

# Eisteddfod

*handout prepared for Ninth Welsh Weekend for Everyone by Marilyn Schrader*

An **eisteddfod** is a [Welsh festival](#) of [literature](#), [music](#) and [performance](#). The tradition of such a meeting of Welsh artists dates back to at least the 12th century, when a festival of poetry and music was held by [Rhys ap Gruffydd](#) of [Deheubarth](#) at his court in [Cardigan](#) in 1176 but, with the decline of the [bardic](#) tradition, it fell into [abeyance](#). The present-day format owes much to an eighteenth-century revival arising out of a number of informal eisteddfodau.

The date of the first eisteddfod is a matter of much debate among scholars, but boards for the judging of poetry definitely existed in Wales from at least as early as the twelfth century, and it is likely that the ancient Celtic bards had formalized ways of judging poetry as well. The first eisteddfod can be traced back to 1176, under the auspices of Lord Rhys, at his castle in Cardigan. There he held a grand gathering to which were invited poets and musicians from all over the country. A chair at the Lord's table was awarded to the best poet and musician, a tradition that prevails in the modern day National Eisteddfod. The earliest large-scale eisteddfod that can be proven beyond all doubt to have taken place, however, was the Carmarthen Eisteddfod, which took place in 1451. The next recorded large-scale eisteddfod was held in [Caerwys](#) in 1568. The prizes awarded were a miniature silver chair to the successful poet, a little silver [crwth](#) to the winning fiddler, a silver tongue to the best singer, and a tiny silver harp to the best harpist. Originally, the contests were limited to professional Welsh bards who were paid by the nobility. To ensure the highest standard possible, [Elizabeth I of England](#) commanded that the bards be examined and licensed. As interest in the Welsh arts declined, the standard of the main eisteddfod deteriorated as well and they became more informal. In 1789, Thomas Jones organised an eisteddfod in [Corwen](#), where for the first time the public were admitted. The success of this event led to a revival of interest in Welsh literature and music.

[Iolo Morganwg](#) ([bardic name](#) of [Edward Williams](#)) founded "Gorsedd Beirdd Ynys Prydain" ([Gorsedd](#) of the Bards of the Isle of Britain) in 1792 to restore and replace the ancient eisteddfod. The first eisteddfod of the revival was held in [Primrose Hill](#), [London](#).

*The Gentleman's Magazine* of October 1792 reported on the revival of the eisteddfod tradition.

This being the day on which the autumnal equinox occurred, some Welsh bards resident in London assembled in congress on Primrose Hill, according to ancient usage. Present at the meeting was Edward Jones who had published his "*The Musical and Poetical Reelicks of the Welsh Bards*" in 1784 in a belated effort to try to preserve the native Welsh traditions being so ruthlessly stamped out by the new breed of Methodists.

[The Blue Books'](#) notorious attack on the character of the Welsh as a nation in 1846 led to public anger and the belief that it was important for the Welsh to create a new national image. By the 1850s people began to talk of a national eisteddfod to showcase Wales's culture. In 1858 John Williams ab Ithel held a "National" Eisteddfod complete with Gorsedd in [Llangollen](#). "The great Llangollen Eisteddfod of 1858" was a significant event. [Thomas Stephens](#) won a prize with an essay demolishing the claim of John Williams (the events organiser) that [Madoc](#) discovered America. As Williams had expected Stephens's essay to reinforce the myth, he was not willing to

award the prize to Stephens and, it is recorded, "matters became turbulent". This eisteddfod also saw the first public appearance of [John Ceiriog Hughes](#) who won a prize for a love poem, *Myfanwy Fychan of Dinas Brân*, which became an instant hit. There is speculation that this was a result of its depiction of a "deserving, beautiful, moral, well-mannered Welshwoman", in stark contrast to The Blue Books' depiction of Welsh women as having questionable morals.

The National Eisteddfod Council was created after Llangollen and the Gorsedd consequently merged with it. The Gorsedd holds the right of proclamation and of governance while the Council organises the event. The first true National Eisteddfod organised by the Council was held in [Denbigh](#) in 1860 on a pattern that continues to the present day.

The **Crowning of the Bard** ([Welsh](#): *Coroni'r Bardd*) is one of the most important events in an [eisteddfod](#). The most famous such ceremony takes place at the [National Eisteddfod of Wales](#), and is normally on the Monday afternoon of Eisteddfod week.

