

## The Brecon Eisteddfod of 1822

### Jonathan Williams

In May 2022, the Brecknock Society was contacted by historical journalist John Evans who was planning to feature the Brecon Eisteddfod of 1822 in his online history magazine – [www.200livinghistory.info](http://www.200livinghistory.info) – which celebrates the ‘news’ from 200 years ago. This prompted me to do some research in what turned out to have been a fascinating event.

#### THE BACKGROUND

As many readers will know, an eisteddfod is a meeting and competition in celebration of Welsh culture – in particular the language, poetry and song. The tradition dates back to medieval times, the earliest known having been held at Cardigan Castle in 1176, but by the seventeenth century the eisteddfod was in decline.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century however, a renewed interest in Welsh culture was in the air. In 1789, the first of a new era of eisteddfodau was held in Corwen. Other followed, often supported by the London-Welsh Gwyneddigion Society. Around the same time, Glamorgan-born Edward Williams, alias ‘Iolo Morganwg’, was busy promoting (indeed often inventing) ‘ancient’ druidic traditions such as the ‘Gorsedd’ of bards, which came to be incorporated into later eisteddfodau. However, these interesting developments petered out during the Napoleonic Wars when the Gorsedd in particular was viewed as suspiciously radical by the authorities.



*Iolo Morgannwg*  
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When eisteddfodau were revived after the wars – the first being at Carmarthen in 1819 – they were a little different. The late eighteenth century developments had been largely focussed within the Welsh-speaking community and sometimes had radical associations. However, the new ‘provincial’ events, as they were known, often had the involvement of English-speaking upper and middle classes and included some proceedings in English and concerts designed to appeal to local society as a whole.

Although not technically ‘national’, there was usually only one provincial eisteddfod in Wales each year and they were nation-wide in scope – the Brecon event attracted entries from all over Wales as well as from Liverpool and London. This series of eisteddfodau lasted until 1834 and included a second event at Brecon in 1826. The character of this series will be discussed in more detail later.

#### THE BRECON EISTEDDFOD

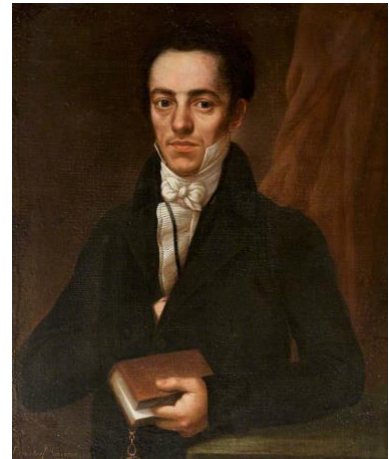
The Brecon Eisteddfod of 1822 was organised by the Cambrian Society in Gwent, which had been established especially for that purpose at a meeting in Brecon the previous December. The society covered the ‘province’ of Gwent, which included the counties of Breconshire, Radnor, Glamorgan and Monmouth. The Eisteddfod was held on Wednesday 24th and Thursday 25th September 1822 in Brecon Town Hall (also known as the Guildhall). It was timed to take place following on from the Autumn Assizes held in the hall.

The morning sessions on each day included the reading and awarding of prizes for poems in Welsh and essays in English. There were also addresses on matters relating to the Welsh language, and music competitions, including one for the prize of a silver harp, won by Henry Humphreys of Welshpool and now in the *Amgeuddfa Cymru*. Attendance at the various events varied between 360 and 600.



*The silver harp awarded to Henry Humphreys*  
© Amgeuddfa Cymru

A strong patriotic streak, born out of the Napoleonic wars, can be clearly discerned in the programme. For example, bards were invited to submit an *Awdl* on the pithy title 'The memorable period during which our most Gracious Sovereign George the Fourth exercised, as Regent, the powers of Government over the United Kingdom, commencing with the debarcation of the British Troops in Portugal and terminating with the Glorious Victory at Waterloo'. Other proceedings celebrated ancient British history, but did so in a way which tended to glorify the heritage of the Britain of the time. The Rev. Thomas Price 'Carnhuanawc', for example, extolled Wales' heritage as being the origin of the 'principles of Christian Chivalry'.



