

OATMEAL AND OATCAKES

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To the Welshman, agriculture is ‘the first craft of mankind’ from which every other rural craft developed. This statement is particularly true, when we consider the relationship between agriculture and food. In former times the Welsh and their animals depended on the produce of the land. Since the land is mainly suitable for rearing livestock, cattle and sheep farming were the main rural industries. Despite this, in the past people tried to grow crops to satisfy their needs. Because of the nature of the soil and the climate, the most common crops were oats and barley, with wheat restricted to the more fertile lowland valleys.

Our richest sources of information on early Welsh agriculture are the Laws of Hywel Dda. They list wheat, barley and oats as the main crops. When Giraldus Cambrensis travelled through Wales with Archbishop Baldwin in 1188, he noted that very little wheat was grown in Wales at that time, but there was an abundance of oats. ‘Only in March and April, once only for oats, do they cultivate the soil; and they do not labour to turn the soil twice in the summer, and a third time in the winter, to grow wheat for threshing. Almost all the people live on animals, oats, milk, cheese and butter. They eat a lot of meat, but not much bread.’

Throughout the centuries, oats have been an important crop in Wales, and farmers were reluctant to experiment with other crops. George Owen noted that the Welshmen of North Pembrokeshire during the reign of Elizabeth I were still

growing oats, as did their ancestors for many generations before them, on land that was suitable for wheat or rye, because ‘they preferred the old grain’. R.T.Jenkins makes the same point in his book on Wales in the 18th century : *Hanes Cymru yn y Ddeunawfed Ganrif*. He says that ‘the chief source of food for our ancestors were oats, the hairy old oats.’

After harvesting and threshing the oat crop, the farmer would take it to the mill to be dried, hulled and ground. The name ‘gynos’ was used in south Cardiganshire for the oats intended for household use, as opposed to the oats that were fed to the animals. In some areas the farmer himself was responsible for drying the oats in the mill kiln. In the evening he would invite his friends to join him and they would hold a *noson lawen* (concert) around the fire as the oats dried on the kiln floor. ‘Shimli’ was the local name for the evening’s entertainment.

The next step was to hull the oats, that is, to separate the kernel from the husk and dust. To do this, the oats were fed through the mill stones, taking care that the stones did not touch the kernel. It was important that the kernel remained intact. This process was then repeated, but with the runner stone raised slightly. Then the kernels were roughly ground, and the meal sieved twice to remove the husks and the coarse meal from the pure oatmeal.

In every farmhouse there were oak chests to hold the oatmeal. To keep the oatmeal absolutely dry, the chests had to be made of hard wood which contained no sap. These chests were kept in a warm, dry room – usually on the upper floor of the house – as oatmeal formed the basis of most of the dishes eaten by the family throughout the winter months and on into Spring.

There is evidence, from many parts of Wales, of the importance of packing the oatmeal tightly into its container. In some areas a specific piece of wood was used, but more often than not the oatmeal was stamped down. The person responsible would put on a pair of clean white stockings before stepping into the chest. Men, women and children would take part. The aim was to pack the flour tight, so as to drive out the air and thus keep it fresh and free from mites.

The most primitive method of bread-making involved mixing a little coarse flour with water to make dough, and forming it into thin loaves which were baked on the hearth. Oatcakes are a direct descendant of this primitive bread. It is said that oatcakes were the staple bread of the people who lived in the mountainous areas of Britain in Roman times, though the Romans themselves favoured wheat bread. By the early Middle Ages we know that flour made of oats and barley and ground by hand mills, was the chief constituent of the bread commonly eaten in Wales. This bread was formed into thin loaves and cooked on an iron griddle. The Laws of Hywel Dda include wheat bread and oat bread in the *dawnbwyd*, the food tax that was paid twice a year to the king. According to the Book of Blegywryd, the winter *dawnbwyd* consisted of 'sixty wheat loaves, six of them of fine flour – four for the hall and two for the chamber – from the wheat crop, and if no wheat is grown, then oat bread, six being round for the hall and the chamber – the width of each loaf the distance from elbow to wrist, thick enough not to bend if gripped on both sides, or else as thick as two fingers.' This strongly suggests that wheat was not grown in all areas, and that the only other choice was oat bread. No mention is made of barley or rye bread. The

significance of these measurements will become clear later on, when the craft of oatcake making is discussed.

According to Giraldus Cambrensis the Welsh ate very little bread in the Middle Ages, but he does note that they baked a sort of thin wide bread daily. These were probably oatcakes, given that he also notes that everyone survived on a diet of animals and oats.

By the seventeenth century, we know that wheat was grown on the rich soil of the Vale of Glamorgan, and by the end of the century a Glamorgan poet tells of a certain Hopkin Thomas Philip of the parish of Llandyfodwg, higher up in the hills, who managed to grow strong wheat. (v. Hopkiniaid Morgannwg Bangor 1909).

