

The Role of Religion in Standardising the Welsh Language

The Welsh language, once a collection of diverse regional dialects, underwent a transformation towards a more standardised form. This transition can be traced back to the **1588 translation of the Bible by William Morgan**, which provided a unified written Welsh. Over time, several key historical events and movements contributed to the consolidation and preservation of the Welsh language, including the **Acts of Union (1536 & 1543)**, the **Welsh Methodist Revival (18th century)**, the **publication of dictionaries and grammars**, and **the role of education and printing**.



<https://www.library.wales/discover-learn/digital-exhibitions/printed-material/1588-welsh-bible>

The Social Context of Translating the 1588 Bible

At the time of the Acts of Union (1536 and 1542), few Welshmen or women could have foreseen the publication of a Welsh Bible by the end of the century. Several factors made this

unlikely. Welsh had been denied official status and was excluded from the realms of law and administration. Furthermore, it was decreed that the English Bible and the Book of Common Prayer should be read in every church across the land. The bardic order, the traditional guardian of the literary language, was also in decline. It seemed probable that the language would deteriorate into a despised collection of dialects and eventually disappear.

However, the language did not die, thanks in large part to a group of Welsh scholars who were inspired by the humanistic learning of the Renaissance. Many of these scholars were Protestants, driven by a zeal to make the Scriptures available to all. They were steeped in classical learning and dreamed of elevating the vernacular to the status of a learned language. Their efforts, including the creation of dictionaries, grammars, and scriptural translations, eventually resulted in the 1588 Bible—an important symbol of their success.

In 1563, Parliament passed an Act that ordered the Bible and the Prayer Book to be translated into Welsh by Saint David's Day, 1567. While this goal was not immediately achieved, a translation of the New Testament appeared in 1567, as did a translation of the Prayer Book. Both translations were largely the work of William Salesbury (c. 1520–1584?). While Salesbury's translations were admirable in many respects, they were also flawed by archaisms and an idiosyncratic approach to orthography. These imperfections would soon be addressed by a subsequent effort that would prove even more influential.

The Influence of Bishop William Morgan's 1588 Bible

William Morgan's 1588 Bible profoundly impacted the Welsh-speaking community. It brought the Scriptures to a largely monoglot population, touching the lives of countless thousands. Revised in 1620, and with some adjustments in orthography, this version remained in general use until the final years of the twentieth century. No other Welsh book has had as much influence as Morgan's Bible. It is not only a monumental religious text but also a work of immense linguistic and literary significance.

Morgan's translation was an achievement of both accuracy and elegance. He worked from the Hebrew and Greek originals and consulted the English Bishops' Bible and the Geneva Bible in the process. More than just a faithful translation, Morgan's work was a literary triumph. The translator skilfully shaped the classical language of the poets into the modern literary Welsh we recognise today. In essence, Morgan's Bible is the foundation stone on which modern Welsh literature was built, marking a defining moment in the preservation and elevation of the Welsh language.

