

Discovering Wales and Welsh: first steps



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Introduction

This free course, *Discovering Wales and Welsh: first steps* is in two parts. In the first part, you will learn about the origins and early shaping of Welsh identity and how Owain Glyndŵr and Llywelyn the Last played their part in shaping that identity. In the second part, you will learn the basics of Welsh pronunciation and how to greet people in Welsh.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [LG001 *Discovering Wales and Welsh*](#).

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course you should be able to:

- understand the origins and early developments of the Welsh people
- understand how an early Welsh identity was shaped
- understand what part Owain Glyndŵr and Llywelyn the Last played in shaping Welsh identity
- pronounce the basic sounds of Welsh
- greet people in Welsh.

1 Who are the Welsh?

A little over three million people live in Wales, which is roughly five per cent of the total UK population. However, around 27% of the people resident in Wales were born outside the country, which in Europe puts Wales second only to Luxembourg in this respect.

Recent survey evidence, as well as Census data, suggests that feelings of Welsh identity (Welshness) have been becoming stronger. In the 2011 Census, two-thirds of respondents ticked the box recording them as 'Welsh', rather than 'British' or some other category. The highest proportions saying they were Welsh were found in the valleys of south Wales, where the vast majority of the population was born in Wales.

But who are the Welsh? Where do they come from? What has forged their identity? One can learn a great deal from understanding who it is that a nation or country chooses to admire and celebrate. In 2003–4 an internet poll was held to find the greatest Welsh men and women of all time. Over 80,000 nominations were received, from which a list of the 'top hundred Welsh heroes' was compiled.

Activity 1

Have a look at the first ten names on the list in the [100 Welsh Heroes](#) Wikipedia article . Do you know any of these personalities? Which fields do they belong to? Whether you do or do not know them, spend some time reading the short biographies by clicking on each name. Why have these particular people come to be so well-known?

Provide your answer...

Answer

You might know or recognise some of these names – perhaps the famous poet Dylan Thomas, the well-known politician David Lloyd George or the actor Richard Burton. Five of these personalities belong to the field of politics if we include Owain Glyndŵr in this category. All but Glyndŵr were alive in the twentieth century: Aneurin Bevan, Gwynfor Evans, David Lloyd George and Saunders Lewis. Then there are three figures belonging to the field of the arts: the singer Tom Jones, the actor Richard Burton and the poet Dylan Thomas; sport is represented, too, with the rugby player Gareth Edwards; and the world of business features the entrepreneur and philanthropist, Robert Owen, born in the eighteenth century. They have come to be so well-known through their achievements and, often, their strong personality. Aneurin Bevan, for instance, is credited for creating the National Health Service as well as his tremendous speaking skills and strong views. The actor Richard Burton achieved global fame through exceptional acting ability, a strong magnetic presence and a turbulent private life.

Of the one hundred names listed, roughly a quarter are contemporary 'celebrities' from the world of show business – film, music and sport. A similar number were historic figures active before 1900: they include the legendary King Arthur, the Welsh law-maker Hywel Dda, the poet Dafydd ap Gwilym, and Saint David, the patron saint of Wales. Only ten of those named were women, none of whom were alive earlier than the twentieth century.

The names attracting most votes at the time undoubtedly included those whose reputations were especially strong, and whom most people in Wales would have heard of: Aneurin Bevan, Owain Glyndŵr, Tom Jones, Richard Burton, Gareth Edwards and Catherine Zeta Jones. When a similar poll was conducted on behalf of the *Western Mail* (which claims to be the 'national paper of Wales') for St. David's Day in 2008, the greatest number of votes were received by Owain Glyndŵr, a Welsh Prince who led an uprising against the English King in the fifteenth century; David Lloyd George, who was a Liberal politician and Prime Minister from 1916 until 1922, and the poet Dylan Thomas.