Despite this, it seems that very little wheat bread was eaten by the farmers of the Glamorgan hills at that time. For instance this entry in the will of farmer Wiliam Rowland of Llanfabon, who died in 1676, shows that ‘a tripod and one iron-plate for baking oaten bread’ was an important possession. Indeed, visitors to the county have testified that oat bread was the daily bread of the smallholders of the area as late as the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth. According to Richard Warner, who wrote at the end of the eighteenth century, the food eaten by the small farmers of Glamorgan in 1806 was very basic, and included ‘oatmeal bread with a relish of miserable cheese’. Benjamin Heath Malkin, who visited South Wales in 1803, confirms that oat bread was still eaten in the more mountainous areas of Glamorgan: ‘in the mountains some oaten bread is used, but not so generally as in former days.’

In his book R.T.Jenkins notes that oat bread and barley bread were an important part of the smallholder's regular diet. 'Not for him the wheat bread and the rich dishes of the Vales of Clwyd, Severn and Wye, or the Vale of Glamorgan. Barley bread and oat bread, flummery and a rather mean cawl, and an occasional small piece of ham...that was his diet apart from on feast days.' This is confirmed by William Williams, Llandygai, in his book *Observations on the Snowdon Mountains*, 1802. Williams praises the food and the welcome he received in the mountain communities and makes this comment: 'in farmhouses they have three sorts of bread, namely wheat, barley and oatmeal but the oatmeal they chiefly use: this with milk, butter, cheese and potatoes is their common summer food.'

Although the evidence is rather piecemeal, I think it's reasonable to conclude that oat bread was an important part of the smallholder's diet, in all parts of Wales, until the end of the eighteenth century. Walter Davies, in his survey of agriculture in Wales (*General View of Agriculture and Domestic Economy*) in 1810 supports this view, and in his opinion it was especially true of the counties of Merioneth, Caernarvon and Anglesey. He criticises the farmers of that area for being backward-looking and planting oats and barley on land which was, in his opinion, fertile and capable of producing good wheat. By continuing to eat oat bread, they were unable to move on and experiment with wheat crops. If they did take the risk, one bad harvest was enough to turn them against wheat. They were not interested in persevering so as to have better quality bread.

Needless to say, sticking to tradition keeps a craft alive. If the Welsh hadn't persisted in eating oatcakes from one century to the next, we would have no knowledge of the craft. It was a skill handed down from mother to daughter, from one generation to the next, both orally and by example. As far as I know, nothing was written till the nineteenth century. The first reference I have found was by Walter Davies in his aforementioned book. He gives a brief description of mixing a quantity of oatmeal with a little warm water, pressing the dough into thin round loaves, and baking them on an iron griddle above the fire. He does not describe how the loaves were formed, nor mention the tools needed.

In 1888 the magazine *Cymru Fu*, edited by George H. Brierley, published a correspondence between 'Glanffrwd' and 'Aneurin Vardd'. During the course of a discussion on old Welsh customs, the two antiquarians reflected on the traditions associated with making oatcakes in Glamorgan and Monmouth. It's worth looking closely at the contents of these letters, because, in my opinion, they provide important evidence on the craft and tradition of oatcake making in that part of South Wales during the first half of the nineteenth century.

Aneurin Vardd (Aneurin Jones, born in Bedwas, Monmouth, 1822-1904) was the son of a miller in Gelli-groes, Pontllanfraith. He trained as an architect and civil engineer, but after the death of his father he became a miller, before emigrating to America in 1864. Firstly, he refers to the term 'armerth bara ceirch', as used in Glamorgan and Gwent, meaning 'making oatcakes.' His definition of 'armerth' is taken from William

Owen (-Pughe)'s dictionary: 'a preparing or providing, the making of bread'. Glanffrwd (William Thomas, 1843-90), who came from Ynys-y-bŵl in the parish of Llanwynno, Glamorgan, was also familiar with the term 'ammarth bara ceirch'. He claimed that the old word 'armerth' had disappeared from the Glamorgan dialect, except in this context. He also mentions the various forms of the word – 'armaeth', ammath' and 'ammarth' – that were used in different parts of the county. He refers in particular to 'diwrnod ammaeth' (ammaeth day), the day set aside by Glamorgan families for making oatcakes. According to Glanffrwd, the oatcakes were made in couples, one couple being three dozen oatcakes.

Aneurin Vardd draws attention to the 'craft' of making oatcakes. In his opinion it required great skill and many families would employ experts to do the work on their behalf. He compares the technique of making oatcakes to the process of beating gold, except that the loaves, or thin layers of oatcake, were formed by hand. A rolling-pin would be of no use, he says, though he offers no explanation for this statement. After each oatcake had reached the right width, it was placed face down on a thick layer of oatmeal. The oatcakes were placed one on top of the other, ready for baking, with a thick layer of oatmeal in between to stop them sticking. The baking had to be carefully monitored. The temperature of the griddle had to be constant. The oatcakes were laid flat on the griddle, one at a time, and during baking, the tip of a feather was used to wet the surface of the oatcake with a mixture of water, milk and sugar.

