise of non-Conformism was particularly important for Welsh as the language and the Welshment. '[...] The existence of vernacular Sunday Schools is often given much of the credit for the relative strength of Welsh over the other Celtic languages [...]'.¹⁸ This once again shows the connection between the religious influence and the Welsh language. Even though, in this case, it was not 'The Church'.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Jeff Wallenfeldt, *Acts Of Union, Uniting The United Kingdom*, Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2025, <<https://www.britannica.com/story/acts-of-union-uniting-the-united-kingdom>> [Accessed 13/08/2025].

¹⁵ Matthew Jones, *On Nineteenth-Century Welsh Literacies, And The 'Blue Book' Education Reports of 1847*,

<https://branchcollective.org/?ps_articles=matthew-jones-on-nineteenth-century-welsh-literacies-and-the-blue-book-education-reports-of-1847> [Accessed 13/08/2025].

¹⁶ Matthew Jones, *On Nineteenth-Century Welsh Literacies, And The 'Blue Book' Education Reports of 1847*.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Geraint Jones, *History And Status Of The Welsh Language*, 1995, <www.cs.ox.ac.uk/people/geraint.jones/rhydychen.org/about.welsh/> [Accessed 13/08/2025].

As mentioned previously, the Druidic revival plays a crucial role in this period. The National Eisteddfod, started and continued as an annual national event which helped the language stay alive and develop further.¹⁹ By ‘claiming descent’,²⁰ From bardic traditions, the Eisteddfod encouraged people to embrace their language by creating a competition around it. The Eisteddfod is still ongoing, in August of each year, alternating its location and bringing forth not only aspiring and accomplished poets, but also those that wish to experience this unique event.²¹

Regarding the decline of the Welsh speakers, only, on average, half of Wales spoke Welsh only.²²

It was also a period in which many notable figures wrote in Welsh, including William Williams Pantycelyn and William Griffith. But English continued to dominate commerce, law and education.²³

The 20th century onwards marks the period of the Modern Revival. It brought many positive things, such as official recognition and prestige that Welsh did not have before. Welsh became more integrated into education. The creation of University of Wales and Welsh medium schools were both a major step in the right direction. In 1962, motivated by a broadcast speech by Saunders Lewis, *Cymdeithas y Iaith Gymraeg* (The Welsh Language Society) was created to fight for the language rights.²⁴ This group famously organised peaceful protests to demand legal reforms. One of the outcomes was the Welsh Language Act of 1967, which permitted the use of Welsh in official settings, such as courts and legal documents. The Act reversed the prohibitions imposed in 1536 and was one of the most crucial milestones for the language itself since that time. This was further then supported in 1993, when a revision of the Act came into place, providing it with the much needed status of that equal to English. This in turn led, in a way, to the creation of the Welsh Sinds in 1999, which provided Wales with its own legislative body, further cementing its bilingual status. This in turn led to the creation of the Welsh Language Commissioner’s office and set standards for ensuring that Welsh was treated equally to English when it came to public services. These were also included in a later revision from 2011.²⁵

Following the legislative changes, media and education transformed Welsh usage. The ‘Welsh not’ was no longer in use, the BBC opened its first Welsh-medium radio station and later on S4C TV channel was launched. Welsh medium education expanded further in the 1980s. Even though the data does not look as well as it did even in the period when the Blue Book was written, the efforts made currently continue to steadily increase the amount of Welsh speakers. In addition, UNESCO now classifies Welsh as the most secure of the surviving Celtic Languages.²⁶ The modern revival period shows clearly how important the

¹⁹ Geraint Jones, *History And Status Of The Welsh Language*.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Eisteddfod, *Croeso*, <<https://eisteddfod.wales/>> [Accessed 13/08/2025].

²² Matthew Jones, *On Nineteenth-Century Welsh Literacies, And The ‘Blue Book’ Education Reports of 1847*.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Geraint Jones, *History And Status Of The Welsh Language*.

²⁵ Law.Wales, *Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011*, 2011, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/mwa/2011/1/pdfs/mwa_20110001_en.pdf> [Accessed 13/08/2025].

²⁶ Danuta Stanulewicz, Andrzej M. Skrzypiec, Is Welsh an Endangered Language?, *Repozytorium UKW*,

language is and the efforts made, the policies implemented and the bilingual services provided by the public institutions (such as universities and local administrations, not to mention the road signs), even if not actively influencing the increase in the Welsh speaker numbers, passively safeguard the language.

From its beginnings as part of the ancient Brittonic tongue, the Welsh language underwent a significant evolution. In its Proto-Welsh stage it inherited Celtic sound patterns that are still visible today, whilst maintaining a sub identity of its own language belonging to p-Celtic group. Old and Middle Welsh provide a reflection, even if in the case of Old Welsh the sources are scarce and nearly non-existent, of a growth and change, its development into a medieval medium of not only stories, but also laws, showcasing its unique grammatical forms.²⁷ The Early Modern period brought the standardisations of forms with William Morgan's translation of the Bible, which created a cornerstone for modern Welsh. The 18th and 19th centuries, despite the revival efforts, including the Eisteddfod, were quite a turbulent era, as proven by the 'Blue Book' discussed earlier. The industrialisation fuelled the necessity for understanding and due to migrations and need for workers, increased the status of English language over Welsh. Thankfully, the religious movements kept it alive. Ultimately it was the 20th century that brought the majority of the change, for the better, as the legal aspects of the language were created, providing not only a safety net, but also a freedom of expression for those that wished to use the language as it was intended. In summary, the Welsh language's history directly reflects the struggles and resilience of Welsh people. It has absorbed external influences (English, French, Latin) while staying true to its Celtic roots. Each milestone, the Laws of Hywel Dda, the Mabinogion, the translation of the Bible, Eisteddfod and the legislations that came centuries later, shaped Welsh into the language we know now. Interestingly, based on the evidence, we could say that the faith and desire for art had the most influence on the language, portraying Welsh people as spiritual, deeply national and appreciative of their mother tongue. It is thanks to those combined aspects, that centuries of oppression and suppression were unable to eradicate Welsh, as was the case with other Celtic languages (in example Cornish). On the other hand, maybe it was exactly that, which kept the language alive, as oppression often creates a resistance, especially a national oppression and language is an expression of national identity. From this perspective, the English oppression could have been one of the key influences on the Welsh language, both positive and negative. Ultimately, the Welsh language has survived through many changes and influences, borrowing what was needed to survive and rejecting what did not fit.

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²⁷ National Library of Wales, Laws of Hywel Dda,

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