

Research Methods

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The purpose of this independent project is to create a distinct visual response to the *Mabinogion* in the context of Welsh culture and heritage. I would also highlight that this is an interpretivist study, focusing on the meanings that humans attach to actions (O'Reilly, 2009) in order to give some structure to the largely qualitative data that I expect to receive in response to a tailored survey.

It is important to stress that human connections, and particularly those relating to our culture or heritage, are deeply individual by design and therefore cannot be compiled into data for fear of losing that which makes them distinct. For this reason, I am using a mixed-method approach by utilising a survey in two parts: the first section relates to gathering data on the individual, such as age and which region of Wales they are/were based in, and the second section focuses on their response to images that were selected for their connection to Welsh mythology.

Exploring this further, I had established a rough hypothesis based around regional influence on people's exposure to Welsh mythology. I believed that due to the mythology being intrinsically tied to the land itself, rather than the people, that we would see a correlation between those based in the South West and North regions of Wales, seeing increased exposure to the *Mabinogion* or other Welsh myths. With the prevalence of folklore and local legends in Pembrokeshire and the Gower in particular, I felt this would lead to a natural prevalence of knowledge in those areas. It was the hope that the quantitative data gathered from the survey would help me to disprove or solidify this hypothesis and justify my decision to primarily research folklore in these areas.

My findings from the survey ultimately supported this theory – 78% of those taking the survey declared themselves as being from or based in the South West Wales region which contains both the Pembrokeshire and the Gower regions, leading to around 57% of people answering 'yes' when asked whether they had heard of the *Mabinogion*. This is not an exact 1:1 ratio, with variables affecting the outcome such as whether they were native to the area, taught in Welsh-medium or English-medium schools, or the resources available to them when it came to learning about their local area and its history. However, I believe it is enough to say that myth feels rooted within the land that people live in and strengthens my choice to visit and photograph specific sites for inspiration regarding the design aspects of this project.

The second half of my survey consisted of an image response section wherein I chose a range of seven images that either depicted scenes of the *Mabinogion*, or were of places that are linked to



Welsh folklore and mythology. The goal for this image response section was to build up a pool of key words or emotions that people associated with these images, and therefore with certain aspects of Welsh mythology. By doing this, I would be building up an important part of my design process, which is establishing themes and important keywords – these themes and keywords will guide my work into a specific aesthetic or establish a certain mood. My hope in doing this, was to receive a solid and tangible sense of themes and ideas that people associated with the *Mabinogion*; so when I attached those same themes to my work, it would have a distinct and established connection to the mythology.

Above is the selection of images I used, covering a range of figures, places, and environments. Participants were asked to record their initial response to these images, which could be anything from a single word or phrase to a more extensive description, poems, songs, or anything that the depiction may have reminded them of. The goal here was to build up a bank of key words and themes that stood out, as I mentioned earlier, to guide my design process meaningfully.

Using Microsoft Forms as my survey platform, I was able to generate a visual map of common thoughts or responses to each of these images which proved extremely helpful when it came to looking closely at the results.



As you can see from these word clouds, each image elicited enough of a distinct response to highlight a few key words that appeared in several individual answers. When I move into my conceptualising and mood boarding stages, I will start to bear these words in mind to ensure that I am gathering references and materials that will best enable me to highlight these themes and moods. The ideal outcome from doing this survey is to be able to design and create a set of stained-glass windows that best reflect thoughts and feelings related to the Four Branches of the *Mabinogi*, as evidenced by these word clouds.

Building a Visual - Stained Glass

The reasoning behind using stained glass – or a mimic – as a central focus of my design is twofold. Firstly, I wanted to have a medium that bridged the gap between medieval design and a more modernist approach, and stained glass fits that perfectly. Its origins sit somewhere in the 7th century, popularised by Romans, and reached a peak between 1150 and 1500 (Department of Medieval Art 2001) after which point a combination of emerging religions, conflicts, and diminishing resources saw a steady decline in the production of the art. Several revivals have occurred since, particularly the Gothic Revival which occurred across Britain, Italy, France, and Germany across the 1800s, though my interest and primary motivation for using stained glass is due to the significance of my hometown, Swansea, being the first place in Wales where stained glass was produced in significant quantities.

The second reason is that I personally think stained glass is a beautiful artform, and if churches, abbeys, and castles are the bones of history in Wales, I feel it is only fair to say that the coloured glass is embedded within that very skeleton. It feels intrinsic to the many retellings of myth and legend, whether they include holy saints or unlikely heroes of the past – they are made to hold such stories, and for this project in particular it demands a simple depiction of a story like the *Mabinogion*, which defies most other means of translation. With a limited space and colour palette that restricts you to a very two-dimensional portrayal, it is a fun and rewarding challenge that will really push my understanding of colour and symbolism in order to design something that does justice to the story, but also holds its own as a visual portrayal of myth and legend.

My inspiration began by looking into pieces of stained glasswork with some connection to the *Mabinogion* or Welsh legends.