'Popularity' is not necessarily a reliable guide to importance, but the list does tell us something about the individuals that people in Wales are familiar with, so that knowledge of them forms a shared cultural resource. In many cases their fame has spread far beyond Wales, so that their celebrity and importance is reflected back on the country and its people. The choices made in drawing up such a list reflect aspects of national pride and national character, revealing how the Welsh see themselves.

1.1 The Welsh and the Celts

It is generally agreed that the Welsh (Cymry) descend from a distinct grouping of people who lived in central Europe, and whom the Greeks called '*Keltoi*', or 'Celts' in modern English. From around the fifth century BC, the Celts spread throughout Europe and arrived in the British Isles, bringing with them their languages and customs. The Celts of the British Isles eventually developed into what we now know as the Irish, Scottish, Cornish, Manx and the Welsh. Despite nearly two millennia of invasions and attempts at suppression, the Welsh have held their ground and have clung to their identity and language. The fact that two-thirds of the population today choose to describe their national identity as 'Welsh' shows that the Welsh are proud of their distinctiveness compared with the rest of the United Kingdom. But today, there is no easy answer to the question, 'Who are the Welsh?' Many people who come from different ethnic backgrounds, but who were born in Wales, would describe themselves as Welsh. The famous Welsh singer, Dame Shirley Bassey, who was born in Tiger Bay in Cardiff to a Nigerian father and an English mother, often performs on stage in a Welsh-flag dress to show her pride at being Welsh. So it seems that the Welsh are not just a genetically distinct group of people, but rather a group of people who self-identify as being Welsh.

1.2 Origins and early developments

Many hundreds of hill forts and ancient enclosures show that Wales was extensively settled by the Iron Age (600 to 400 BC), and that by then productive agriculture had been established in the fertile lowlands and border regions. Stone circles and other remains, including an enormous Bronze Age copper mine in North Wales, the Great Orme near Llandudno, and nearby Late Stone Age axe factories, date back even earlier.

Two of the main invading forces, the Romans (from 48 AD) and the Normans (from 1081), found Wales a very difficult place to penetrate and control, while – except for one or two coastal sites (around 850) such as the Gower peninsula in South Wales and a settlement at Llanbedr-goch in Anglesey (North Wales) – there is very limited evidence of any strong Viking influence.

The terms 'Celt' and 'Celtic' are often applied to signify the historical roots of the Welsh but later newcomers to Britain – the Anglo-Saxons – used the term 'Welsh' (*Wealisc*) to

refer to the 'foreigners', or 'others', who were already there. People living in what later became known as Wales would not have described themselves in this way. Neither, according to one eminent expert on the archaeology and prehistory of Britain, would they have said they were Celts, since 'no ancient source ever suggested that Celts lived in Britain and probably no ancient Briton would have thought of themselves as Celtic' (Miles, 2006, p. 108). Instead they were part of a variety of local tribal groupings with different names. In the Welsh language, they were 'Cymry', or members of the same community or group, and the place they inhabited was 'Cymru'. One thing is certain, there is agreement that for centuries Wales has been home to a people – whether Celts or not – who were distinct from the people who, over time, became identified as the English.

1.3 Early shaping of a Welsh identity

External pressures from the English and others helped mould the consciousness of the Welsh, and of being part of a distinct people. When the Romans arrived in Britain they built a network of forts and encampments across Wales, including the major military bases of Caerleon in South Wales and Caernarfon (Segontium) in North Wales. It took them seventeen years to conquer Wales (AD 48–75) and bring all five main tribes of Wales under a single authority, which then lasted for some 300 years. Apart from physical artefacts such as roads, one of the main legacies of this period was the addition of around 800 Latin words to the Brittonic language, from which Welsh developed terms such as *pont* for bridge, *ffenestr* for window, *eglwys* for church. With the decline and withdrawal of Roman influence, Wales fragmented again into separate kingdoms: Gwynedd, Powys, Dyfed, Gwent and so on.



