

Wales 2004

Adventures in wild western Wales, off the beaten track and away from the crowds. Owain Glyn Dwr trail and native Welsh castles were the priority. (3300 words)

Places Visited:

Brynmawr → Tretower Castle & Court → Pennal, Plas Talgarth → Domen Las Castle →
Aberdovey → Castell y Bere → Machynlleth → Dolgellau

Cymer Abbey → Llechwedd Slate Caverns → Dolwyddelan Castle → Tomen Castell →
Aberystwyth → Aberystwyth Castle → National Coracle Centre

Llangeller → The Nevern Cross → Saint Brynach Church → Nevern Castle → Castell Henllys →
Eglwys Gwyddelod Stone Circle → Harlech Castle

St. Peter Ad Vincula (Owain Glyn Dwr) → Brynmawr → Blaenavon → Big Pit National Coal
Museum → St Fagans National Museum of History London

Part I: West Wales

After arriving at London, Heathrow, we grabbed our rental car and headed down the M4 west into Wales. We made a quick stop in Brynmawr, Wales, my ancestral homeland, for a quick pub lunch followed by a short trip to Tretower Castle & Court, before heading to west Wales. Our destination was lovely and historic Pennal, a village and community on the A493 in southern Gwynedd, on the north bank of the River Dyfi, near Machynlleth. Our week's accommodations were at the Plas Talgarth Resort, a lovely location overlooking the village and surrounding hills.

In addition to being beautiful, the village is steeped in Welsh history as it was visited by Welsh patriot Owain Glyn Dwr in 1406. It is said that it was here that Glyn Dwr composed his famous "Penal Letter," and visited the church of St. Peter Ad Vincula, and possibly the motte castle of Doman Las, the remains of which are found on the grounds of Plas Talgarth. Pennal is a small village and the only pub was the Riverside Hotel. We ate there several times during the week and the food was quite good. It was late in the day when we arrived and we were pretty tired from the long flight and drive, so we simply spent the rest of the day at the resort.

The next day was Sunday and we began the day by driving to Aberdovey, a lovely coastal town. We did some shopping before having lunch at the Dovey Inn, right on the high street with good views of the water. Our main goal for the day was the remote native Welsh-built Castell y Bere near Abergynolwyn some 10 miles SW of Dolgellau. On the way we stopped at the picturesque Dolgoch Falls near the Talyllyn Railway line (Dolgoch Station path).

If you have ever visited Castell y Bere you know that the castle enjoys a strategic location, atop a steep-sided, flat-topped rock, perfectly situated to stand guard over the surrounding valley floor, and providing views of the breath-taking Cadair Idris. To me it's absolutely one of the most beautiful places in all of Wales. Built by Llywelyn ap Iorwerth, the castle played an important role in the Welsh wars, finally being surrendered as one of the final acts of the Second Welsh War against Edward I in 1283. As always we spent a lot of time here exploring the interesting, but greatly-ruined castle, and simply enjoying the surrounding countryside before visiting the nearby church of Llangadwaladr to conclude our visit.

We ended the day's adventures by visiting the Owain Glyndŵr Centre & Parliament House in Machynlleth. Unfortunately the centre was closed, I believe due to some renovation work. We returned to our resort.

We began the next day by visiting the town of Dolgellau, known for its market, shopping, and especially its Welsh gold. After a bit of shopping (and yes, we did buy a little bit of Welsh gold), we purchased a picnic lunch at a deli for our visit to nearby Cymer Abbey.

The Cistercian abbey of Cymer was founded in 1198-9 under the patronage of Maredudd ap Cynan, a grandson of Owain Gwynedd. The first monks came from Abbey Cwmhir in Powys. The abbey is not a large one but the ruins here are substantial with a certain romantic beauty. It was April and the abbey and grounds were beautifully framed by bright blue sky, green grass, and full-bloom daffodils sprinkled throughout the site. It was perfect weather and a perfect setting for a Spring picnic. This is one of the many off-the-beaten-path, seldom-visited sites in west Wales that makes the region so intoxicating.

We finished off the day by visiting the Llechwedd Slate Caverns near Blaenau Ffestiniog, industrial heritage that is both important and controversial. My own Welsh ancestors were coal and iron miners from Brynmawr in south Wales, and it is difficult for most of us to imagine what these men endured in order to put bread on the table. (But I digress...) Today it's all tourists and fun as you descend into the shallow mines in your rail car and miner's hat and walk around a bit at the bottom of the pit. We usually don't do "touristy stuff" like this, but I was trying to gain some perspective on slate mines versus coal mines.

The next day we began by visiting the Welsh-built Castle of Dolwyddelan in Snowdonia. We have been here several times and it's just one of those places we return to time and time again. So beautiful and so historic. Like most of the castles of the native Welsh princes, Dolwyddelan is set amidst spectacular scenery. The castle guards a mountain pass through the Vale of Conwy, and it's the beauty of the surrounding countryside that visitors first notice. There are wonderful walks all around and the area is very popular with hikers. A castle, great walks, and a nearby village make the area a great choice for a holiday.

Again, as is the case with other Welsh castles, it's a bit of a hike to get to Dolwyddelan, and if you have a problem with hiking around sheep, you may want to remain at the visitors center because it's high enough itself to offer some great vistas. But then again, if you do so, you'll be

missing a spectacular survey of the surrounding countryside from the top of Dolwyddelan's keep, so I would recommend braving the sheep!

We began by photographing Tomen Castell, aka Old Dolwyddelan, now just a tree-covered but large motte castle lying just below the present stone castle. Legend claims that Tomen Castell was birthplace of Llywelyn ap Iorwerth, (the Great), the likely builder of the later castle at Dolwyddelan. Both castles controlled a crucial route through southern Snowdonia, and the importance of this site is further attested to by the presence of the Welsh prince's summer pastures or hafotiroedd.