Rev. Thomas Price 'Carnhuanawc'  
[@University of Wales Trinity Saint David](#)

The Welsh poetry competitions of the first day were for poems that had been submitted on pre-advertised subjects. The competition for a four-line *Englyn* on 'The Rainbow', had received 60 entries and was won by William Williams 'Gwilym Caledfryn' of Denbigh (later ordained a congregational minister). The winner out of 15 entries for a *Cywydd* on 'The overthrow of the Egyptians in the Red Sea' was Peter Jones of Liverpool. The main prize, for a lengthy *Awdl* on the period of the Regency, which received five entries, was won by William Ellis Jones 'Gwilym Cawrdaf', who was 'regularly graduated a bard by Mr Edward Williams' and seated in the 'Bardic Chair of Gwent'. Jones received a premium of 15 guineas and a silver medal worth 5 guineas.

Two subject for an *Englynion* were given out on the first day, to be judged and awarded on the second. One was on 'The munificent patronage conferred on the bards by Ivor Hael, and his descendants, particularly those of the House of Tredegar.' Ivor Hael, nicknamed 'the Generous', had been an important patron of poetry in the fourteenth century and was uncle to one of Wales' most famous poets, Dafydd ap Gwilym. The subject was also clearly intended to flatter Brecon's MP Sir Charles Morgan of Tredgar. The winning poem was by Rev. Daniel Evans 'Daniel Ddu o Geredigion'. The second subject was dedicated to the memory of a much-loved local figure, Breconshire's historian Theophilus Jones, and was to refer 'particularly to his zeal in promoting Welsh Literature, and investigating the antiquities of his native country' – this won by clergyman Evan Evans 'Ieuan Glan Geirionydd' of Trefriw, Caernarfonshire.

A medal awarded by the Cymmrodorion Society in Gwynedd was presented to William Edwards, apparently 'only a poor miner' (this might be 'Wil Ysgeifiog', although he was a millwright by trade) for his ode on 'His Majesty visiting Wales', while the Gyneddigion Society awarded a medal for an *Awdl* on 'the old customs and manners of the Ancient Britons' to Mr Robert Evans.

The prize essay in English on 'The ancient and modern state of the Welsh language' was won by a Brecon-born Wesleyan minister, the Rev John Hughes. The Archdeacon of Brecon, Richard Davies, immediately declared with typical exuberance that he would have the essay printed at his own expense. Another essay subject on the 'Credibility of the Massacre at Stonehenge, and the identity and real character of the British Leader Ambrosius' received no entry deemed worthy of the prize.

In the evenings, there were concerts sung in both Welsh and English. After the Wednesday concert, there was a ball at the Lion Inn. Up to 30 'bards' were given dinner at an 'open table' at the Swann Inn on the Wednesday and Thursday. On the Friday morning after the Eisteddfod there was a charity concert of sacred music in St Mary's Church which raised £58 12s for local widows and orphans.

## ANALYSIS

Brecon was a thriving and important place at the time, at least on a par with any other town in Wales. It also had a lively social scene for the local gentry and town grandees with assemblies, concerts and its own theatre. For this group of people, the 1822 Eisteddfod appears to have been considered an extension of that social scene. We don't have accurate figures for Welsh speaking in

the area until later in the century, but it seems likely that, while overall there was still a high proportion of Welsh speakers in the county, especially in the more westerly parts, many of the local gentry, and a significant proportion of the inhabitants of Brecon town, would have used Welsh little or not at all.

Given the target audience, it is perhaps not surprising that a proportion of the proceedings were held in English, or were musical in nature. But this, of course, was in danger of running counter the whole purpose of the Eisteddfod – the promotion and celebration of the Welsh language. The Eisteddfod could become ‘respectable’, be well funded and gain a numerous and prosperous audience as part of a wider ‘concert culture’, but at the risk of diluting its core purpose.

This contradiction can be seen in those involved in setting up the society and running the eisteddfod. They can for the most part be divided into two groups, who we might call the ‘gentlemen’ and the ‘players’. The ‘gentlemen’ were local and regional gentry and town dignitaries – the people who ran things at a local level and organised the social scene in Brecon. The ‘players’ were the active participants – scholars and bards – and they included some of the major figures in the early eisteddfod movement. Some details about a selection of both groups are given in the appendices.