Figure 1 The Welsh kingdoms

After the Norman conquest of England in 1066, Wales was encroached upon by powerful Norman landowners who sought to extend their territories from across the English border. These 'Marcher Lords' (barons), appointed by the King of England to protect the border between England and Wales, built castles, established monasteries and created towns, often inhabited by non-Welsh people – the first phase in the urbanisation of Wales. For example, the town of Montgomery in Mid Wales was founded by Roger de Montgomerie, a Norman nobleman.



Figure 2 Kidwelly Castle

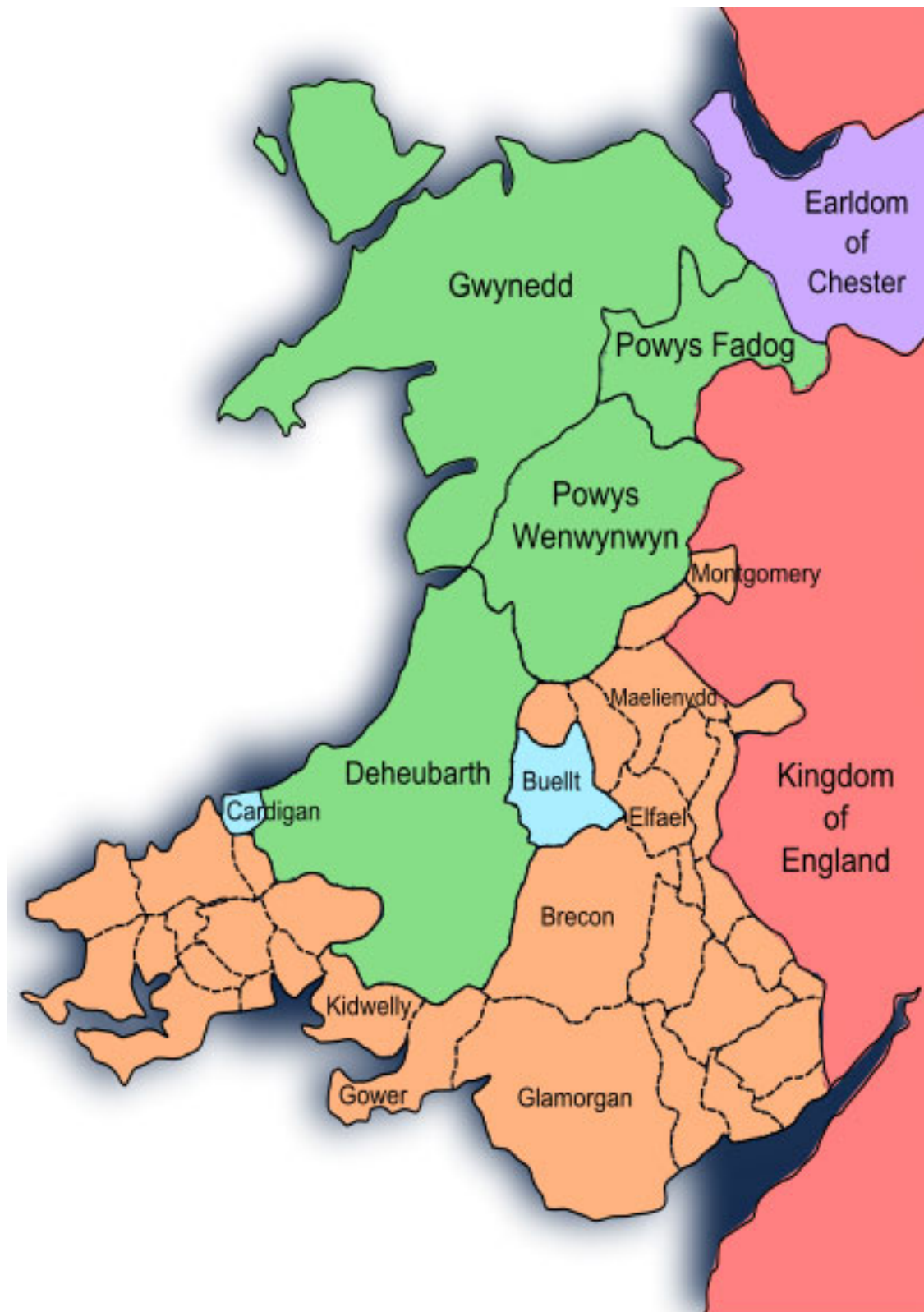


Figure 3 Map of lands ruled by the Marcher Lords

1.4 Llywelyn ap Gruffydd and Owain Glyndŵr: the

birth of a nation

Although Owain Glyndŵr appears to have captured the imagination of the Welsh more firmly than any of his predecessors, his actions can be seen as part of an unfolding story of national ambition. The first attempt to establish an independent Welsh principality came when the ruler of the most powerful Welsh kingdom, Gwynedd, managed to secure the allegiance of the other Welsh princes. The English King John recognised the importance of Llywelyn Fawr (Llewelyn the Great) by offering him the hand of his daughter Joan in marriage, and in 1218 John's heir, Henry III, confirmed Llewelyn's claim to the Principality of Wales in the Treaty of Worcester. Despite continuing unrest and conflict, Llywelyn managed to dominate Wales until his death in 1240.



Figure 4 The arms of Gwynedd – the first flag of Wales? The flag is also used in the present day by supporters of the Wales national football team

Llywelyn's successors were less successful in holding Wales together. Gwynedd became a battleground between the claims of the Welsh and English thrones. Rivalries between and within each kingdom in Wales weakened the ability of the Welsh to resist English power, and after a series of uprisings and rebellions King Edward I was able to defeat the Welsh forces under the Prince of Wales, Llywelyn ap Gruffudd (Llywelyn the Last, or in Welsh, Llywelyn Ein Llyw Olaf ('Llywelyn Our Last Leader'), who was killed in battle in 1282. Edward's conquest of Wales meant that from then onwards the destinies of Wales and England were fused together, and hopes for an independent Welsh nation were suppressed. In Wales some have interpreted this as the beginning of a process of colonisation, in which Wales became the first of England's colonial possessions.

