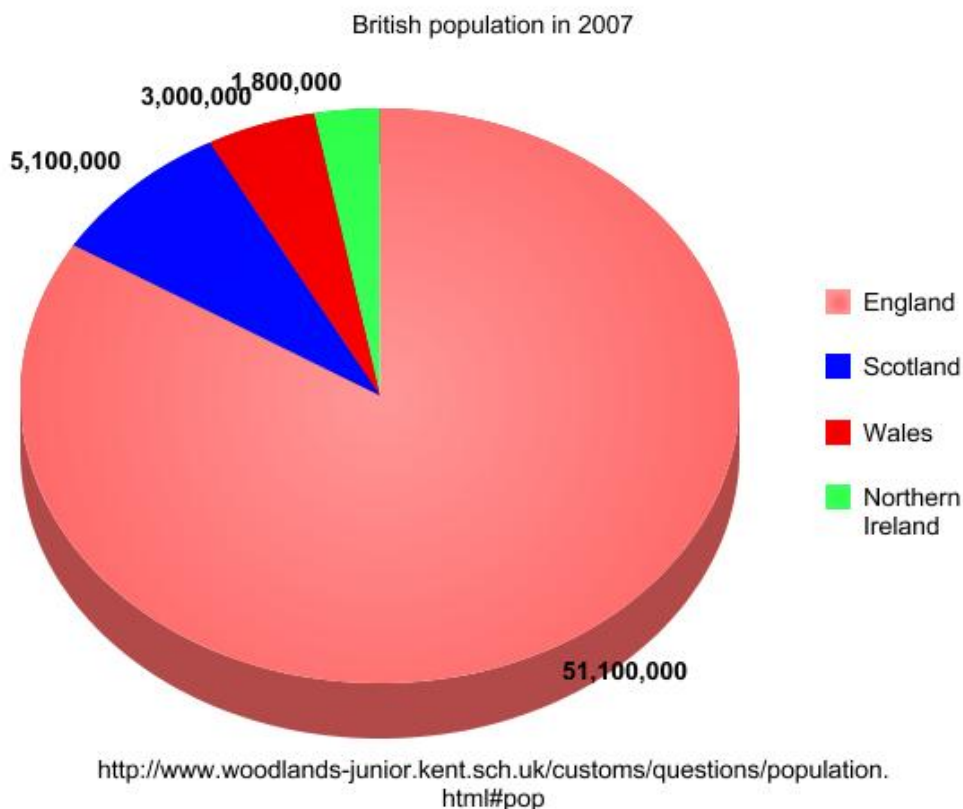


BRITISH CULTURE & SOCIETY II

A Profile of Wales

The Britons, a Celtic tribe, who first settled in the area that is now Wales, had already begun to identify themselves as a distinct culture by the sixth century C.E. The word "Cymry," referring to the country, first appeared in a poem dating from 633. By 700 C.E. , the Britons referred to themselves as Cymry, the country as Cymru, and the language as Cymraeg. The words "Wales" and "Welsh" are Saxon in origin and were used by the invading Germanic tribe to denote people who spoke a different language. The Welsh sense of identity has endured despite invasions, absorption into Great Britain, mass immigration, and, more recently, the arrival of non-Welsh residents.



Language has played a significant role in contributing to the sense of unity felt by the Welsh; more than the other [Celtic languages](#), Welsh has maintained a significant number of speakers. During the eighteenth century a literary and cultural rebirth of the language occurred which further helped to solidify national

identity and create ethnic pride among the Welsh. Central to Welsh culture is the centuries-old folk tradition of poetry and music which has helped keep the Welsh language alive. Welsh intellectuals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries wrote extensively on the subject of Welsh culture, promoting the language as the key to preserving national identity. Welsh literature, poetry, and music flourished in the nineteenth century as literacy rates and the availability of printed material increased. Tales that had traditionally been handed down orally were recorded, both in Welsh and English, and a new generation of Welsh writers emerged.

Location and Geography.