It is remarkable that a high proportion of the poets and writers were clergymen, and the majority of these were Anglican, which is perhaps surprising given that denomination’s later reputation as an opponent of the Welsh language. At this date however, relations between the Anglican and non-conformist strands of Christianity were much less antagonistic than they were to become. Certainly, there were serious cracks between the two, but not the wide gulf which developed later. Methodism had initially worked within the Anglican church and the Calvinistic Methodists had only seceded from it as recently as 1811 (one suspects that a number of these Anglican ministers, had they been born a generation later, might have ended up in chapel rather than church).

On the surface then, the spirit of 1822 was one of harmony and cooperation between the ‘gentlemen’ and the ‘players’, between the speakers of English and of Welsh. But over the next generation this was to turn into a suspicion and even open hostility which still has resonances today. So what went wrong?

Even in 1822, by no means everyone in the establishment supported the lauding of Welsh culture. Some clearly saw English as the language of economic progress and Welsh as a hindrance to that. Perhaps best-known of these was the Breconshire’s MP, Colonel Thomas Wood, who had publicly stated that Welsh was a backward language which he predicted would soon disappear. One contributor to the December 1821 meeting felt it necessary to address this view specifically, and to state of the promotion of Welsh that ‘it was not apprehended that this would tend to check the progress of English’. In contrast to Wood, he clearly believed that a bi-lingual future was possible for Wales.

It is likely that certain subsequent events encouraged a hardening of attitudes on both sides. Popular unrest in the 1830s such as the Rebecca and Chartist riots and the Merthyr uprising worried even the more liberal gentry. Colonel Wood’s view of Welsh as a ‘backward’ language became much more prevalent among a ruling elite among whom Welsh speaking was increasingly rare. This led to the notorious ‘Treachery of the Blue Books’ of 1847 – a report into the state of education in Wales in 1847 which denigrated the Welsh language and led to further reductions in the proportion of Welsh speakers.

On the other side, a new generation of fiery non-conformist preachers with no ties to Anglicanism were able to use the language issue to mobilise their congregations against the Anglican church and the landlords who supported it. This issue also became increasingly politicised, especially after the voting franchise was extended in 1867, and was used by politicians to drive a wedge between the different groups.

After the last 'provincial' eisteddfod in 1834, a thriving series of Abergavenny Eisteddfodau were held under the patronage of Lady Llanover until 1851. The first officially titled 'National Eisteddfod' then took place in 1861. It is interesting to note though, that the 'concert culture' of the early 1800s did not go away – recitals remained an important part of the programme. More surprisingly, English language proceedings continued to be a significant part of eisteddfodau held after 1861 and it was not until as recently as 1950 that the National Eisteddfod became an exclusively Welsh language event.

The tone of the proceedings of Brecon Eisteddfod of 1822 echoes both with a jarring jingoism and with a naïve optimism. But, despite the inherent contradictions, there is something refreshing in the generous, if sadly short-lived spirit of cooperation it represented – and perhaps there is a lesson for us today in that.

#### APPENDIX 1: SOME OF THE 'GENTLEMEN'

**Sir Charles Gould Morgan of Tredegar** (1760 – 1846), a major regional landowner, MP for County of Monmouth (and previously for Brecon) and Lord of the Manor of Brecon. Morgan was appointed President of the Cambrian Society in Gwent at the December 1821 meeting in his absence. This may have been largely a courtesy and one wonders how interested he really was. On the first day of the Eisteddfod he managed to find an excuse to disappear at the earliest opportunity, leaving his daughter to fill in for him. He did however donate the substantial sum of £21 to the Society, and other members of his family contributed as well.

**Major David Price** (1762-1835), former East India Company officer retired to Brecon. He took the chair of the December 1821 meeting in the absence of Charles Morgan.