Activity 2

Watch these two short videos on Llywelyn the Last and Owain Glyndŵr. How did Llywelyn and Owain Glyndŵr acquire the title of Prince of Wales? What were their motivations? How were their claims on the title and on the land justified? Why do you think Owain Glyndŵr has left more of a mark on Welsh imaginations than Llywelyn ap Gruffydd?

Video content is not available in this format.

[Video 1](#)



Video content is not available in this format.

[Video 2](#)



Answer

Llywelyn ap Gruffydd is recognised as Prince of Wales by the English King Henry in 1267 as part of the Treaty of Montgomery, on the condition of swearing allegiance to the King, whereas Owain Glyndŵr was proclaimed Prince of Wales nearly 150 years later by his supporters, following a dispute over land. Llywelyn is motivated by a desire to be legitimised or recognised as a ruler, by his 'hunger for power'. Note the price he agrees to pay for it. Glyndŵr, on the other hand, is 'pushed' into action because his effort to have the dispute solved by the English Parliament failed. Note that Glyndŵr studied law in London and came to rebellion late, in his forties. It is interesting to compare how they both justified their claim on the title and the land. Llywelyn invokes an ancestral obligation to protect the people and the land and, by calling on the legend of Brutus, claims a connection to the land that the English cannot. Similarly, with Glyndŵr, the claim on the title and the land is justified through ancestry as a descendant of Welsh princes. As with Llywelyn, reality and myth combine to make Glyndŵr a King Arthur-like figure. You will no doubt have your views as to why Owain Glyndŵr has left more of a mark on history than Llywelyn ap Gruffydd. Maybe Glyndŵr

had an ambitious, inspiring and to some extent selfless vision for a Welsh state that Llywelyn did not?

Owain Glyndŵr's rebellion was a serious, but short-lived, assertion of the right of Wales to an independent political existence which has echoed through subsequent centuries. Six hundred years later, in 2000, celebrations were held to commemorate the anniversary of the revolt. Although much about Owain Glyndŵr's life remains shadowy, he is widely praised as a natural, charismatic leader, an inspiration for Welsh national aspirations, and one of the most heroic figures in Welsh history.