Translating the 1588 Bible

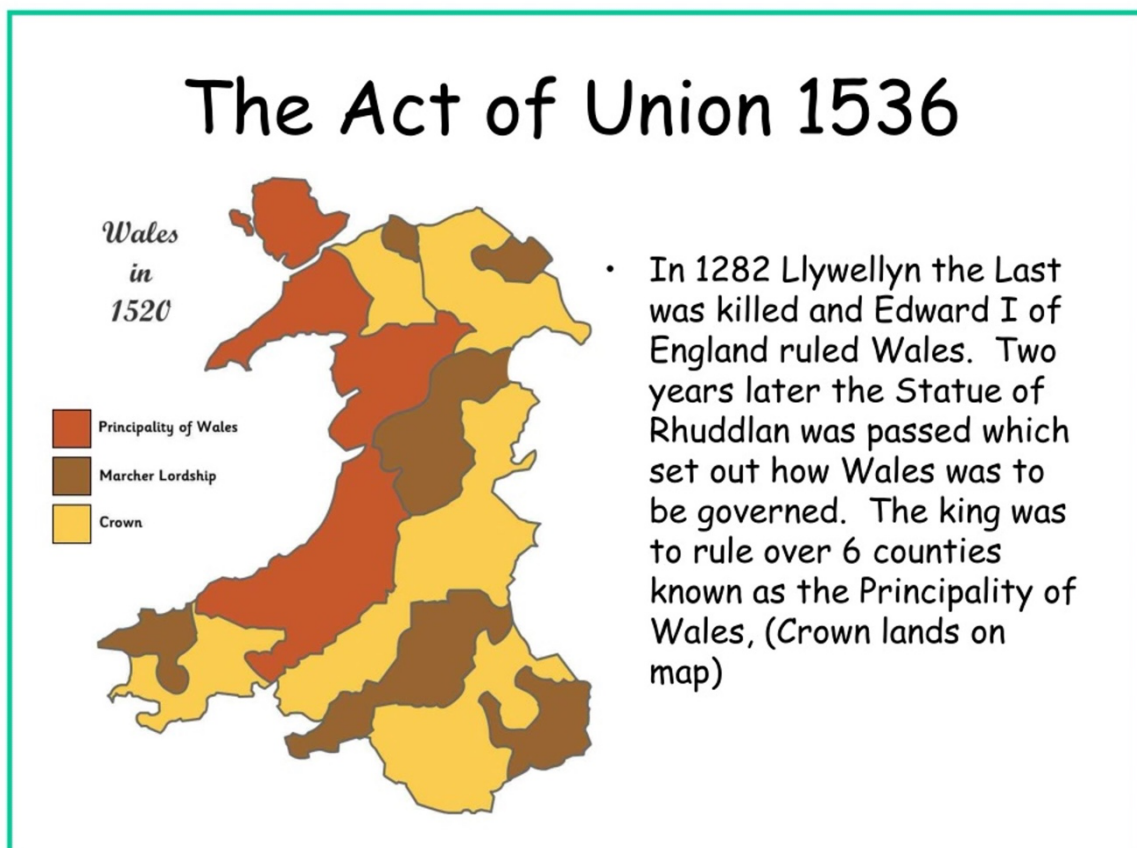
The remarkable Bible published in 1588 was primarily the work of William Morgan, who appears to have undertaken this monumental task around 1578. It involved both the translation of the Old Testament from the original Hebrew and Greek texts and the adaptation of Salesbury's earlier translation of the New Testament. Morgan's translation was thorough and methodical, incorporating the best of earlier translations while ensuring the accuracy and literary quality of his work. The result was not just a translation of the Bible into Welsh but the creation of a new standard for the Welsh language, one that would resonate for centuries to come.

Morgan's Bible stands as both a linguistic achievement and a cultural milestone, shaping the Welsh language and influencing the lives of generations of Welsh speakers.

<https://tinyurl.com/1588-Welsh-Bible>

The Acts of Union (1536 & 1543)

The **Acts of Union**, passed under **Henry VIII**, fully incorporated Wales into England, profoundly impacting the Welsh language.



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laws_in_Wales_Acts_1535_and_1542

Key Provisions:

- **Abolition of Welsh Legal and Political Autonomy** – The Welsh legal system was replaced by English common law, integrating Welsh landowners into English governance.
- **Imposition of English as the Official Language** – English became the only legal and administrative language, excluding Welsh from public affairs.
- **Creation of Welsh Counties** – Traditional Welsh lordships were abolished, replacing them with 13 counties governed under English law.

Impact on the Welsh Language:

- **Marginalisation in Public Life** – Welsh speakers had to learn English for political and legal participation.
- **Preservation Through Religion** – Despite restrictions, the Welsh Bible (1588) helped preserve and standardise the language.
- **Long-Term Effects** – While the Acts led to the decline of Welsh in formal settings, the language survived in rural areas and religious communities.

The Welsh Methodist Revival (18th Century)

The **Welsh Methodist Revival** was a religious movement that significantly strengthened the Welsh language.

Key Figures:

- **Griffith Jones** – Established **circulating schools**, increasing Welsh literacy.



- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Griffith_Jones_\(priest\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Griffith_Jones_(priest))

- **Howell Harris & Daniel Rowland**

Spread Welsh Methodism, promoting the use of Welsh in preaching.



- <https://www.unionpublishing.org/resource/the-welsh-saints-1714-1814-howell-harris-and-daniel-rowland/>
- <http://ukwells.org/wells/daniel-rowland-meets-howell-harris>

William Williams Pantycelyn

A prolific hymn writer who reinforced Welsh as a literary language.



- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Williams_Pantycelyn
- <https://www.unionpublishing.org/resource/the-welsh-saints-1714-1814-william-williams/>
- **Key Features of the Revival:**
- **Open-Air Preaching** – Allowed the masses to engage with religious teachings in Welsh.
- **Growth of Methodist Societies** – Formed the basis of **Welsh Nonconformist Christianity**.
- **Increase in Literacy** – Circulating schools ensured that the Welsh population could read the Bible in their native language.
- **Strengthening of Welsh Identity** – Encouraged cultural pride and reinforced Welsh as a religious and communal language.

Impact on the Welsh Language:

- Gave Welsh a renewed purpose and dignity despite English suppression.
 - Helped standardise Welsh through hymnals and religious literature.
 - Ensured high literacy rates among Welsh speakers, preserving the language into the modern era.
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The Publication of Dictionaries and Grammars

From the **16th century onward**, scholars worked to codify and refine Welsh grammar and vocabulary, playing a key role in standardising the language.

Key Works and Scholars:

- **John Davies of Mallwyd (1621, 1632)** – Created one of the first Welsh grammar books and dictionaries, formalising Welsh spelling and grammar.



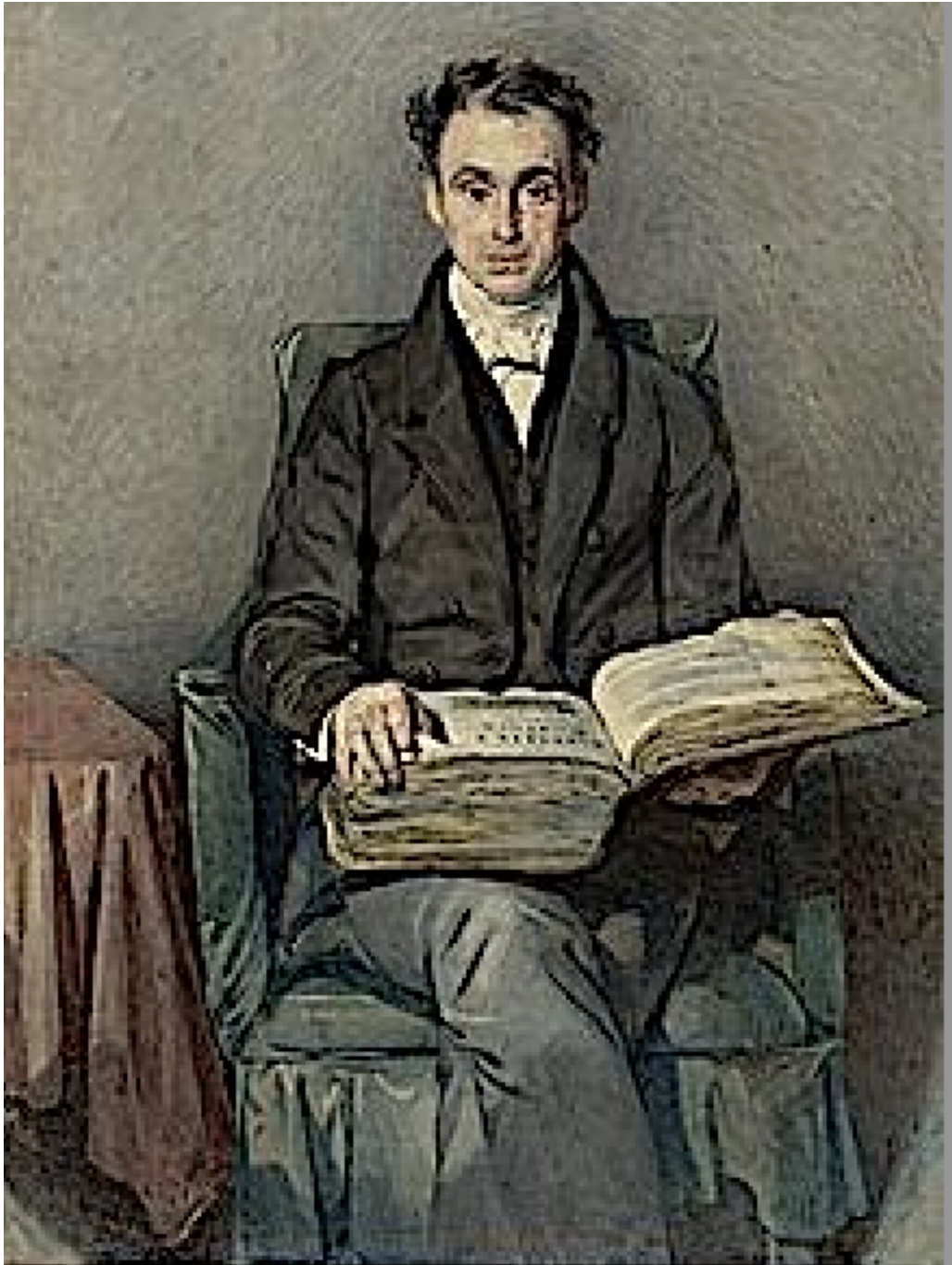
- <https://tinyurl.com/John-Davies-Mallwyd>