Glanffrwd, in his letter dated 18 November 1888, gives a more detailed account of wetting the surface of the oatcake. The term used by the locals to describe this process was ‘britho bara ceirch’ (colouring the oatcakes), and oatcakes thus treated were known as ‘coloured oatcakes’ in contrast to the ordinary oatcakes, which were known as ‘bara gwyn’ (white oatcakes). The writer attributes the custom of colouring oatcakes in Glamorgan to the rise of monasteries. At certain times of the year, farmers, as well as monks, were expected to bring gifts to the altar. Bread was the usual gift, and to try and improve the quality of the ordinary oatcakes before presenting them to the altar, they began to colour the cakes. According to Glanffrwd, to the old people coloured oatcakes meant eucharist bread. In support of this he quotes a couplet attributed to Rhys Goch ap Rhicert, a chaired bard of Tŷr Iarll, who is said to predate Dafydd ap Gwilym.

Bara ceirch brith chwiawg

Bara offeren i ddiawg.

(Coloured oatcakes, eucharist bread for the lazy)

We only have the word of Iolo Morganwg that Rhys Goch was actually a poet, as Professor Griffith John Williams pointed out in an article in *Y Beirniad* (Vol. viii, No. 4). But whoever penned the couplet, the fact that a Glamorgan poet refers to coloured oatcakes in conjunction with the eucharist is significant in terms of the history of oatcakes. Glanffrwd himself witnessed the last vestiges of the tradition of baking two types of oatcake: white oatcakes for servants and coloured

oatcakes for the master and his family. The servants were only allowed coloured oatcakes on special occasions.

To summarise the information recorded by Glanffrwd and Aneurin Vardd: they both note that families in Glamorgan set aside a day for ‘armerth bara ceirch’, and they both refer to the practice of wetting the surface of the oatcakes with a mixture of water, milk and sugar during baking. But only Glanffrwd uses the term ‘coloured oatcake’ and he is the only one who offers an explanation. The Glamorgan poet (?Iolo Morganwg) confirms that the name ‘coloured oatcakes’ was indeed used, and he too associates it with eucharist bread. So it’s fair to assume that oatcake-making was fairly widespread in certain areas of Glamorgan and Monmouth till the last half of the nineteenth century, whether they were white oatcakes or coloured oatcakes.

I tried to gather oral evidence to confirm what I’d learnt from written sources and to document the survival of the craft of oatcake making in the counties of South Wales. But I failed in my search for women in Glamorgan who had carried on the tradition, and I only met a few who remembered seeing home-made oatcakes on the table. I had to go to the agricultural areas of the south-west to find some trace of this craft. I use the word ‘trace’, because the women who provided information were over eighty years old, and most had only childhood memories of their mothers’ generation making oatcakes. The best sources were the daughters of smallholders. The craft flourished in those areas of the country where oats, rather than wheat, were grown at the beginning of the twentieth century, but smallholders in the mountainous areas had already turned

their land over to sheep, and were no longer growing crops, so in their case the craft of oatcake making had disappeared from living memory. The areas where I gained most information were Abernant and Cynwil Elfed, south Carmarthenshire; Capel Iwan on the border between north Pembrokeshire and south Cardiganshire; Crug-y-bar, Pumsaint, Cwrtycadno and Cellan, in north Carmarthenshire; Tregaron, Ffair Rhos, Llwynpiod, Bronant in Cardiganshire; and Cray, Llanwrtyd and Abergwesyn in Breconshire. Making oatcakes was a special occasion in the homes of most of these women, and so they paid special attention to the process and the details have remained fresh in their minds. I gathered evidence from more than one woman in each area, to confirm that the details were indeed correct. The conversations were taped, and are kept in the archive of the Folk Museum. Here is the information they provided on the craft of making and baking oatcakes in south-west Wales at the beginning of the twentieth century:

Place a good measure of oatmeal in a bowl and gradually add cold water to make a fairly dry dough. Most of the women stressed that the secret of making good oatcakes lay in the mixing and kneading. Knead the dough well to make the oatmeal stick together, otherwise it could crack when forming the oatcakes. When the dough has reached the required consistency, dust the table with oatmeal, place the dough on it and roll with both hands to make one long thick roll. Divide this roll into a number of equal parts, and form into little round balls. Flatten the balls in pairs, one to each hand, by pressing and turning, till they reach the size of a large saucer. Place the oatcakes one on top of the other, with a layer of oatmeal in between, till there is a pile of about twelve. Using the left hand

to make sure the side of the pile keeps its rounded shape, flatten the pile with the palm of the right hand, and as the oatcakes grow in size, use the arm from the wrist to the elbow, to press them into the shape of a large dinner plate. Give the pile a quarter turn every now and then to make sure that the oatcakes are even. Then separate the oatcakes carefully, brush off the oatmeal with a clean feather, and bake one at a time on the griddle.