The Mabinogion Oak (c) Bill Bleasdale @ Great Oak Glass

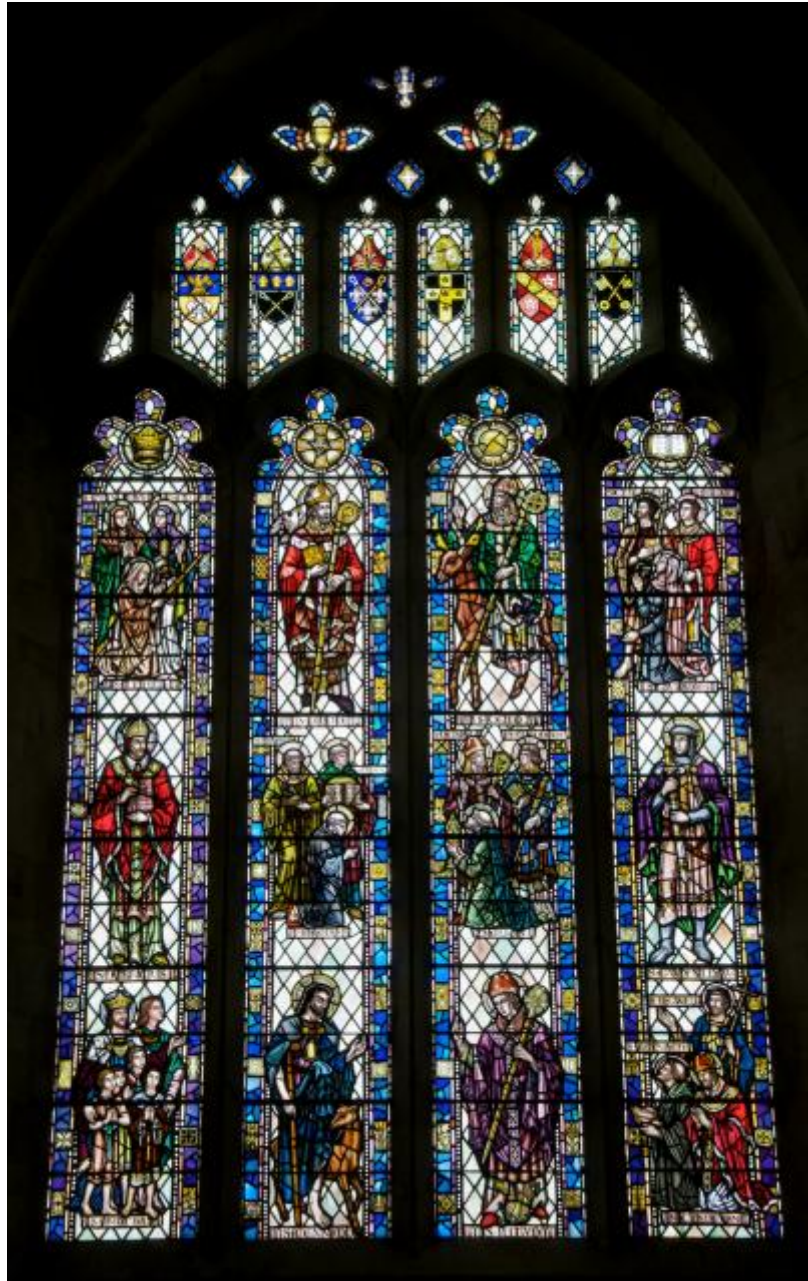
This is one of the first pieces I came across, depicting the great oak of the Otherworld that Peredur sees on one of his many journeys. The tree is split between fire and flame on one side and the usual green branches of the oak on the other. I really like this use of colour, it is bold and distinctive, and you can clearly see the shape of the image it is trying to portray, which I appreciate, as I have found that some glasswork can be too 'busy' and detract from the overall composition.



From 'Imaging the Bible in Wales' by Martin Crampin. Glasswork designed by Charles Edward Tute in 1897.

This is an older glasswork piece from the Church of St Llonio in Powys. It depicts scenes from early Christian history which interestingly includes a depiction of Caractacus – often said to be the basis for Caradog, son of Brân, who features in the Second Branch – and Bendigeidfran, otherwise known as Brân.

While far less colourful than the other pieces I have looked at, I chose to include this because it is a more classic style with deep roots in biblical art – a theme which many depictions of Welsh legends tend to dip into, thus further blurring the lines between history and myth. I also really like the clean lines of these windows, it gives them a clear structure which is pleasing to the eye and makes the scene easy to decipher as you travel up or down the window. I want to try and emulate this in my own work when I piece my designs together, as I feel this is a really strong visual.



Welsh Saints - by Celtic Studios.

This window, from the Church of St Gabriel in Brynmill, Swansea, was commissioned in 1949 and the work was carried out by the Swansea glasswork firm, Celtic Studios. The piece being local to my hometown was the primary reason for including this, as it ties into the notion of myths and legends being connected to the land – and in this case, in the buildings upon it. I really love the distinct nature of each of the saints depicted here, and the coat of arms that decorate the top window. The colours are vivid and easy to identify, and although there is a lot of detail present in the work, I do not feel that it is too busy or overwhelming at all.

Through my research into Celtic Studios, I found myself inspired by the work of John Edwards, a glass-painter who had joined the Studios in 1954. It marked a changing style in the Studios, with artists being to utilize small pieces of glass and heavy leading to create the impression of a mosaic.



Annunciation, St Mary's, Seven Sisters,
John Edwards, 1959 (detail)