

History of Welsh

Hanes y Gymraeg

Introduction

The Welsh language is considered one of the oldest living European languages and stands in the modern world as a symbol of Welsh national identity and a marker of the resilience of the people of Wales, through Roman, Anglo-Saxon and Norman occupation. Welsh is one of the six modern Celtic languages, standing as the most widely spoken, at around five hundred thousand to nine hundred thousand speakers globally. Welsh sits as a member of the Brittonic (or Brythonic) branch of the wider Insular Celtic family. This essay will outline the historical development of Welsh, looking at its closest relatives, origins and the factors that have shaped both its decline and revitalisation.

Celtic Britain and Ireland

Scholars generally concur that the Celtic languages have had a presence in Britain and Ireland after 600 BCE; however, the Irish historian Myles Dillon argued that a Celtic speaking presence may have emerged earlier at around 2000 BCE.¹ The language of the early Britons closely resembled the language of Gaul, and they can be considered as dialects of a single continuum, which have been given the name of Gallo-Brittonic. Another sub-family of Celtic languages took root in Ireland known as Goidelic, the group to which modern Irish, Scots Gaelic and Manx belong.² In the Goidelic branch and Celtiberian,³ the *kw* sound of Indo-European was retained giving the group the classification of Q-Celtic. However, in Gallo-Brittonic there was a shift from the *kw* sound to a *p*, providing the distinction of P-Celtic for Gaulish, and the modern Brittonic languages. This shift is reflected in the modern Welsh word 'mab' meaning son, and the Goidelic counterpart 'mac' also meaning son.

Early, Old and Middle Welsh

Welsh emerges as an identifiable language around the seventh century to the mid-12th century. The remnants left by Early Welsh are limited to inscriptions, poetry and manuscript glosses.⁴ The era of Old Welsh is believed to begin in the middle of the ninth century, there is a scarcity in evidence from this stage. A marginal text in an eighth century gospel book, known as the Surrexit memorandum, is frequently given the status as the earliest Welsh-language text. The text describes an account of a settlement of a land dispute. Another early text is contained in marginal notes on the Juvenius manuscript, containing two series of three-line poems written in about 880 CE.⁵ By the second half of the twelfth century Old Welsh has developed to Middle Welsh, the oldest example being the Black Book of Carmarthen, dated to around 1200 CE.⁶

Features of the Welsh language

Welsh is written in the Latin script like many European languages such as English, however it has a unique alphabet with twenty-eight, or twenty-nine letters including seven vowels. The language benefits from being largely phonetic, where words are consistently said how they are spelt.⁷ Notable letters in the Welsh alphabet are the eight double letters: *ch*, *dd*, *ff*, *ng*, *ll*, *ph*, *rh*, and *th*. Welsh also lacks the letters *k*, *q*, *v*, *x*, *z* and sometimes *j*, as it is featured in some dialectal terms and loan words such as *garej* meaning garage. A distinctive feature of

¹ Janet Davies, *Welsh Language - a History*. (University Of Wales Press, 2014), (p. 6) <https://research-ebsco-com.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/c/onvpsy/ebook-viewer/pdf/d4uuzcscn5/page/pp_Cover?location=https%25253A%25252F%25252Fresearch-ebsco-com.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org%25252F%25252Fonvpsy%25252Fsearch%25252Fdetails%25252Fd4uuzcscn5%25253Frequest-context%25253Dplink%252526db%25253Dnlebk> [accessed 1 March 2026].

² Ibid.

³ BBC, 'BBC - Irish - Tionchar Na GCeilteach', www.bbc.co.uk, 2009 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/irish/articles/view/720/english/>>.

⁴ John Cannon, *A Dictionary of British History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁵ Janet Davies, *Welsh Language - a History*. (University Of Wales Press, 2014), (p.179) <https://research-ebsco-com.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/c/onvpsy/ebook-viewer/pdf/d4uuzcscn5/page/pp_Cover?location=https%25253A%25252F%25252Fresearch-ebsco-com.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org%25252F%25252Fonvpsy%25252Fsearch%25252Fdetails%25252Fd4uuzcscn5%25253Frequest-context%25253Dplink%252526db%25253Dnlebk> [accessed 1 March 2026].