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PLATE 1 Pressing oatcakes with the palm: Mrs May Davies
Llan-saint, Dyfed



F14 365

PLATE 2 Pressing oatcakes with the forearm: Mrs May Davies
Llan-saint, Dyfed

In these areas the aim was to produce thin round oatcakes without using any tools. The housewife, by her own skill, had to produce dough of a consistency that could be made into oatcakes 'as thin as wafers'. They were piled up in numbers that varied from six to twenty, and the pile would be rearranged two or three times during the pressing process. However, in other parts of the country, the oatcakes were pressed one at a

time, but always with the hand and arm. Although every house had a rolling pin at this time, in South Wales it was not used to roll oatcakes. (This confirms Aneurin Vardd's evidence half a century earlier.) According to oral testimony, the heat of the hand and arm were essential to keep the dough from breaking up and cracking. That was the view of the experts of the period. However, could this practice date from a time before rolling pins became common? The Laws of Hywel Dda contain a list of the king's equipment, furniture and arms, and their monetary value. The detailed list of household and kitchen equipment includes a griddle, meat plate, sieve, ladle, baking dish with lid, but no mention is made of a rolling pin. Also the king's food tax I quoted earlier notes that each loaf should be 'the width from wrist to elbow', so one can assume that this measurement was used, precisely because it was common practice at that time to flatten the loaf with the arm. If they had no tool designed for the task, they could not produce a loaf wider than the distance from wrist to elbow, and a narrower loaf would have given short measure. On the basis of this detailed account in the Laws and in view of abundant oral evidence from South Wales, this, in my opinion, is an example of a craft that has survived intact from the early Middle Ages to the beginning of the twentieth century: a craft born of necessity, which developed through constant use, and was good enough to withstand the development of new equipment.

The baking of the oatcakes followed a consistent pattern in all the areas I have noted. The oatcakes were placed one at a time on the baking stone, a round iron plate set above a moderate heat. The plate was known as *gradell* or *adell* in Cardiganshire,

which is a name that appears in the list of blacksmith's tools in the Laws. Planc was the common name in Carmarthenshire and Breconshire, with rare examples of maen and llechwan, which were the names used in Glamorgan.

The fuel varied according to the nature of the soil. Peat was commonly used in Tregaron and neighbouring villages. A peat fire was usually lit on the floor, with the griddle positioned on a trivet above it. This was an excellent fire for baking oatcakes. It was easy to keep the griddle at a constant temperature, as the peat smouldered. A wood fire, on the other hand, needed constant attention. Because it burned quickly and fiercely, it was difficult to keep the griddle at the required low temperature. It took five or six minutes to bake each side to a pale creamy colour. An oatcake should not brown, nor curl up at the edges.

One other tool was common to all areas. This was a small, thin wooden shovel, with a short leg, that was used for turning the oatcake during baking. This shovel was home-made, and its only purpose was to turn bread and cakes on the griddle. Its size and shape varied from area to area, as did the name. It was generally known as rhawlech in the counties of Carmarthen and Cardigan, and occasionally awlerch and owlerch. In Bronant, Cardiganshire, it was called adell bren, and sgleis or sgleish in Breconshire. The name rhawlech appears in William Owen (-Pughe)'s dictionary of 1832, with the definition 'slice' or 'shovel'. So it appears that the English name had made its way into the Welsh dialect of Breconshire.

After baking the oatcakes the next important step was to let them dry in front of the fire. The drying was as important as

the baking, in making sure that the oatcake hardened. An oatcake that didn't dry out properly could well turn mouldy in time. In many areas the oatcakes were laid flat between two pieces of wood in front of the fire, but around Tregaron and Ffair Rhos, they were propped up against a three-legged stool. The oatcakes would bend a little as they dried, and one would be tucked into the folds of another for storage. In Carmarthenshire, they were usually stored on top of the oatmeal in the chest, but some housewives would pack them in white muslin, a dozen at a time, and hang the parcels from hooks in the kitchen ceiling. Around Tregaron and Ffair Rhos they were hung from the kitchen ceiling in shopping baskets. In Breconshire, especially around Cray and Llanwrtyd, I was told of a wide wooden shelf that ran along the wall opposite the kitchen fire, about a foot below the ceiling. This was known as the oatcake shelf where the oatcakes were kept within easy reach.

Baking oatcakes was seasonal work in the areas I have mentioned so far. In the autumn, after grinding the oats, the farmers would 'take the gynos home,' the gynos being the supply of fresh oatmeal for use in the house during the winter months. A day would then be allocated for making enough oatcakes to supply the family for some months. Often an expert would be employed to make the oatcakes on behalf of the housewife. At the beginning of the twentieth century, in many areas these experts were the only ones who knew how to bake oatcakes. I was told by a woman in Abergwesyn, that she remembered seeing an old lady from Llanwrtyd walk three miles to a mountain farm in Abergwesyn to spend a day baking oatcakes. She was the only person in the district who could do

so. An eighty year-old housewife in Llwynpiod, Cardiganshire, told me a similar story. She remembered her mother being called out to local farms to bake oatcakes in return for some farm produce. Potatoes or oatmeal were the usual payment, although she was sometimes paid a shilling or two shillings a day.

By the first quarter of the twentieth century, oatcakes were not an everyday foodstuff in South Wales, but had become a delicacy to be eaten on special occasions. More often than not they were thickly spread with butter and eaten for Sunday tea, or offered to visitors. Foodstuffs do sometimes undergo a change of use. Professor Gunther Wiegelman, an expert on the history of German food, divides foodstuffs into two groups – staple food and special occasion food. To the Welsh peasant farmer oatcakes were a staple food until the beginning of the nineteenth century. But due to developments in agriculture and changes in the pattern of rural life, oatcakes had become special occasion food in South Wales by the beginning of the twentieth century. At the same time, there was less emphasis on growing corn crops, ready-made food had appeared in the shops, and so there was less call for oatcakes. Consequently, older women in the first quarter of the twentieth century were the last to practise the craft in this part of the country.

