

Chapter One

Early Eisteddfodau

The National Eisteddfod of Wales is a cultural festival held during the first week of August every year which alternates between north and south Wales.

What does the noun *eisteddfod* originate from?

It is derived from the verb *eistedd* 'to sit' and literally means a 'sitting together', a session (probably competitive from its beginning) of bards and minstrels intent on exercising and advancing their crafts in the presence of a distinguished patron.¹

The first ever event which resembled an eisteddfod took place at Cardigan Castle under the auspices of Lord Rhys ap Gruffydd in 1176.



Lord Rhys



Cardigan Castle

This was mentioned in an old manuscript *Brut y Tywysogion* (The Chronicle of the Princes). A year prior to this festival, Lord Rhys had proclaimed that it would take place, and he had invited bards and minstrels from all over Wales to compete. This tradition still takes place today. There were two contests: one was between the poets and the other was between the harpists and other musicians. The winner of each contest received a chair.

The next three hundred years would increasingly see many poets who wrote poor quality poetry (doggerel). In an effort to increase the quality of entries in eisteddfodau and ensure that only reputable poets took part, a system of granting licences was introduced at the Carmarthen eisteddfod of 1451. This eisteddfod would be the beginning of standardisation and increasing strict

patterns of poetry. These would develop into the complex rules that still determine the award of the Chair at the National Eisteddfod today.

Two further eisteddfodau were held at Caerwys, Flintshire in the 1500s. Continuing the move towards professionalization began in Carmarthen over seventy years earlier, the eisteddfod at Caerwys in 1523 once again they attempted to prevent amateur bards competing. They resolved that licences/degrees would be awarded to poets and musicians according to their status. Further qualifications would be accorded on the basis that these professional poets who celebrated the Welsh nobility. These regulations were confirmed at a further eisteddfod there in 1567.

In the period from the Act of Union of 1536 to 1780 the Welsh nobility cast off the Welsh language and predominantly used English in all settings. With little or no patronage during this period there were no eisteddfodau for almost two hundred and fifty years and the quality of Welsh poetry degenerated considerably.

This hiatus could have meant the end of eisteddfodau but however they re-appeared in a most unexpected place. They would reappear London, instigated by a strange man but more of him later.

Welsh societies were established by fashionable Welshmen in London: The *Cymmrodorion* (1751), *Gwyneddigion* (1770) and *Cymreigyddion* (1794). Rescuing the eisteddfod from obscurity, they decreed that eisteddfod would be proclaimed a year in advance. Bards would compete under a *nom de plumes*, the successful bard would be chaired and the chair would hold that office throughout the festival week, a rules that still apply to this day.

The strange man who would resuscitate the eisteddfod was a self-educated stonemason, a clever forger and faker from Cowbridge in Glamorgan- Edward Williams, *Iolo Morganwg* (1747–1826). 'Iolo' invented the "Gorsedd of the Bards of the Isle of Britain," a society of patriotic and literary people dedicated to furthering the language, literature and honour of the Welsh language. The basis of the rituals and "antiquity" of the Gorsedd. He claimed were the "secrets" he had received from Edward Evan² (1716–98), a bard from Aberdare who was a minister of Hen Dŷ Cwrdd Unitarian Chapel at Trecynon, Aberdare. He was one of the best-known poets during the second half of the eighteenth century. Iolo claimed that Evan was the last of the old bards of Glamorgan

who had preserved “the learning of the druids from primitive times”. This was quite false.



Iolo Morganwg

Iolo went to London in 1791 and a year later he arranged the first Gorsedd of Bards which was held on Primrose Hill, London on 21st June 1792. He organised the occasion according to what he claimed were ancient druidic rites.



Iolo Morganwg memorial plaque on Primrose Hill, London

With the Napoleonic Wars raging and the authorities harbouring the suspicion that Iolo was a pacifist and banned him from holding any further ceremonies in London. Forced to confine his activities to Wales in 1795 he held an eisteddfod at Stalling Down, near Cowbridge, bards wore white ribbons to symbolise innocence, blue ribbons to symbolise truth and green symbolise the arts.³

In July 1819 at the Ivy Bush Hotel in Carmarthen, Iolo arranged a Gorsedd ceremony, the first time it had been associated with an eisteddfod.

As Geraint H. Jenkins describes it in his book about Iolo: A rattle skull genius says:

“It has rightly been depicted as a seminal event in the annals of the eisteddfod movement”.⁴

The regalia was minimal, with members simply wearing armbands of green, blue and white to denote the three orders of ovate, bard and druid. Nowadays they wear the same colours, but they don't wear these armbands but robes of these colours!

The stone circle was made using pebbles from Iolo's pockets! This would be a far cry from the majestic rocks used in today's Gorsedd circle.

A new ritual was introduced which is still used today; during the chairing ceremony, poets stand around the chaired bard who sheathes and unsheathes a sword above the victor's head.

The Gorsedd, despite being Iolo's invention, is still seen as the ceremonial arm of the festival and acknowledges publicly those who have given particular service to Wales and to the Welsh language.

Iolo hoped to raise the profile of the Wales and the Welsh language by linking them with ancient Druids and claimed that they were guardians of the Celtic tradition. He presented documentation and evidence in a bid to substantiate his claims. This deceit remained hidden till the early twentieth century when Professor Griffith John Williams ruthlessly exposed these forgeries but by then it was decided that the Gorsedd should remain a part of the Eisteddfod.

Some miscellaneous notes

The chair is awarded for the best long poem written in traditional cyghanedd. This ancient and complex form of Welsh language poetry entails the correlation of consonants and sounds in varying forms according to specific strict metre rules.

The crown, which was first awarded in 1867 is awarded to the composer of the best pryddest (poem) in free verse.

The Literary medal is awarded to the winner of the Prose competition.

Books about the National Eisteddfod

- Miles, Dillwyn, *The Royal National Eisteddfod of Wales*, Christopher Davies, 1977, 172pp. (This is an excellent, chronological history of the eisteddfod.)
- Edwards, Hywel Teifi, *The Eisteddfod*, University of Wales, Writers of Wales Series, 1990, 82pp. (An engaging and witty volume)
- Davies, Rhian, A. *Yr Eisteddfod Genedlaethol: The National Eisteddfod*, Gwasg Gomer, 2001, 24pp (A short bilingual introduction.)

Notes

¹ Edwards, Hywel Teifi, *The Eisteddfod* University of Wales Press, 1990, Writers of Wales series

² James Stewart has written a book about Edward Evan which he hopes will be published soon.

³ *The Cambridge History of Welsh Literature*, Chapter 15: A romantic, Wales and the Eisteddfod, Cambridge University Press, 2019, pp.285-305

⁴ Jenkins, Geraint H. *Iolo, A rattle skull genius: the many faces of Iolo Morganwg*, University of Wales Press, 2009, page 291.