Wales is a part of the United Kingdom and is located in a wide peninsula in the western portion of the island of Great Britain. The island of Anglesey is also considered a part of Wales and is separated from the mainland by the Menai Strait. Wales is surrounded by water on three sides: to the north, the Irish Sea; to the south, the Bristol Channel; and to the west, Saint George's Channel and Cardigan Bay. The English counties of Cheshire, Shropshire, Hereford, Worcester, and Gloucestershire border Wales on the east. Wales covers an area of 8,020 square miles (20,760 square kilometers) and extends 137 miles (220 kilometers) from its most distant points and varies between 36 and 96 miles (58 and 154 kilometers) in width. The capital, Cardiff, is located in the southeast on the Severn Estuary and is also the most important seaport and shipbuilding center. Wales is very mountainous and has a rocky, irregular coastline with numerous bays, the largest of which is Cardigan Bay to the west. The Cambrian Mountains, the most significant range, run north-south through central Wales. Other mountain ranges include the Brecon Beacons to the southeast and Snowdon in the northwest, which reaches an elevation of 3,560 feet (1,085 meters) and is the highest mountain in Wales and England. The temperate climate, mild and moist, has ensured the development of an abundance of plant and animal life. Ferns, mosses, and grasslands as well as numerous wooded areas cover Wales.

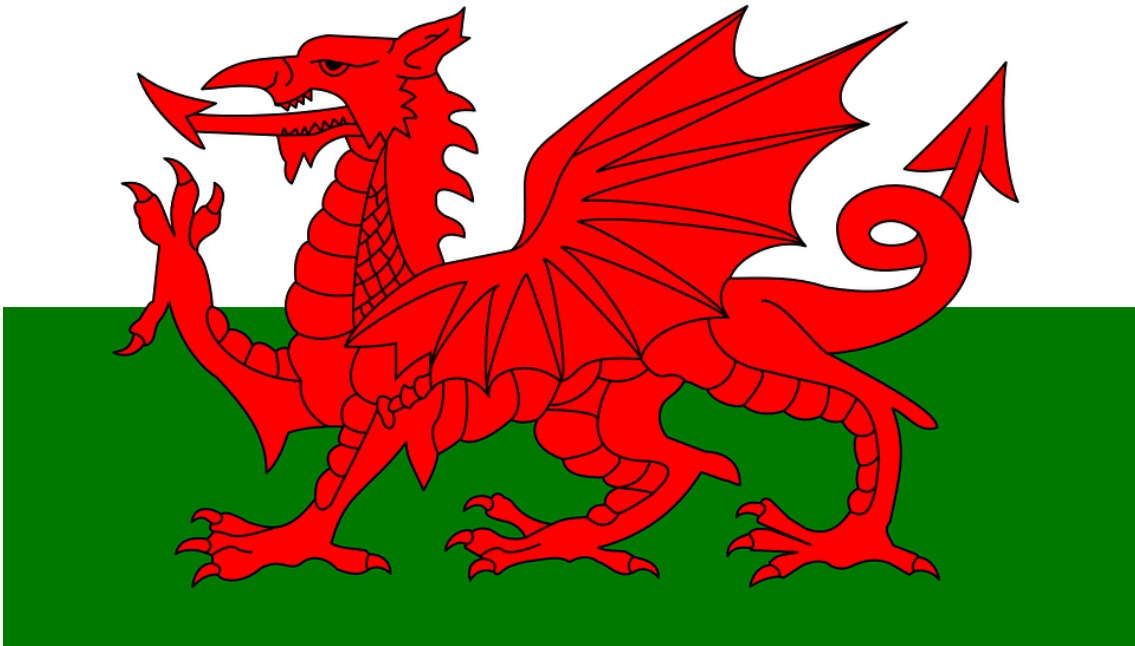
Linguistic Affiliation.

There are approximately 500,000 Welsh speakers today and, due to a renewed interest in the language and culture, this number may increase. Most people in Wales, however, are English-speaking, with Welsh as a second language; in the north and west, many people are Welsh and English bilinguals. English is still the

main language of everyday use with both Welsh and English appearing on signs. In some areas, Welsh is used exclusively and the number of Welsh publications is increasing.