But what about the North? The 1893 Welsh Land Commission Report shows that oatcakes were eaten every day by servants on the small farms of Merionethshire and Caernarvonshire during the second half of the nineteenth century. However, John Rhys and David Brynmor Jones, in their comments on

the report, state that oatcakes were not eaten as often as they had been fifty years earlier.

Autobiographies of people born in the second half of the nineteenth century are an important source of information on the history and survival of the craft in North Wales. The authors often refer to food they remember eating as children. Elizabeth Williams, in her book *Siaced Fraith* (1956) says that her mother in Llanrwst used to set aside a day a week to make oatcakes. (Her mother was born in the 1860s.) ‘Mam and Nain had a day a week for making oatcakes. Mam made two types: a harder oatcake for making brŵas, and a soft crumbly oatcake to be eaten between two slices of bread thickly spread with butter.’ This excerpt not only provides evidence of the survival of the craft in that area, but also shows that it was a weekly task, rather than seasonal as in South Wales in the same period. It’s interesting too that the author refers to two types of oatcake. We’ve already encountered the ‘coloured oatcake’ and the ‘white oatcake’ of Glamorgan, but Elizabeth Williams mentions a particular type of oatcake that was an ingredient of a food known as ‘brŵas’ (brose).

When I searched for oral evidence to back up this reference and to try and determine how widespread this practice was in the North, I soon realised that it was not difficult to find women who knew how to make oatcakes. They had been familiar with the craft throughout their lives and I was fortunate enough to find a few who still made oatcakes. Once again the strongest evidence came from the wives or daughters of smallholders in Merionethshire or Caernarvonshire, or by those who had worked as maids on the big farms of Llŷn or

Anglesey. The oats were usually grown on the farm or smallholding but I found examples of smallholders in the slate mining areas e.g. Beddgelert and Waunfawr, buying oatmeal specifically for making oatcakes. On the basis of oral testimony, here is an account of the craft of oatcake making in the counties of Merioneth, Caernarvon and Anglesey at the beginning of the twentieth century. First, we'll look at the craft of kneading and rolling thin oatcakes in Merioneth. The housewives of Anglesey and Arfon followed the same method, but when there are differences, I shall draw attention to them.

A measure of oatmeal, enough for about 5 oatcakes, is placed in an earthenware dish. Melt a little dripping or bacon fat in warm water, add slowly to the oatmeal and mix to form a soft dough. The ingredients were added by rule of thumb, and never weighed. The temperature of the water was all-important. Water that was too warm would cause the dough to crack, when rolled. On the other hand, if the water were too cold, the dough would be impossible to knead. All the women stressed the importance of kneading properly. The dough had to come away from the sides of the dish and the hand. It was just as important, before rolling, to get the dough to a soft and flexible consistency. Then sprinkle a little oatmeal on a wooden table, lift the dough from the dish and divide into five equal pieces. Take a piece and mould between the hands into a small cone. This was the basis of the finished round oatcake. Press and flatten the cone with the palm of the right hand to form a small thick round oatcake about the size of a large saucer. Repeat with the other four pieces. Then take the first oatcake and, with the aid of a rolling-pin, roll out to almost the same size as the griddle. The aim, of course, was to form a large thin

oatcake with smooth edges. To achieve this, it was important to give the oatcakes several quarter turns during the rolling process, and to press on the edge of the oatcake with the tips of the fingers of the right hand to strengthen it and prevent cracking. The oatcake should also be even. The finished oatcakes were set aside to harden for a while before baking; they were placed one on top of the other with a layer of oatmeal in between to stop them sticking.

The baking process was the same as that used in South Wales. The oatcakes were placed one at a time on the warm griddle, known throughout the region as *radell*. In Merionethshire a peat fire was favoured, but the fuel varied in many areas of Llŷn, where straw, chaff or gorse clippings were used, depending on what was available. On the big farms in Llŷn, oatcakes were usually baked on a griddle and trivet in the back kitchen, with more than one griddle used at a time. In Merionethshire, however, the griddle usually rested on the chimney corners each side of the kitchen fire. Around Waunfawr and Rhostryfan in Caernarvonshire, oatcakes were baked in the bottom of the cast iron stove, after baking barley or wheat bread. The oatcakes had to be turned during baking, and in each one of the three Northern counties, the tool used was called a *crafell*. This is similar to the *rhawlech* used in the South. The shape and pattern of the tool varied somewhat, and many were skilfully made. Thomas Jones of Shrewsbury, in his book *Y Gymraeg yn ei Disgleirdeb* (1688), gives the following translation of *crafell*: ‘a curry-comb, also a wooden slice to turn oatcakes with’, which proves that this tool was used in the baking of oatcakes in the seventeenth century. William Owen (-Pughe) also includes the word in *A Dictionary of the Welsh*

Language (1832), with similar meanings: ‘a spatula or slice; a curry-comb, scraper’.