A new bardic crown is specially designed and made for each eisteddfod and is awarded to the winning entrant in the competition for the [Pryddest](#), poetry written in free verse.<sup>[2]</sup>

The National Eisteddfod ceremony is presided over by the [Archdruid](#), who reads the judges' comments before announcing the identity of the bard, using only the [nom de plume](#) that the winner has used to submit the work. Up to this point, no one knows the true identity of the bard, who is asked to stand and is then escorted to the stage and crowned. Local children perform a dance to honour the new bard.

Winning the "double" of [bardic chair](#) and crown at the same eisteddfod is a feat that has only been performed a handful of times in the history of the eisteddfod. [Alan Llwyd](#) and [Donald Evans](#) have each performed the double twice.

The **Chairing of the Bard** ([Welsh](#): *Cadeirio'r Bardd*) is one of the most important events in the [Welsh eisteddfod](#) tradition. The most famous chairing ceremony takes place at the [National Eisteddfod of Wales](#), and is always on the Friday afternoon of Eisteddfod week.<sup>[1]</sup> Winners are referred to as [Y Prifardd](#) (literally "The Chief Bard"). The custom of chairing the bard is, however, much older than the modern eisteddfod ceremony, and is known to have taken place as early as 1176.<sup>[2]</sup>



The charring ceremony of the 1958 National Eisteddfod; the victorious poet was [T. Llew Jones](#)

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## Gorsedd of the Bards

The Gorsedd of Bards of the Isle of Britain has a long and interesting history dating back to the end of the eighteenth century. Iolo Morganwg, an academic, originally from Llancafarn in Glamorgan, created the Gorsedd, and this happened on Primrose Hill, London in 1792.



*The honours take place at a ceremony on the Maes during Eisteddfod week.*

Below is a list of those honoured by the Gorsedd of the Bards in 2014.

These honours, presented annually, are an opportunity to recognise individuals from all parts of the country for their achievements and their commitment to Wales, the Welsh language and to their local communities across the whole of Wales.



In line with the Gorsedd of the Bards' arrangements for honouring new members, all new members enter the Gorsedd on the same level, irrespective of whether they are honoured into the Blue or Green robes.

Those who have succeeded in the fields of Law, Science, Sports, Journalism, Media, local / national activities become Honorary Druids – Blue robes for their services to the nation.

The Gorsedd also honours new members to the Green robes for their contribution to the arts. Those who have succeeded in the Gorsedd examination or are eligible because of their degree in literature, music, drama or art, also receive the Green robes, as will the winner of the Osborne Roberts Memorial Prize every year and the winners of the Urdd Crown and Chair.

Only the winners of the main competitions at the National Eisteddfod are honoured with White robes.

The Eisteddfod is held on the 'Maes', an area of around 35 acres of land, which is home to a big pink Pavilion and up to three hundred stands and exhibition spaces. The Pavilion is the focus of competing and ceremonies during the week, but there's plenty of activities for people and children of all ages all over the Maes – and beyond.

There's all types of activities in a wide range of places across the Maes, so whether it's literature, theatre, learning Welsh, science and technology, dance or visual arts, you'll find plenty to see and so at the National Eisteddfod.

With up to three hundred stands on the Maes, selling all kinds of trinkets and treasures – a veritable Mecca for any shopper – with book shops, crafts, jewellery, clothes, art and much more at prices to suit every pocket. Plenty of choice within easy reach – it's the best ever department store for all things Welsh!

Every evening, the Pavilion is transformed into a concert hall, which attracts world-famous performers. Enjoy the relaxed atmosphere of the Maes in the evening at Maes C activities - an eclectic mix of music, poetry, and plenty of fun! Maes B has long earned its place as the main Welsh language music festival, with all the biggest names in Welsh rock and pop performing at the Eisteddfod. So, there's plenty to do and enjoy at the National Eisteddfod – from morning till night!

The language of the Eisteddfod is Welsh and everything is held in Welsh. But, there's a warm welcome for everyone on the Eisteddfod Maes – whatever your language! There's translation equipment available for the Pavilion, and there's plenty of information available to help everyone to have a week to remember.

Entry is free to all Maes activities for the price of a daily ticket to the National Eisteddfod.

In 2009, a commemorative plaque was unveiled on Primrose Hill to celebrate Iolo Morganwg's contribution and the creation of the Gorsedd of the Bards of the Isle of Britain.

The first link between the Gorsedd and the Eisteddfod was in 1819 at the Carmarthen Eisteddfod, and since the creation of the National Eisteddfod in its current form in 1861, a strong and close relationship has developed, with the Gorsedd playing an important role in the Eisteddfod every year.