

From Provincial to National | Welsh Eisteddfod History

Introduction |

'Picture Bank' resources provide a set of images focused on a particular theme or subject.

This 'Picture Bank' provides a set of images that highlight certain aspects of eisteddfodau in Wales and the history of the National Eisteddfod.

Within these guidance notes you will find background information on the theme, interpretation of the images, possible learning outcomes and details on further reading and web resources.

The resource is downloadable and does not have a specific age or progression step in mind. We would encourage users to read through the notes and edit the resource to best suit their needs.

Background Information |

According to Professor Hywel Teifi Edwards, the word Eisteddfod means 'sitting-together.' The earliest form of the Eisteddfod was a competitive meeting between bards and minstrels, in which the winner was chosen by a noble or royal patron. Although the history of the Eisteddfod may trace back to a bardic competition held by the Lord Rhys in Cardigan Castle in 1176, the roots of the modern National Eisteddfod as we know it today lie in the latter part of the eighteenth century.

In 1789, Thomas Jones of Corwen, took a great interest in the little eisteddfodau then being held in the taverns. He asked the Gwyneddigion, a society of Welsh exiles in London, to sponsor an Eisteddfod in Wales. In September 1789, in Bala, the Gwyneddigion did sponsor an Eisteddfod, which was a precursor to the National Eisteddfod.

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After the Napoleonic wars ended, people took up their eisteddfodic interests once again. Prominent among them was a circle of clergymen who used to meet around Christmas time and the New Year, up in Kerry near Newtown, in the rectory there. It was in fact at Kerry in 1818, that people began to think seriously about reviving the eisteddfod movement and creating real, proper eisteddfodau.

The first of these eisteddfodau - the first provincial eisteddfod - was held the following year (1819) in Carmarthen. Iolo Morgannwg, creator of the Gorsedd of Bards, at the age of 70 travelled all that way to Carmarthen, with a pocketful of stone chippings, and there he traced the Gorsedd circle on the lawn. That would be the first appearance of the Gorsedd Beirdd Ynys Prydain (The Gorsedd of the Bards of the Island of Britain) at the Eisteddfod at the Ivy Bush Inn in Carmarthen in 1819, and its close association with the festival has remained. It is an association of poets, writers, musicians, artists and individuals who have made a significant and distinguished contribution to Welsh language, literature, and culture. Its members are known as Druids, and the colour of their costumes – white, blue or green – is indicative of their various ranks.

Momentum would continue to build as eisteddfodau would be held at Denbigh, Beaumaris, Cardiff and several at Abergavenny, sponsored by Lady Llanover.

By the time we reach the last provincial Abergavenny eisteddfodau in 1853, it's obvious that the Eisteddfod is on the threshold of a particularly exciting period.

By 1853, there were railways the length and breadth of Wales, and this made it possible to bring thousands of people from every part of Wales to the different venues where the eisteddfodau were held.

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In Denbigh, 1860, a national body was established, called The Eisteddfod. This body would have an Executive Committee called the Council, whose members would be elected. It was this body which went on to create an official National Eisteddfod, to be held in the North and the South in alternate years.

The first official National Eisteddfod was held in Aberdare in 1861.

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Images used and interpretation |

Slides 2-3 | These slides show Lord Rhys and Cardigan Castle. At Cardigan Castle, in 1176, Rhys held a competition similar to what would become the eisteddfod.

Stone effigy of Lord Rhys in Cathedral, St Davids The remains of Cardigan Castle, 1788

Slide 4 | A medal that was awarded to the best harpist at an Eisteddfod in Caerwys, 1567. This object shows how the eisteddfod traditional continued long after Lord Rhys, and how awarding medals as prizes is a traditional as old as the eisteddfod.

'Telyn Mostyn', prize for best harpist at the Eisteddfod in Caerwys, 1567

Slide 5 | Medal awarded to Walter Davies at the Bala Eisteddfod, 1789, a pivotal eisteddfod that would influence many to come. The runner-up was so angry that they did not win the medal he challenged Walter Davies to a duel. Thankfully a sword or gun duel was avoided.

Silver medal of the Gwyneddigion Society, London, Bala, 1789

Slide 6 | There is a lack of early visual records of eisteddfodau in Wales, which makes this image from Powys very rare. The harpist is Henry Humphreys, who won the harp prize in 1822 and 1824.

Powys Eisteddfod, 1824, Welshpool, Montgomeryshire

Slide 7 | The Carmarthen Eisteddfod in 1819, was the first of the large-scale provincial eisteddfodau. This slide shows the bardic chair and medal, awarded that year to Walter Davies. The chair and medal would be two of the main three prizes awarded at eisteddfodau.

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**Carmarthen Eisteddfod chair and medal, 1819,
awarded to Walter Davies (Gwallter Mechain)**

Slides 8-12 | If the Eisteddfod is provincial or national it is fundamentally a competition and three of the top prizes are the chair, the crown, and the literature medal. The Chair is the prize for the best awdl (strict meter poem) under 300 lines. The crown is the prize for the best pryddest (long poem) or sequence of poems in free verse. The Literature Medal is the prize for the best volume of prose (prose is found in novels, essays, articles etc).