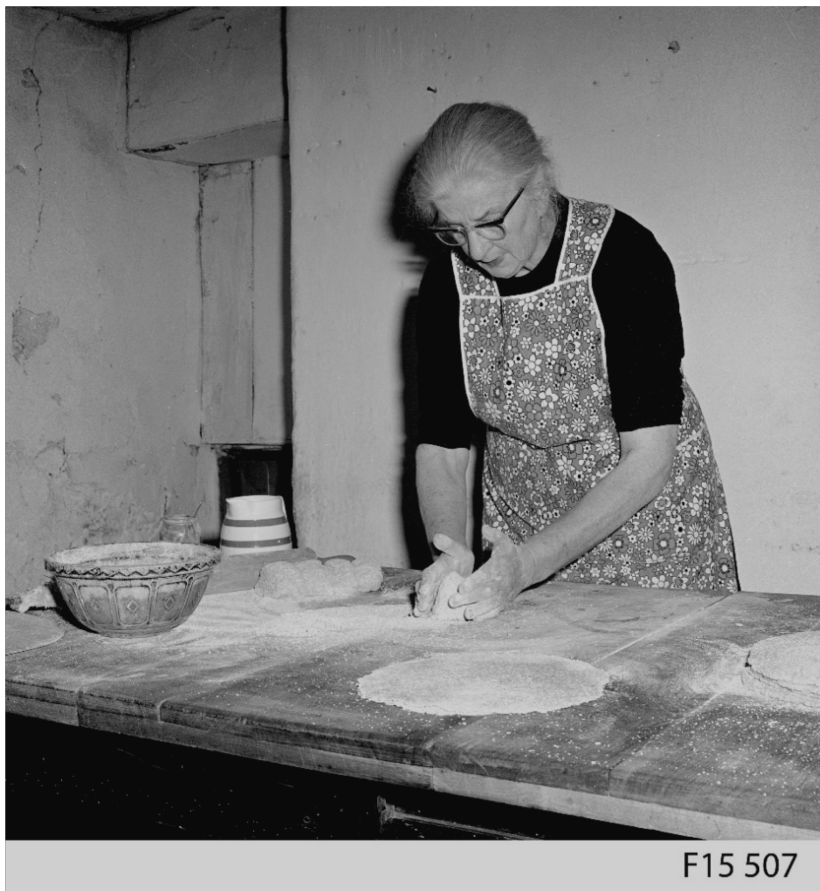
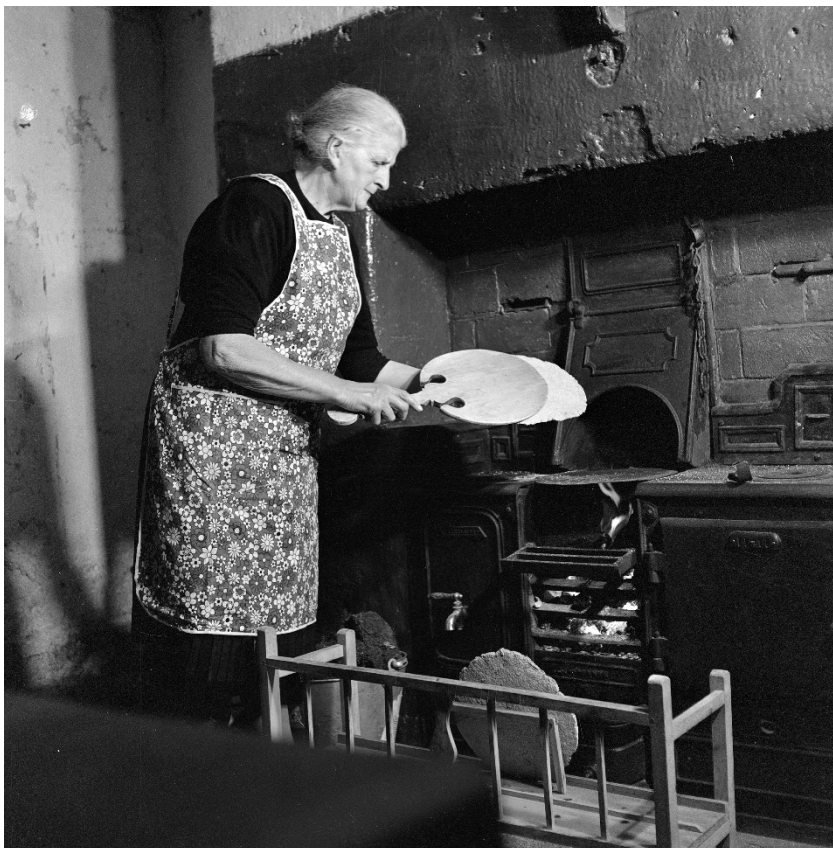


PLATE 3 Rolling out oatcakes: Mrs Catrin Evans Llanuwchllyn, Gwynedd



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PLATE 4 Baking oatcakes Mrs Catrin Evans Llanuwchllyn, Gwynedd

Drying the oatcakes after baking was just as important in the North as in the South. However, in the North a special frame was commonly used. This was a four-legged frame made of wood or iron, known as *car bara ceirch* or *diogyn*. The oatcakes

were arranged on their sides on the frame and dried and hardened in front of the fire, before being put away in the chest.