1.5 The Principality of Wales

Of course, as a figure of national importance, Owain Glyndŵr did not appear out of nowhere. His campaign drew on memories of earlier events, including previous attempts to establish Wales as a distinct political realm, and to legitimise the authority of a Prince of Wales. The previous efforts relied on relationships of loyalty and trust, but were also hindered considerably by competing claims and rivalries within Wales. However, Owain Glyndŵr's successes were achieved with the support of almost all sections of society in Wales, including some support from disaffected English people. At the time of Glyndŵr's rebellion, Wales had been ruled more or less effectively for a hundred years by the King of England, the English Prince of Wales and the Marcher Lords, ever since King Edward I gained control after long years of struggle against the Princes of Gwynedd and their allies. This was when Wales first took shape as a meaningful reality, with aspirations to be fully recognised as a nation.

However, this was not quite the end of Welsh royal pretensions. Between 1485 and 1603 both England and Wales were ruled by the Tudors, descended from an Anglesey family, members of which had been prominent in the service of the Kings of Gwynedd and who later rallied to Owain Glyndŵr's call to arms. Henry VII (Harri Tudur), born and raised in south Wales, seized the English throne after his victory at the Battle of Bosworth Field. In 1542 Wales was formally united with England. Despite their Welsh antecedents, the Tudors do not generally feature among the roll-call of Welsh heroes, nor were Henry Tudor's successors prone to advertise their Welshness.



Figure 5 Statue of Llywelyn ap Gruffydd in Cardiff City Hall

As we noted at the beginning of this course, the figures whom a people choose to honour or celebrate tell us a great deal about their memories, values and imaginations. Llywelyn ap Gruffydd and Owain Glyndŵr are typical of one sort of national hero – warriors, noblemen and, in the case of Glyndŵr, romantically martyred by defeat.

Now, we move on to the language part of this course where you will learn how to pronounce the basic sounds of Welsh and how to greet people.

2 Welsh language

In this section you will learn how to greet people and say goodbye in Welsh. You will also learn how to pronounce the sounds of Welsh and practise them through pronouncing Welsh names.

2.1 Bore Da!

The activity below introduces you to how to greet people in Welsh.

Activity 3

Look at the following images (Figures 6–11), then match the English phrases to their equivalent phrases in Welsh.

If you are accessing this activity using only the keyboard, tab to a target and press the enter key to cycle through the choices.