**Penry Williams III of Penpont** (1782-1847). One of the wealthiest landowners in the county. Generally progressive and liberal, very active in agricultural improvement and county affairs of all sorts, and from 1837 Lord Lieutenant of Breconshire. He spoke in person at the December 1821 meeting. However, there is no evidence that he himself was able to speak Welsh. He was one of only two of the 70 or so subscribers to the Society to pay a double subscription of 2 guineas. He attended the Eisteddfod but does not seem to have played an active part in the event itself. Initially a supporter of Thomas Wood MP, he later disagreed with him, taking a more liberal line on a number of issues. In 1831, he considered standing against Wood, but decided against it.

**Archdeacon Richard Davies** (1777-1849). A cousin of Penry Williams and wealthy in his own right. Generally liberal in his views and very charitable, not afraid to argue with his bishop and to get involved in politics. A remarkable and eccentric man given to bursts of enormous energy when he would walk 10 miles before breakfast, followed by periods of lethargy in which he would be carried around the house on a chaise-langue (all day long) reading novels. His name appears a number of times in the *Proceedings* of the Eisteddfod and he donated 5 guineas to the cause, as well as offering to pay for the publication of John Hughes' prize-winning essay.

**Rev Hugh Bold**, from a prominent family of Brecon solicitors, Bold spoke at the December 1821 meeting and chaired one of the subsequent meetings to organise the event.

**John Parry Wilkins (later De Winton)** (1778-1864), appointed Treasurer of the Cambrian Society in Gwent. A wealthy and important banker in Brecon.

**Philip Vaughan**, appointed Secretary of the Cambrian Society in Gwent, solicitor and later Mayor of Brecon.

**Rev Thomas Williams**, Bailiff of Brecon, he chaired an initial meeting in November 1821 at which the December 1821 meeting was arranged.

**John Christie** (1774–1858), a wealthy indigo trader who had recently purchased a huge tract of moorland in the Great Forest of Brecon and was intent on establishing his credentials in local society. He donated 10 guineas, the largest contribution after Charles Morgan, but there is no record of any further involvement. He was declared bankrupt in 1827.

**William Alexander Madocks** (1773 – 1828). Another remarkable man – a Lincolnshire MP, developer of Porthmadog in N Wales, and married to the heiress of Tregunter near Talgarth. He sent a letter which was read at the December 1821 meeting, attended the Eisteddfod and paid a double subscription to the Society.

**Colonel Thomas Wood of Gwerynfed Park** (1777 – 1860), MP for Breconshire. Conspicuous for his absence was the county's MP. He did not subscribe to the proceedings and made his apologies for not attending the event, ostensibly 'in consequence of the decease of a noble Relative'. As Wood had publicly criticised the Welsh language and believed it to be an obstacle to progress which would soon disappear, he was probably wise to stay very well away.

## APPENDIX 2: SOME OF THE 'PLAYERS'

**Edward Williams 'Iolo Morganwg'** (1747-1826). Stonemason, poet, antiquary, polymath and forger extraordinary. Perhaps the most important figure in the revival (and often invention) of Welsh culture. Appointed to judge the poetry, he attended the Eisteddfod and spoke to try to solicit a premium for the weaver-poet William Harry 'Gwilym Garw-dyle' of Penderyn.

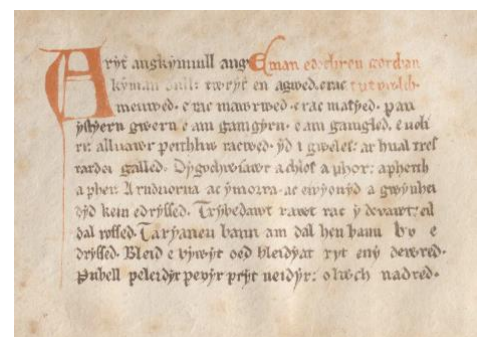
**Walter Davies 'Gwallter Mechain'** (1761-1849), Montgomeryshire clergyman and winner (with the aid of some inside information) of the first Eisteddfod of the eighteenth century revival, held in Corwen in 1789. He was appointed as a poetry judge for Brecon, but was unable to attend in person.

**William Jenkins Rees** (1772-1855), cleric and antiquary, born in Llandovery, vicar of Casgob, Radnorshire and prebend of Christ College, Brecon (among other posts).