In Merionethshire and Caernarvonshire oatcakes were often eaten for afternoon tea at the beginning of the twentieth century, but it was more of a special occasion food in Anglesey at this time. In Merioneth three or four oatcakes were always kept on a large wooden plate in the drawer of the kitchen table, ready to eat at all times. This plate was known as *foediar*. When preparing the afternoon meal, the first thing that was placed on the table was the oatcake *foediar* and a loaf of barley or wheat bread. Oatcakes were also kept in the kitchen drawer around Beddgelert, though the plate did not have a specific name in that area.

Having two types of bread on the table is a feature of the eating habits of North Wales in the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. In that area oatcakes were rarely eaten alone. Oral evidence has shown time and again, that the common practice was to place a piece of oatcake on a slice of wheat or barley bread, or between two slices of bread, with a layer of butter, and sometimes treacle, in between. The names given to this double sandwich are worthy of note. It was simply called a *brechdan ddwbl* (double sandwich) in some areas, but the name commonly used in Merioneth was *brechdan linsi* (linsey sandwich). According to The Shorter Oxford Dictionary, the original meaning of linsey was a sort of cloth made of coarse linen. But as the woollen industry developed, another cloth was produced, called linsey-woolsey, which was made of linen and wool. In speech, linsey-woolsey

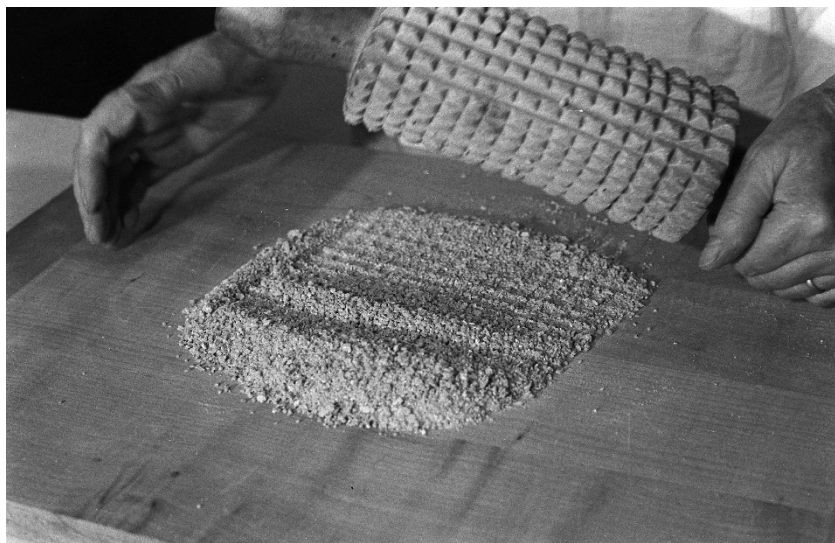
was often shortened to linsey. Joseph Wright's *The English Dialect Dictionary* defines linsey-woolsey as 'rags made from cloth woven with a cotton warp and a woollen weft'. J. Geraint Jenkins in his book *The Welsh Woollen Industry* (1969) mentions the production of linsey. As the cloth linsey and the linsey sandwich both contain two different textures, it's clear that the name 'linsey sandwich' was borrowed from the woollen industry. Merionethshire was a sheep farming area, where the industry played a key role in people's lives, so no wonder such borrowings were made.

In Caernarvonshire, however, the sandwich was generally known as brechdan fetal (metal sandwich). In *The English Dialect Dictionary* one of the definitions of 'metal' is 'shale of various colours and kinds'. Is this another example of a term borrowed from local industry, in this case quarrying? The name brechdan fetal was used around Waunfawr and Beddgelert, both situated among the slate quarries, where the layers of slate varied in colour and quality, as did the sandwich. In the same areas the terms pais fetal (metal petticoat) and ffedog fetal (metal apron) were used to denote clothing made of coarse cloth with wide stripes of different colours. The term brechdan fetal also reached Llŷn and Eifionydd.

The second type of oatcake made in the counties of North Wales was the 'hard oatcake' that contained no fat. Water and oatmeal were the only ingredients, and the oatcakes were not rolled as thin. However, the method of kneading and pressing was the same, but because of the thickness, they took a little longer to bake and dry. The main reason for baking this oatcake in Merioneth was to make a dish called siot (shot). To

make shot, the oatcake had to be crumbled, the crumbs placed in a dish and a little cold buttermilk poured on top. Then it was either eaten at once or left to soak for an hour or two, depending on personal preference. A bowlful of shot was usually eaten before afternoon tea all the year round, and in the summer it was a dish that could be taken out to the workers at harvest time. There was nothing more refreshing for a thirsty worker who had been labouring for hours in the hayfield. I was told by housewives around Llanuwchllyn and Rhyd-y-main in Merionethshire that the big farms used to employ a woman to make a large quantity of shot oatcakes for the hay harvest. A woman who went around the farms of Cwm Cynllwyd at the beginning of the twentieth century used to spend one day kneading and baking thin oatcakes, and two days making shot oatcakes. For her work she was given half a crown a day and her food. As well as kneading and baking, she had to crumble the shot oatcake. In every house there was a special tool for the task, a sort of rolling pin with teeth. This tool was known as an ‘oatcake crumbler’, and was made by the man of the house to his own design.