Figure 6



Figure 7

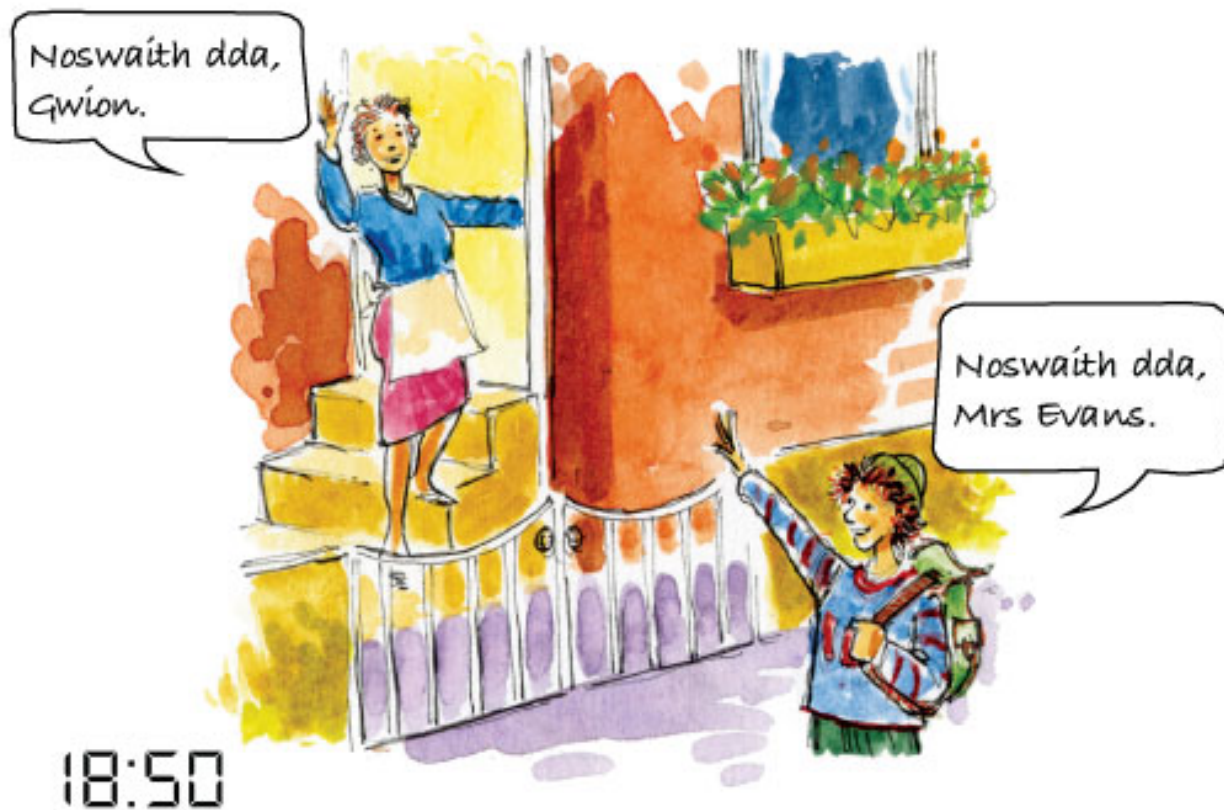


Figure 8

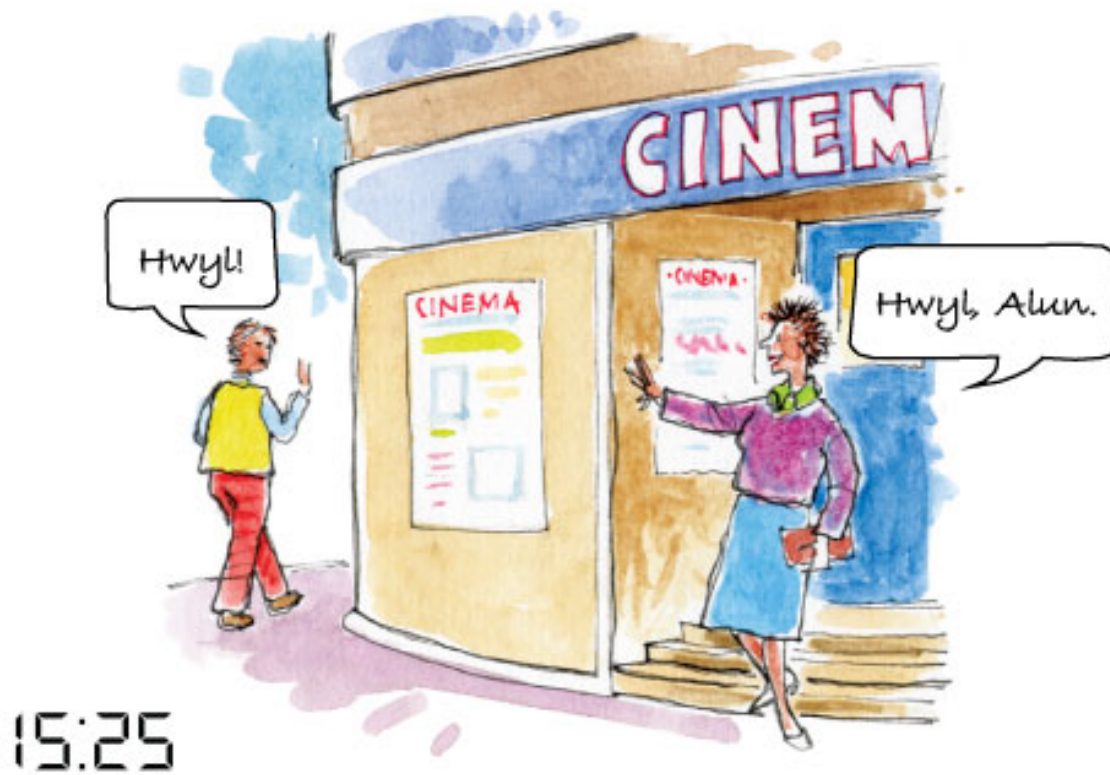


Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11

Helo.

Hello.

Bore da.

Good morning.

Prynhawn da.

Good afternoon.

Noswaith dda.

Good evening.

Nos da.

Good night.

Sut mae?

How are things?

Sut dych chi?

How are you?

Da iawn, diolch.

Very well, thanks.

Hwyl / Da boch chi.

Goodbye.

2.2 Pronunciation practice

Now you will hear how the greetings are pronounced and practise your pronunciation.

Activity 4

Listen to the following phrases and try repeating them to practise your pronunciation.

1

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2

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Greeting people

When greeting somebody, you can say:

Bore da. *Good morning.*

Prynhawn da. *Good afternoon.*

Noswaith dda. *Good evening.*

These expressions are often followed by:

Sut mae? *How are things / How are you?*

Sut dych chi? *How are you?*

To which you could respond:

Da iawn, diolch. *Very well, thanks.*

Note that the common greeting *Sut mae?* is pronounced *shwmai* in some places in South Wales.

When parting from people, you can say:

Nos da. *Good night.*

Hwyl. *Goodbye. (informal)*

Da boch chi. *Goodbye. (formal)*

Sut mae? can be used as a greeting on its own at any time during the day. *Nos da* can also be used to say good night to someone before going to bed.

2.3 Choosing the correct greeting

In the following activity you will practise how to choose the correct greeting according to the situation.

Activity 5

Step A

How would you greet people at the following times of the day? Tick one answer.

1. In the evening

- ☐ Bore da.
- ☐ Prynhawn da.
- ☐ Noswaith dda.

2. In the morning

- ☐ Bore da.

- Prynawn da.
 - Noswaith dda.
3. In the afternoon
- Bore da.
 - Prynawn da.
 - Noswaith dda.

Step B

This part of the activity asks you to greet someone at different times of the day and to say goodbye. Try pronouncing the following greetings yourself, and then check your responses against the model answers.

1

Greet someone in the afternoon.

Answer

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2

Greet someone in the morning.

Answer

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3

Greet someone in the evening.

Answer