Welsh, or Cymraeg, is a Celtic language belonging to the Brythonic group consisting of Breton, Welsh, and the extinct Cornish. Western Celtic tribes first settled in the area during the Iron Age, bringing with them their language which survived both Roman and Anglo-Saxon occupation and influence, although some features of Latin were introduced into the language and have survived in modern Welsh. Welsh epic poetry can be traced back to the sixth century and represents one of the oldest literary traditions in Europe. The poems of Taliesin and Aneirin dating from the late seventh century reflect a literary and cultural awareness from an early point in Welsh history. Although there were many factors affecting the Welsh language, especially contact with other language groups, the [Industrial Revolution](#) of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries marked a dramatic decline in the number of Welsh speakers, as many non-Welsh people, attracted by the industry that had developed around coal mining in the south and east, moved into the area. At the same time, many Welsh people from rural areas left to find work in London or abroad. This large-scale migration of [non-Welsh-speaking](#) workers greatly accelerated the disappearance of Welsh-speaking communities. Even though there were still around forty Welsh-language publications in the mid-nineteenth century, the regular use of Welsh by the majority of the population began to drop. Over time two linguistic groups emerged in Wales; the Welsh-speaking region known as the Y Fro Cymraeg to the north and west, where more than 80 percent of the population speaks Welsh, and the Anglo-Welsh area to the south and east where the number of Welsh speakers is below 10 percent and English is the majority language. Up until 1900, however, almost half the population still spoke Welsh.

In 1967 the Welsh Language Act was passed, recognizing the status of Welsh as an official language. In 1988 the Welsh Language Board was established, helping to ensure the rebirth of Welsh. Throughout Wales there was a serious effort in the second half of the twentieth century to maintain and promote the language. Other efforts to support the language included Welsh-language television programs, bilingual Welsh-English schools, as well as exclusively Welsh-language nursery schools, and Welsh language courses for adults.



Symbols

The symbol of Wales, which also appears on the flag, is a red dragon. Supposedly brought to the colony of Britain by the Romans, the dragon was a popular symbol in the ancient world and was used by the Romans, the Saxons, and the Parthians. It became the national symbol of Wales when Henry VII, who became king in 1485 and had used it as his battle flag during the battle of Bosworth Field, decreed that the red dragon should become the official flag of Wales. The leek and the daffodil are also important Welsh symbols. One legend connects the leek to Saint David, the patron saint of Wales, who defeated the pagan Saxons in a victorious battle that supposedly occurred in a field of leeks. It is more likely that leeks were adopted as a national symbol because of their importance to the Welsh diet, particularly during Lent when meat was not allowed. Another, less famous Welsh symbol consists of three ostrich plumes and the motto "Ich Dien" (translation: "I serve") from the Battle of Crecy, France, in 1346. It was probably borrowed from the motto of the King of Bohemia, who led the cavalry charge against the English.

Government

The Principality of Wales is governed from Whitehall in London, the name of the administrative and political seat of the British government. Increasing pressure

from Welsh leaders for more autonomy brought devolution of administration in May 1999, meaning that more political power has been given to the Welsh Office in Cardiff. The position of secretary of state for Wales, a part of the British prime minister's cabinet, was created in 1964. In a 1979 referendum a proposal for the creation of a non-legislating Welsh Assembly was rejected but in 1997 another referendum passed by a slim margin, leading to the 1998 creation of the National Assembly for Wales. The assembly has sixty members and is responsible for setting policy and creating legislation in areas regarding education, health, agriculture, transportation, and social services.

Vocabulary Check

Write the English meaning for the following words taken from the text:

- a) denote _____
- b) endured _____
- c) solidify _____
- d) flourished _____
- e) orally _____
- f) temperate _____
- g) accelerated _____
- h) decreed _____
- i) autonomy _____
- j) devolution _____
- k) contend _____

Comprehension Questions

Write the answer to the following questions in your own words with a sentence:

- 1) What 4 events has the Welsh sense of identity survived?

- 2) What played a significant role in keeping the Welsh sense of identity? How was it different from other Celtic languages?

3) What happened in the 18th century? What did this cause?

4) Why did a new generation of Welsh writers emerge in the 19th century (2 reasons)?

5) What caused the decline of Welsh in the 18th & 19th centuries (2 reasons)?

6) How is North-West & South-East Wales different?

7) In the late 20th century, what 4 things were done to promote Welsh?

8) How did the red dragon become a national symbol?

9) Why did the Welsh leek become an important symbol?

10) What caused political power to move from Whitehall?