⁶ Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain: A Chronological Survey of the Brittonic Languages, 1st to 12th C. AD*. (Edinburgh University Press., 1953) (p.6) <https://contentstore-cla-co-uk.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/EReader/Index?guid=4172508a-3320-ec11-ae72-a04a5e5d2f8d&pcid=3706114&t=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJqdGkiOiJmZDZlZmJlNC01ZTc2LTQ0NmYtOTY1NS05NGI3MzNhNTImZDIiLCJub3R5IjoiE3NzMWODYyNDQsImV4cCI6MTc3MzA4NjU0NCwiaWF0IjoxNzczMDg2MjQ0LjJpc3MiOiJlEQ1MiLCJhdWQiOiJlS2ZWFkZXIifQ.G17w5T_o0XUIDeajM3j7hhuyBeRn2L3LPeylO1pG0g&b=False> [accessed 1 March 2026].

⁷ Janet Davies, *Welsh Language - a History*. (University Of Wales Press, 2014) (p.179) <https://research-ebsco-com.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/c/onvpsy/ebook-viewer/pdf/d4uuzcscn5/page/pp_Cover?location=https%25253A%25252F%25252Fresearch-ebsco-com.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org%25252F%25252Fonvpsy%25252Fsearch%25252Fdetails%25252Fd4uuzcscn5%25253Frequest-context%25253Dplink%252526db%25253Dnlebk> [accessed 1 March 2026].

Welsh and other Celtic languages is that of initial mutations. These cause the initial consonants of some words to shift. There are 3 types of mutation in Welsh: soft, nasal and aspirate. The origin of initial mutation has been suggested to be ‘[...] the result of a fusion of the Celtic languages with the languages spoken by the pre-Celtic inhabitants of Britain and Ireland.’⁸ Welsh nouns and some adjectives have two grammatical genders and lacks a neutral ‘it’ instead using the words for he (e/fe) and she (hi). Another layer of complexity comes with some adjectives having a plural form. The gender of a noun can also impact when a mutation is triggered. The gender of a noun can trigger a mutation, such as a feminine noun following a definitive article. For example, the Welsh word *cath* (meaning cat) will softly mutate when saying, *y gath* (the cat).⁹

Cornish and Breton

Cornish is a Brittonic language that was reported to have gone extinct in the late 17th century, with the death of Dolly Pentreath in 1777, the supposed last fluent speaker of Cornish. Although, evidence indicates that Cornish continued to be used during the 19th century by the working class and those who wished to uphold the language.¹⁰ The decline of Cornish may be linked to thee ‘[...] clerical imposition of English [...]’¹¹ and to population decline following wars and uprisings during the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries. These uprising hindered the survival of Cornish texts, for example, during the 1549 Prayer Book Rebellion, ‘mass books of the old superstitious service’ were ordered to be destroyed. These texts most likely included Cornish translations.¹² The ‘end’ of Cornish was well known at the time, inspiring the early revivalists. Edward Lhuyd reconstructed basic Cornish grammar from remaining manuscripts. The Cornish revival was spearheaded by Henry Jenner, who had left behind his study of Cornish in the 1870s due to the absence of interest. Jenner was motivated to return by the late nineteenth and earliest twentieth century ‘Celtic Renaissance’ by those that desired learning materials.¹³

Cornish and Breton are observed to agree with each other in places where they diverge from Welsh. It is evident that whilst Breton and Welsh are not mutually intelligible, Cornish and Breton speakers could potentially understand each other. This close relationship is due to the mass emigration from those in Cornwall, Devon, and potentially those from other areas of southwestern Britain to Brittany.¹⁴ The Breton language in recent centuries has continued to decline but the number of works published in the language per year has remained stable and even appears to be rising.¹⁵ In the 19th century a development of the ‘Bretonist Movement’ saw the creation of literature presenting ‘[...] an idealised vision of Brittany [...]’ written in French or bilingually in French and Breton.¹⁶ Many of these works were not intended for the Breton speaking population and were in fact inaccessible to a lot of them. In the following century between the 1920s and 1950s major social and economic changes in Brittany led to the language declining in even more rural areas.¹⁷ Eventually the introduction of Breton language teaching in the 1980s and 1990s a small population of speakers learnt to read and write in the language.¹⁸

Decline and Regrowth

Following the Roman period, Welsh maintained a ‘[...] full range of functions in medieval Wales up until the English conquest of 1282-83[...]’.¹⁹ English rule over Wales, introduced English as the language used for administrative and legal purposes. The Act of 1536 stated that English was the language of the courts of Wales,

⁸ Ibid. (p. 180)

⁹ Ibid. (pp. 181-182)

¹⁰ Kerri Madden, 'Cornish Continued to Be Used throughout the 19th Century – Long after the Death of Dolly Pentreath - New Book Shows', *University of Exeter News*, 2025 <<https://news.exeter.ac.uk/faculty-of-humanities-arts-and-social-sciences/cornish-continued-to-be-used-throughout-the-19th-century-long-after-the-death-of-dolly-pentreath-new-book-shows/>> [accessed 4 March 2026].