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4

Greet someone at any time.

Answer

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5

Say goodbye to a friend.

Answer

Audio content is not available in this format.

6

Say goodbye to someone you don't know very well.

Answer

Audio content is not available in this format.

Hwyl

Many languages have words that are spelled exactly the same but have different meanings, and Welsh is no exception. You have already seen the word *hwyl*, meaning 'goodbye', but it also means 'fun', as in 'to have fun', and it means a sail on a boat.

2.4 The sounds of Welsh

The activity below introduces you to the sounds of Welsh.

Activity 6

Look at how the sounds are spelled in Welsh. Then listen to each sound and practise your pronunciation by repeating it.

a

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b

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c

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ch

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d

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dd

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e

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f

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ff

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g

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ng

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l

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ll

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m

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p

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rh

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w

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y

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2.5 The Welsh alphabet

There are 29 letters in the Welsh alphabet. This is the order that they will appear in a Welsh dictionary:

- a, b, c, ch, d, dd, e, f, ff, g, ng, h, i, j, l, ll, m, n, o, p, ph, r, rh, s, t, th, u, w, y

As you can see, the following letter combinations count as single letters:

- ch, dd, ff, ng, ll, ph, rh, th

Here are some notes on how to pronounce some of the sounds of Welsh:

ch pronounced like the 'ch' in the German composer's name, Bach, and the Scottish word *loch*.