- **Thomas Richards (1753)** – Produced a **Welsh-English dictionary**, bridging the gap between the two languages.



<https://www.bywgraffiadur.cymru/article/s-RICH-THO-1710>

- William Owen Pughe (1793)
- Developed a modern Welsh-English dictionary.



- <https://tinyurl.com/William-Owen-Pughe>

Daniel Silvan Evans (1818–1903)

Published one of the most comprehensive 19th-century Welsh dictionaries.



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel_Silvan_Evans

- **Sir John Morris-Jones (1913)**

- Established **grammatical accuracy in literary Welsh.**



- <https://tinyurl.com/John-Morris-Jones>

Impact on the Welsh Language:

- **Standardisation** – Created a unified and formal structure for written Welsh.
 - **Preservation** – Strengthened the language at a time when English dominance threatened it.
 - **Foundation for Modern Welsh** – Influenced later dictionaries, such as **Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru (University of Wales Dictionary)**.
 - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geiriadur_Prifysgol_Cymru
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Education and Printing

Education and printing played vital roles in promoting and standardising the Welsh language.



Education and Welsh Literacy:

- **Early Welsh Education (16th–18th Century)** – The **Welsh Bible (1588)** and **Griffith Jones’s circulating schools** promoted Welsh literacy.
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- **19th-Century Suppression** – The **1847 'Blue Books' Report** blamed Welsh for social backwardness, leading to policies that discouraged its use in schools.
- <https://tinyurl.com/Blue-Books-1847>
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- **The Welsh Not** – A form of punishment used to discourage children from speaking Welsh in school.
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Welsh_Not
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- **20th-Century Revival – The 1967 Welsh Language Act** granted some legal status to Welsh, leading to the growth of **Welsh-medium education**.
- <https://tinyurl.com/Welsh-Language-Act-1967>

Printing and the Growth of Welsh Literature:

- **First Welsh Books (1546–17th Century)**
- <https://tinyurl.com/First-Welsh-Books>
- The printing of Welsh books, including
- **Yn y Lhyvyr Hwnn (1546)** and the **Welsh Bible (1588)**, provided a written standard.
- <https://www.library.wales/discover-learn/digital-exhibitions/printed-material/yny-lhyvyr-hwnn>
- **19th-Century Welsh Press** – Newspapers such as *Seren Gomer* (1814) and *Baner ac Amserau Cymru* fostered Welsh cultural identity.

Seren Gomer

Baner ac Amserau Cymru



<https://www.newspapers.com/paper/baner-ac-amserau-cymru/7454/?tab=browse>

Impact of Education and Printing:

- ✓ **Increased Literacy** – Ensured Welsh remained a widely read language.
- ✓ **Preserved National Identity** – Reinforced Welsh cultural pride.
- ✓ **Resisted English Domination** – Helped prevent the extinction of Welsh.
- ✓ **Foundation for Modern Welsh** – Supported today's Welsh-language education, media, and literature.

Conclusion

The standardisation of the Welsh language was driven by a complex interplay of religious, educational, and literary efforts over centuries. While the Acts of Union sought to diminish its use, key developments—such as the translation of the Welsh Bible, the influence of the Methodist Revival, the creation of dictionaries and grammars, and the expansion of Welsh-language education and printing—ensured its resilience. These historical efforts not only safeguarded the language but also laid the foundation for contemporary Welsh-language policy, education, and cultural identity. Today, they continue to shape the ongoing revival and preservation of Welsh in modern Wales.