

# MYSTERIOUS AFAN CUDD

## CHILDREN IN MEDIEVAL WALES

Do you ever wonder what it would have been like to be a child in the time of Owain Glyndwr?

In some ways it would have been very different – no computers, no mobile phones, no internet, no electricity, only candle light and firelight, no hot water on tap, no cars or trains or planes ...

And no teenagers, because by the time you were twelve you were already part of the adult world of work.

But some things would be the same. Children played much the same games – hide and seek, catch, hopscotch, all sorts of ball games – and sang the same rhymes. They enjoyed the open air, and the special celebrations – Christmas, May Day, Midsummer, the fire festival in the autumn – there were bonfires in early November long before Guy Fawkes was born.

One thing that you would almost certainly have missed was going to school. There *were* schools, but mostly for those who were going to join the Church and become monks or nuns or clergymen and had to be able to read the Bible. Instead, after the first few years you would begin to learn the skills you would need when you were grown up.



Detail from Children's Games by Pieter Bruegel the Elder 1560  
Original held in Kunthistorichesmuseum, Vienna, Austria  
Pieter Brueghel the Elder, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

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Boys who came from a noble family would be sent away to live, perhaps with a friend or relative, and there they would learn how to be a soldier, how to handle weapons and ride a horse but also how to behave in polite company. Learning to read and write was less important – there were very few books anyway, because they all had to be written out by hand, and they were very expensive.

As for the girls, they would be taught by their mothers, or perhaps by a governess, and they would learn how to run a household. They would not be expected to do the cooking and cleaning themselves, but they needed to know how these things were done. They would also learn to spin and embroider and how to entertain visitors.

If you were a boy and lived in a town, and your family could afford to pay a fee, then you were likely to be apprenticed to a trade. That meant that you were obliged to serve your master, who might be a merchant or a craftsman, for anything up to seven years while you learned about his business or profession. Your master would feed you and clothe you while you worked for him, and see that you behaved yourself – apprentices were well-known for getting up to mischief.

The girls would have to learn how to look after a household, though they might be expected to do more of the daily work of cleaning and cooking than the daughters of the nobility. But if your family were poor, then you would work as a servant, doing the rough work.



Swaddled baby and a toddler in a baby walker  
Histoire d'ancienne jusqu' à César, Bodleian Douce 353  
<https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/e16412ca-c8be-461a-86ac-de59c6464fe6/surfaces/36b1a45e-7eac-41aa-ae1a-2fb6813ae46e/>

And if you were a farmer's child, you would take part in the farm work as soon as you were able. Even very young children could scare the crows away from the crops or pick up stones in the fields in winter so that they did not damage the ploughshares in the spring ploughing.

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Miniature for the entry *etas* "age" in the *Omne Bonum* encyclopedia (London, 14th century, BL Royal MS 6 E vii, fol. 67v) showing children playing with toys and catching butterflies. James le Palmer / anonymous illustrator  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Omne\\_Bonum#/media/File:Omne\\_Bonum\\_Royal\\_6Evii67v\\_Etas.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Omne_Bonum#/media/File:Omne_Bonum_Royal_6Evii67v_Etas.jpg)

Girls helped with the household tasks and looked after the younger children, but they also cared for sick or injured animals and looked after the poultry in the farmyard, collecting the eggs. If your family did not have a farm, then you might go away to work as soon as you were old enough, as a farm worker or a maidservant.

It would often have been a hard life, for everyone, whether you lived in a castle or a cottage - but there were holidays too, and fair days, when there were music and dancing and storytelling. You will find some of those stories in this section of the website. And when you are listening to them, imagine that you are sitting round a blazing fire on a cold winter's night in the middle of your family, just as Owain Glyndwr's children would have been all those years ago.

Adapted from: 'Children in Medieval Wales' by Sally Roberts Jones

From websites:

[https://www.owain-glyndwr.wales/fate\\_of\\_owain\\_glyndwr.html](https://www.owain-glyndwr.wales/fate_of_owain_glyndwr.html)

<https://stores.renstore.com/history-and-biography/childrens-lives-in-the-middle-ages-and-the-renaissance>

Also see: 'Medieval Children' by Nicholas Orme Yale University Press 2003