dd pronounced like the 'th' in 'the' and 'this'.

th pronounced like the 'th' in 'thin' or 'thick'.

ff pronounced like the 'f' in 'friend' or 'foe'.

f pronounced like the 'v' in 'of'.

ng pronounced like the 'ng' in 'sing'.

ll pronounced by placing your tongue into the top of your mouth, with the tip of your tongue almost touching or just touching your top middle teeth, and then blowing out gently.

ph pronounced like an 'f', or like the 'ph' in 'phrase' and 'phobia'.

rh pronounced as if the 'h' and the 'r' were reversed – 'hr'.

u pronounced like the 'e' in 'me' and 'she'.

w pronounced like the 'oo' in 'mood' and 'food'.

y pronounced in three different ways, depending on where it is in the word. You have heard it pronounced like the 'e' in 'the'.

s+i pronounced like the 'sh' in 'shop'.

2.6 Welsh names

In the activity below you will practise how to pronounce some common Welsh names.

Activity 7

Try to pronounce the following Welsh first names, and then check your answer against the audio recordings.

1

Rhys

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2

Sioned

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3

Carys

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4

Dafydd

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5

Bedwyr

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6

Rhian

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7

Llinos

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8

Angharad

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9

Lowri

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10

Euros

Audio content is not available in this format.

11

Non

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12

Iestyn

Audio content is not available in this format.

13

Meredydd

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14

Rhiannon

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Welsh names

Many of these names date back to the time of the Welsh Princes – **Rhys, Gwynfor, Rhodri, Dafydd, Angharad**. Others come from the **Mabino-gion** – a series of very old Welsh stories – **Liŷr, Rhiannon, Olwen, Branwen, Bedwyr**.

A recent trend seems to favour names with the name of a place added, for example **Megan Iorwerth Enlli** (Bardsey) or **Elin Liŷn** (Lleyn).

What about surnames? It has become fashionable to use the father's first name for a surname, such as Aled **Ifan** or Lowri **Dafydd**.

You will also hear '*ap*', which means 'the son of', followed by the father's first name, for example **Rhun ap Iorwerth** (Rhun the son of Iorwerth) and **Dafydd ap Gwyn** (Dafydd the son of Gwyn).

You might not know it, but your own surname might have a Welsh origin. The surnames Bowen, Bevan, Powell and Pugh come from the combination of '*ap*' or '*ab*' plus the father's first name. Both *ap* and *ab* mean 'son of', so Bevan comes from '*ab*' + '*Evan*', the son of Evan, Powell from '*ap*' + '*Howell*', the son of Howell (Hywel), and Pugh from '*ap*' + '*Hugh*', the son of Hugh (Hyw).

Conclusion

In the first part of this course, you have learned about the origins of the Welsh people and how two significant Welsh figures, Owain Glyndŵr and Llywelyn the Last took part in the shaping of Welsh identity, leaving their marks on Welsh history and capturing imaginations. The second part introduced you to basic Welsh pronunciation and taught you how to greet people at various times of the day.

If you have enjoyed studying this course and want to learn more about Wales and carry on studying Welsh, why not join the Open University course [LG001 *Discovering Wales and Welsh*](#).

If you're interested in Wales and Welsh, you can also visit the [OpenLearn Cymru](#) website, where you can browse a selection of courses in both English and Welsh.

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Further reading

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Acknowledgements

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Figure 2 Photograph of Kidwelly Castle (© Valérie Demouy).

Figure 3 Map of lands ruled by the Marcher Lords: (wikimedia) © AlexD, cleared under Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported licence (cc BY-SA 3.0).

Figure 4 The arms of Gwynedd – the first flag of Wales? The flag is also used in the present day by supporters of the Wales national football team: (wikimedia) Rhion Pritchard.

Figure 5 Statue of Llywelyn ap Gruffydd in Cardiff City Hall: (wikimedia) Seth Whales.

Videos

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