In some areas of Merionethshire the shot varied according to the season. Siot gynnes (warm shot) was made by pouring warm buttermilk onto the oatcake. Siot bosel was made by adding warm milk to the oatcake, with a little cold buttermilk on top. To make siot faidd (whey shot), whey was added instead of buttermilk. In Anglesey and Arfon shot was known as picws mali or pincws mali. In those areas it was an occasional snack, rather than part of the staple diet.



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PLATE 5 Crushing oatcakes for brose and shot

However, the baking of hard oatcake was common in both Anglesey and Arfon, especially for making a dish called brêws or brêwas (brose). The big farms of Llŷn would employ a woman to make brêws oatcakes, and the farm workers considered brêws an excellent meal. It appears that it was mainly eaten by servants in that part of the country. They were served brêws for breakfast every Sunday and Wednesday, and there is some evidence of this in the slate-mining areas of Eifionydd and Beddgelert too. It was only occasionally eaten for breakfast on Anglesey farms. I could find no explanation as to why it was eaten on two specific days. Probably it was due to local custom. Some housewives suggested that one

practical reason for making brêws on Sunday, was that, on that particular morning, they had plenty of broth or gravy which were essential for making good brêws. Every Saturday evening, on the farms, they would boil a large piece of salt beef for the Sunday dinner, and so there'd be plenty of fresh broth for the morning.

The usual way of making brêws was to place a thick layer of crumbled oatcake in a dish, pour the boiling broth over it, season with pepper and salt, allow to soak for some minutes, then sprinkle another layer of crumbled oatcake on top before eating. In some areas a layer of white bread was placed in the bottom of the dish before adding the crumbled oatcake. Others would spread a little fat on the crumbled oatcake, and add boiling water, if there was no meat broth. The names for this dish were brêws troednoeth (barefoot brêws) or brêws pig tegell (kettle spout brêws), suggesting that it was a poor sort of dish compared to the first.

By the 1920s brêws was usually prepared in individual dishes, but the evidence of many former maids on the big farms of Llŷn proves that this was a fairly recent development. They remembered preparing the brêws in a large wooden or earthenware bowl. Four farmworkers would usually be seated around the bowl and they would all eat from it, after first of all marking the 'boundary hedges' between each share. Then each one would eat from his own corner, leaving the 'hedges'. They had to eat the brêws very neatly 'from the edge' as they said in the areas around Uwchmynydd, Aberdaron and Mynytho in Llŷn. A little cold buttermilk would be poured into the individual corners once some of the food had been eaten, and

the buttermilk would then be consumed with the rest of the brŵes.

Is this the remnant of an old social tradition? Tri Englyn y Juvencus, a series of poems in Old Welsh which are said to date from the ninth century, contain a reference to this pattern of eating and drinking. According to Sir Ifor Williams's interpretation, the following extract describes a nobleman and a foreign mercenary eating from the same pot, after a battle:

mi am (franc) ddam an callawr

(I and my hireling, about our cauldron)

In the next verse, they appear to be sharing a drink:

mi am franc ddam an padell

(I and my hireling, about our bowl)

In Llŷn, only members of the same social class shared a bowl. They were all servants, and there is no evidence of a master and a servant sharing a dish. Tri Englyn y Juvencus paints a different picture, though a sad one. The nobleman has lost all his family and has to descend to the level of the peasant foreigner and share his dish.

Giraldus Cambrensis, in describing the food of the Middle Ages, also talks of sharing dishes. 'The servants sit three to a plate, and all the dishes are placed before them at the same time on a plate or trencher.'

I found no evidence of sharing bowls in any other part of Wales. It's difficult to understand why this ancient tradition

should have persisted in Llŷn till the end of the nineteenth century. Was it common throughout Wales at one time? To answer this question we need further evidence.

In conclusion, if we look at the craft of oatcake-making in North and South Wales, we see that the method of pressing or rolling was far more sophisticated in the North than in the South. There were special tools for pressing and drying the oatcakes in the North, which did not exist in the South. This was evident even in such remote areas as Cwm Cynllwyd in Merioneth, whereas the method of making oatcakes was more primitive in areas which had far more access to large towns and the latest developments. Of course, the craft disappeared from these areas early on, because they had shops on the doorstep. But the craft survived in the remote valleys, and because it survived, new tools were developed.

No one mentioned making brŵes or siot or any such dish in the South in the nineteenth century, and so oatcakes were not such an essential part of the diet. No meal depended on them. But in the North, oatcakes were an every-day food until the beginning of the twentieth century, and their importance is reflected in the idioms and culture of many areas. Around Llanuwchllyn a large hat that turned up at the edges was described as an 'oatcake hat'. In the eisteddfodau of this area there were competitions for making an 'oatcake shovel' or an 'oatcake frame'. In the report of Eisteddfod Moel Tryfan 1882, I found these results:

Best oatcake rolling pin: J.D.Jones 2. W.E.Hughes

Best oatcakes: Mrs Ellen Griffith 2. Mary Hughes

This proves that, at the turn of the century, these crafts had a special place in the culture of these areas. They were neither unimportant nor without skill, and they went on to survive for at least another quarter of a century.

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