¹¹ *Language in Britain and Ireland*, ed. by Susan Fox (Cambridge University Press, 2024) (pp. 358-359) <<https://www.cambridge.org/9781108849630#description>> [accessed 1 March 2026].

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid. (p. 359)

¹⁴ Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain: A Chronological Survey of the Brittonic Languages, 1st to 12th C. AD.* (Edinburgh University Press., 1953) (p.12) <

¹⁵ Mannaig Thomas, '100 Years of Literature in the Breton Language (1920-2020)', *Studia Celto-Slavica*, 13 (2023), 101–16 <https://doi.org/10.54586/tvkn4289> [accessed 28 February 2025].

¹⁶ Ibid.

17 Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ *Language in Britain and Ireland*, ed. by Susan Fox (Cambridge University Press, 2024) (p.333)
<https://www.cambridge.org/gb/universitypress/subjects/languages-linguistics/sociolinguistics/language-britain-and-ireland-3rd-edition?format=AR&isbn=9781108849630#description> [accessed 1 March 2026].

and anyone using Welsh should not hold public office.²⁰ Despite this in 1801, 90 percent of the Welsh population could still speak Welsh, with 70 percent being monolingual Welsh speakers.

The 1800s brought with it an influx of migration from England and Ireland, introducing a large amount of non-Welsh speakers into the north-east and south-east of Wales.²¹ From the mid-nineteenth century, the British state took hold of education, and ‘[...] pursued a policy of linguistic eradication via an English-medium education system.’²² The consequences of these legal actions are clear, in 1871 it is estimated the percentage of Welsh speakers in Wales dropped to 66.2 percent, around 934,530 people. Later in the 1901 census the Welsh speaking population again dropped to 49.9 percent, about 930,000 people. Even with the decrease in proportion, the absolute number of Welsh speakers appeared to have remained stable.

In the twentieth century, however, the absolute number dropped Welsh began to decline. In the 1981 census it showed 504,000 people were Welsh speakers, 18.9% of the population.²³ In the 1960s and 1970s campaigns steered to the reversal of the policies suppressing the Welsh language and introduced a network of Welsh-medium schools. The introduction of Welsh-medium schooling has helped more young people to speak the language. As a result of the introduction of Welsh-medium education, the numbers of Welsh speakers have stabilised since the 1980s. With surveys suggesting there were between 538,300 Welsh speaker, 17.8% of the Welsh population, and 892,000, 29.5%.²⁴ The Welsh government now aims to reach one million Welsh speakers living in Wales by 2050. The history of Welsh since the Acts of Union reflect a shift from suppression to stabilisation, through modern revitalisation efforts.

Conclusion

The history of the Welsh language and its closest relatives reflect the narrative of their shared hardships through the last two millennia. The shared relationship between Welsh, Cornish and Breton highlight the migration of the Brittonic languages; from the Gallo-Brittonic shared between the people of Gaul and the Britons, to Common Brittonic diverging over time into their modern-day counterparts. Through the decline in Welsh speaker beginning in the medieval period, driven by political conquest, legal suppression and later industrialisation, marked the danger posed to the Welsh language. However, through resilience, modern day activism and policy change, Welsh has survived and is growing to its former glory. As the Welsh Government has set a target for one million speakers by 2050, the continued growth of Welsh is ever-present. The history of the Welsh language demonstrates the challenges faced by minoritised languages and the possibilities of revitalisation.

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²⁰ Janet Davies, *Welsh Language - a History*. (University Of Wales Press, 2014) (pp. 33-34) <https://research-ebsco-com.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/c/onvpsy/ebook-viewer/pdf/d4uuzcscn5/page/pp_Cover?location=https%25253A%25252F%25252Fresearch-ebsco-com.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org%25252Fc%25252Fonvpsy%25252Fsearch%25252Fdetails%25252Fd4uuzcscn5%25253Frequest-context%25253Dplink%252526db%25253Dnlebk> [accessed 1 March 2026].

²¹ *Language in Britain and Ireland*, ed. by Susan Fox (Cambridge University Press, 2024) (p.333)
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²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

