



Keith Morris

The National Eisteddfod

This travelling festival revels in all things Welsh – from music and dance to language and literature. **Elliw Iwan** dives into the week-long celebration

The National Eisteddfod, held every year during the first week of August, is a festival celebrating the culture and language of Wales. It is the natural showcase for Welsh music, dance, visual arts, literature, original performances and much more – and all in the Welsh language.

The history of the Eisteddfod in Wales can be traced back to 1176, when the first festival was held in Cardigan, with the modern history of the organisation dating back to 1861.

Traditionally a competition-based festival attracting over 6,000 competitors and hundreds of competitions every year, the festival has developed and evolved over recent years. While the competitions form the central focus for the week, the *Maes* (the Eisteddfod site) itself has grown and developed into a vibrant festival with hundreds of events and activities for the whole family.

Eisteddfod organiser Elen Elis says, “there is nothing quite like the atmosphere on the Eisteddfod Maes. With colourful and vibrant events and activities around every corner, this

is Welsh culture at its informal best. With over 800 ‘official’ events and activities during the week, it’s the perfect festival to try out different things, as everything is free during the day once you’ve paid for your ticket. The programme is online, so have a look before you come, choose a session or two, but leave plenty of time to explore and find some of the little secrets hidden away in the hundreds of activities around the Maes. If this is your first visit, step in, relax, and have a day to remember.”

Bryn Terfel started his world-famous singing career competing on the National Eisteddfod Pavilion stage; the Super Furry Animals controversially drove a real tank, their Techno Tank, onto the Maes to blast out techno music in the late 90s; Hollywood’s Matthew Rhys and Ioan Gruffudd are past winners and keen Eisteddfod goers and 6Music’s Cerys Matthews helped Hardeep Singh Kohli enjoy his visit to one of the largest travelling cultural festivals in Europe in 2008.

The poet, writer and musician Benjamin Zephaniah visited the Eisteddfod in 2015. In

his interview with the BBC’s Welsh language online news service *Cymru Fyw*, he said: ‘*I am a multiculturalist. In England, on the whole, when we talk about multiculturalism, we tend to talk about black people, Asian... and sometimes we forget that there are local cultures which are very different to English mainstream culture and literature. So when I come to Wales, I treat Wales like a different country with a culture and language of its own. And if Wales is a part of Britain, then that culture is an important part of Britain.*’

The week-long festival travels from place to place, alternating between north and south Wales, attracting around 150,000 visitors and over 250 trade stands and stalls. The festival is the pinnacle of an 18-month community project, providing an array of opportunities for the host area to get involved, from choosing the themes and texts for the competitions and events on the Eisteddfod Maes to raising awareness of local history and personalities, which gives a local flavour to each edition of the Eisteddfod.



For many, the spectacular Gorsedd ceremonies, a gathering of modern-day bards, are an integral part of the Eisteddfod festival, but in reality, the Gorsedd and the Eisteddfod are two separate organisations.

The Gorsedd of the Bards of the Isle of Britain has a long and interesting history dating back to the end of the 18th century. It was created in London in June 1792 by the Welsh academic Iolo Morganwg, originally from Glamorgan. He wanted to emphasise the fact that the heritage and culture of the Celts belonged to the Welsh, and felt that the creation of the Gorsedd was an excellent way to reflect this. The first link between the Eisteddfod and the Gorsedd was at the Carmarthenshire Eisteddfod in 1819, a link that has continued since the creation of the Eisteddfod in its current form in 1861.

Six Gorsedd ceremonies are held at the Eisteddfod annually, either around replica ceremonial stones on the Maes or in the Pavilion. The first is the Crowning Ceremony, which is led by the Archdruid and honours one of Wales’ leading poets. The Prose Medal ceremony is on the Wednesday afternoon and the final ceremony of the week, when the winner of the Eisteddfod Chair for poetry in *cynganedd* (strict metre poetry) is honoured on the Friday. This ceremony is held on the Pavilion stage and the building is often packed to find out who has won the coveted prize.

This year, with the Eisteddfod held in Monmouthshire, the life and legacy of Augusta Plu, Lady Llanover, will be celebrated. Born in Abergavenny in 1802, she was a Welsh heiress, best known as a patron of the Welsh arts who made a huge impact on Welsh culture and the preservation of its customs.



‘Pnawn Llawen Llanover’, stories and music dedicated to the legend that was Lady Llanover, promises to be one of the highlights of the week’s events at the *Tŷ Gwerin* (Folk House), a large and beautiful yurt, hosting all folk and traditional events on the Maes.

Other 2016 highlights of *Tŷ Gwerin* includes Ar Log, celebrating 40 years in Welsh folk showbiz; local lad Oli Wilson-Dickson of Alaw and Jamie Smith’s Mabon, performing with both bands; and Cowbois Rhos Botwnnog, three brothers storming the scene with their blend of Welsh folk/alternative country tunes. Angharad Jenkins will perform with her band Calan and her new project, Ffidlo, bringing the best folk fiddlers from Wales together. Plu will perform their album of folk songs for children live, and Gwilym Bowen Rhys, the brother in this trio of siblings, launches his solo album during the week. The Stomp Cerdd Dant will be held on the Thursday



Clockwise from far left: the *Maes* (Eisteddfod festival site); modern-day bards performing at the Gorsedd ceremony; folk of all ages are welcome; harps feature prominently, especially in the *cerdd dant* and expect plenty of clog dancing!

night. *Cerdd dant* is a unique tradition of singing lyrics over a harp accompaniment, and while the *cerdd*

dant competitions are taken very seriously in the Pavilion, the mood at the Stomp is lighter, where the winner is the one who receives the most laughs, coupling musical prowess with risqué poetry and a play on words.

On the Thursday night in the Pavilion, Radio 1 DJ Huw Stephens will present the current stars of the Welsh scene – Candelas, Yr Ods and Swnami – who will be accompanied by the Welsh Pops Orchestra. This will provide a novel way to hear some of Wales’ best-known pop and rock songs.

The Eisteddfod has a Welsh-only rule, which enforces the country’s constitution and is the driving force behind its

whole existence – to promote Welsh language and culture. Non-Welsh speaking visitors needn’t worry however; it is an inclusive and welcoming festival. Translation services are available in the Pavilion and bilingual information is handy. There is also a centre for learning Welsh on the Maes. ♦

+ DATES The next Eisteddfod will be in Monmouthshire and District, on the Castle Meadows in Abergavenny, July 29-August 6
+ ONLINE eisteddfod.wales

Ffled Llywelyn/Keith Morris