These slides show examples of how chairs varied in style and were prizes in provincial and national eisteddfodau. Likewise the medals and crowns are unique to each eisteddfod. Slide 12 shows how sometimes the prize can be something totally different, in this case a triple harp awarded to the best harpist.

**Tregaron Eisteddfod chair, awarded to John Watkins
(Ioan Gwent), 1876**

**Chair won by Ben Davies at the National Eisteddfod,
Llandudno 1896**

Silver medal, Cardiff Eisteddfod, 1839

**This crown was won by the poet Ceiriog (John Ceiriog
Hughes) at the Great Llangollen Eisteddfod of 1858**

**Triple harp awarded as a prize by Lady Llanover at the
Abergavenny Eisteddfod, 1848**

Slide 13-16 | These slides begin with an image of Iolo Morgannwg, creator of the Gorsedd of Bards. In 1819, Iolo first associated the Gorsedd circle and the Druidic ceremony with the eisteddfod. From then on, till the modern day, Druid ceremonies and Gorsedd circles are a fundamental part of eisteddfod tradition. The slides show the ceremonies, as well as a depiction of the Gorsedd Circle and a Gorsedd Circle model made by a toy factory.

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Iolo Morgannwg, Edward Williams

A plan of the 'Gorsedd of the Bards of Great Britain' designed by T.H. Thomas, in 1901

Marriage of the Swords, Abergavenny Eisteddfod, 1913

Model of Gorsedd, made by the Vale of Clwyd Toy Factory in Trefnant for Bangor National Eisteddfod, 1914

Slide 17 | A painting of the chair winner of the first official National Eisteddfod, held in Aberdare, 1861. In the painting you can even see the chair he was awarded as he is pictured sitting on it.

The eisteddfod was meant to be held on Hirwaun common, on the outskirts of Aberdare, but heavy rain and wind destroyed the huge pavilion, and the eisteddfod was moved to the market house. The weather did not stop the event at all, and the local newspaper wrote...

"The streets of Aberdare presented quite an animated appearance, the streets were decorated with floral devices, and triumphal arches, while the windows of the house floated and profusion of bunting, embracing flags of all nations."

David Watkin Jones (Dafydd Morganwg), (1832-1905), by A Harris

Slide 18 | This slide shows an eisteddfod pavilion being erected. The pavilion was a major focus of all of the events at any eisteddfod.

Eisteddfod Gadeiriol Dinorwig, sir Gaernarfon, 1911

Slide 19 | The National Eisteddfod had been held every year for over 160 years, but it has not always been held in Wales. This slide shows the rainy opening of a National Eisteddfod in London, in 1887.

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National Eisteddfod, London, Illustrated London news, 1886

Slide 20-21 | These two slides showcase how provincial eisteddfodau still continued to happen throughout Wales after the National Eisteddfod had begun and well into the 20th century. They would still be large events, have prizes, erect pavilions, and so on.

**Eisteddfod, Dre-fach, Felindre, 1920
Eisteddfod, Dinorwig, 1911**

Slide 23 | This slide shows a young Nansi Richards after one of her three back-to-back victories at the harp competitions at the National Eisteddfod. She went on to become the Royal Harpist. For many the eisteddfod would be a stage that would introduce them to a wider audience, and it would change the lives and careers of the people taking part.

Miss. Nansi Richards (Telynores Maldwyn) with her triple harp after winning at the Llangollen National Eisteddfod, 1908

Slide 23 | A poster from the 1906 National Eisteddfod. If you look closely, you can pick out lots of different aspects of eisteddfod tradition.

National Eisteddfod poster, 1906

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Key vocabulary |

Archdderwydd

Arch-druid, leader of the Gorsedd.

Awdl

A long poem in one of the traditional cyghanedd metres (often translated as “strict metrical verse”).

Bardd (plural beirdd)

Bard, i.e. poet, especially an entrant in one of the competitions.

Cadeirio

Chairing of the Bard, the ceremony in which a hand-carved throne is awarded to the winner of the competition for a long poem in cyghanedd (“strict metrical verse”).

Coroni

Crowning of the Bard, the ceremony in which a crown is awarded to the winner of the “free” verse competition.

Derwydd (plural Derwyddon)

Druid; the “druids” are the most senior rank of the Gorsedd, dressed in white.

Ffugenw

Bardic name, the pen-name adopted by bards entering the poetry competitions

Gorsedd, Gorsedd y Beirdd

The assembly or “Court” of the Bards, famous for their colourful costumes.

Pafiliwn

The enormous central marquee (capacity 4,000) where the main ceremonies take place.

Pryddest

A long poem in “free verse”, i.e. not cyghanedd.

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Further reading |

Edwards, H. T. Edwards, The Eisteddfod, University of Wales Press, 2016

Websites |

<https://museum.wales/curatorial/social-cultural-history/online-collections/what-is-the-eisteddfod/>

<https://www.library.wales/discover-learn/education/learning-resources/the-national-eisteddfod-of-wales>