**John Hughes** (1776-1843), Wesleyan minister and antiquary, born in Brecon, educated at Christ College. Author of 'Horae Britannicae' (Studies in Ancient British History). Hughes won the prize for an essay in English on 'The ancient and present state of the Welsh language'.

**Taliesin Williams** (1787-1847), son of Iolo Morganwg, stonemason, schoolmaster and poet, he attended the 1821 meeting as well as the Eisteddfod itself.

**Rev. Thomas Price 'Carnhuanawc'** (1787-1848), in 1822 of the parish of Llangenny, but later vicar of Llanfihangel Cwm-du. Price was a key figure in the early eisteddfodau and important not only for his own writings, but also for his associations with Breconshire's historian Theophilus Jones, and with promoters of Welsh language and culture such as Lady Charlotte Guest, who he helped with her translation of the *Mabinogion*, and Lady Llanover, wife of ironmaster Benjamin Hall. He had acquired from Theophilus Jones a manuscript of the *Book of Aneirin*, possibly the earliest surviving piece of literature in Brythonic, an early form of Welsh widely spoken in post-Roman Britain. It contains the poem *Y Gododdin*, describing the battles of the warriors of the kingdom of Manaw Gododdin, in what is now southern Scotland, against the



Facsimile from the Book of Aneirin reproduced as the Frontispiece of the Proceedings of the Brecon Eisteddfod  
© Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru

invading Angles in the years around 600 AD. He talked about the manuscript at the meeting and a page of it was reproduced in facsimile as the frontispiece of the *Proceedings*.

**Rev Canon Henry Thomas Payne** (1759-1832) of Llanbedr, antiquarian and historian of the bishopric of St David's.

**Thomas Williams, 'Gwilym Morgannwg'** (1778-1835), Breconshire born poet who read at the 1822 Eisteddfod.

**Henry Humphreys of Welshpool** (fl.1819 – 24), harpist, winner of the silver harp at Brecon (and later at Carmarthen), family harpist at Powys Castle and author of the air 'Holl ieuencyd Cymru' (All the Youth of Wales).

**John Parry, 'Bardd Alaw'** (1776-1851), musician and composer, born in Denbigh and later settled in London, Parry was musical director and adjudicator at Brecon and other eisteddfodau.

**William Ellis Jones, 'Gwilym Cawrdaf'** (1796-1848), poet and writer, son of a Caernarfonshire schoolmaster, Jones worked as a printer and artist and travelled on the continent. At Brecon, he chaired for his *Awdl* on the period of the Regency.

## SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

There is an account of the December 1821 meeting in *The Cambro-Briton* Vol. 3, No. 25:

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/30070053?seq=1>

An account of proceedings, in English, is available online from the National Library of Wales:

<https://viewer.library.wales/5720993>

The Welsh verse from the Eisteddfod was published separately and is available here:

<https://archive.org/details/ffrwythyrawense00morggoog>

The printed version of Revd John Hughes' prize-winning essay is available here:

[https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/An\\_Essay\\_on\\_the\\_Ancient\\_Present\\_State\\_of/tfIIAAAQA-AJ?hl=en&gbpv=0](https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/An_Essay_on_the_Ancient_Present_State_of/tfIIAAAQA-AJ?hl=en&gbpv=0)

Some excellent articles on the early eisteddfodau are available from Amgeuddfa Cymru:

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

<https://museum.wales/articles/1141/Eisteddfod-and-Gorsedd-join-forces/>

<https://museum.wales/articles/1128/Pebbles-and-plots-eisteddfodau-after-the-Napoleonic-Wars/>

There is more information about Rev Thomas Price's involvement here:

<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/011545375>

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=gri.ark:/13960/t6d24mb9n&view=1up&seq=130&skin=2021>

The Eisteddfod was reported in a number of newspapers – see Welsh Newspapers Online:

<https://newspapers.library.wales/home>

For information on Thomas Wood MP and local politics see the online History of Parliament:

<https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1820-1832/constituencies/breconshire>

More details of some of the other people mentioned can be found here:

<https://www.biography.wales/>

An article by David Willis on 'Welsh and English in Breconshire' is in the 2022 edition of *Brycheiniog*:

<https://brecknocksociety.co.uk/resources/brycheiniog/>