After hiking to the castle we explored the modest ruins, which feature a large, well-fortified keep, and the remains of other buildings. The views from the top of the keep, again, are spectacular some of the best in north Wales. (Have I said that before?) I never get tired of this site and always feel a sense of dazed awe and appreciation for Welsh history and scenic beauty when visiting.

Next it was on to the university town of Aberystwyth, which also boasts a famous castle. The ruins of the castle are slight, but there's definitely enough here to keep the mind of an avid castle hunter engaged. We surveyed the castle before strolling along the high street taking in views of the ocean as we walked. We enjoyed a pub lunch at the Welsh Black Inn, offering Felinfoel ale (yum!). On the way back to Pennal we visited Celtica, an educational guest center located in Machynlleth (now closed).

On the agenda for the following day was a visit to the Parish Church of Llangeller in Carmarthenshire, where my g.g.g grandfather was baptized in the late 1700s. His daughter married my Thomas g.g. grandfather in Brynmawr and they emigrated to the United States in 1848. I knew there would be no records to find here. I simply wanted to see the place where one of my ancestors was born, baptized, and was a child. The church is not far from The National Coracle Centre in Cenarth Falls. This attraction features a museum and workshop of coracles from around the world set in the grounds of a 17th Century Flour Mill beside the beautiful Cenarth falls famed for its Salmon Leaps and 200 year old Bridge over the Teifi River. A coracle is a compact paddle fishing boat for usually one man. They are lightweight and once mastered are easy to maneuver for the fisherman. The site is set amid a stunning river location and offers visitors a chance to step back in time and experience what it was like to fish using these centuries-old boats. Although coracles have been used for centuries all over the world, some consider the coracle to be particularly associated with Wales. We figured that was enough for the day and returned to Pennal.

The following day was very exciting because I finally visited the historically significant site of Nevern Castle and The Nevern Cross located in the churchyard of Saint Brynach. The large, impressive cross at Nevern churchyard is closely related in style to the cross at Carew, and is of a similar late 10th or early 11th century date. Like the Carew Cross, it is inscribed on the shaft. The cross is in remarkable condition. The churchyard itself is framed by some ancient Yew trees that seem to hover over the site adding to the ancient feel here. Inside the church is another

smaller cross and stones on the window sills, one carved in ancient Ogam script and the other in Latin.

If the church isn't enough to impress you, then visit the ruined motte castle lying close to the church. Nevern Castle was once of the principal seats of power for the great Welsh prince, Rhys ap Gruffydd, or The Lord Rhys. He was one of Wales' remarkable medieval rulers, managing to expand his rule over much of south Wales during the reign of King Henry II. Although he was eventually deposed by his own sons, his reign remains one of the most successful of all the Welsh princes. We visited before the extensive archaeological excavation took place beginning in 2008. Since then parts of walls, along with stone footings of towers and other buildings have been recovered, in what was a successful and long overdue project. Nevertheless, it was still thrilling to stand on the summit of the motte castle once occupied by the Lord Rhys, and explore the surrounding ground. Being an amateur Welsh medieval historian, this was a very special moment.

We finished the day by visiting Castell Henllys, a reconstructed Iron Age hill fort and village set within thirty acres of beautiful woodland and river meadows in the heart of the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park. The village rests on the archaeological site of an original Iron-Age hill fort. The site has been the subject of an excavation since the early part of the century. Featured here are reconstructed timber fortified defensive walls and gatehouse surrounding several large round huts or living quarters. Costume guides are provided to help visitors with questions. After concentrating primarily on Medieval Welsh history, it was nice to take a step back in time and explore the history of Iron-Age Wales. Afterwards it was late in the day so we returned to Plas Talgarth. We had experienced the beauty of the Welsh countryside, medieval native-Welsh castles associated with some of the greatest names in medieval Welsh history, ancient carved crosses, and an Iron-Age hill fort. Now THAT was a full day!

The following day we began by taking a beautiful hike into the hills near Pennal. Our destination for the morning was the seldom-visited Eglwys Gwyddelod Stone Circle. According to Cadw:

"This is a beautiful monument in a very dramatic setting. It stands on a rocky shelf, a point where several tracks converge. Like so many monuments in such settings, it is designed for maximum impact from one direction - in this case, the south. The track continues westward beyond it and runs along the top of the ridge, passing other cairns and coming down to the valley floor near a fine earthen barrow (visible from the road). These Bronze Age monuments suggest that this trackway, like many others, has its origin in this period. The circle consists of five upright stones and two stumps just under the grass on the north. A boulder beside the north-eastern stone and perhaps the large leaning stone at the south-east may have fallen from the crag above."

This was yet another instance of the journey to the site being as rewarding, or perhaps even better, than the site itself. Not that the stone circle isn't impressive. It is, however the gentle climb into the hills to get there provides, yet again, outstanding views of the surrounding countryside. We lingered here for quite some time, contemplating both the mystery of the

people who erected this ancient monument, and because it was yet another place of great beauty and grandeur that's difficult to leave. We took our time on the trip back down, enjoying the same outstanding views of the countryside. Afterwards we grabbed a pub lunch (fish and chips and a couple of pints, our usual) at the Pen y Bont hotel overlooking beautiful Tal y Lynn lake.

In the afternoon we revisited mighty Harlech Castle. Harlech is another of those sites (there are many in Wales) that I can visit time and time again without ever getting tired of the site. Harlech is tied with Chepstow (I think) for my most-visited Welsh castle at six. The castle sits perched dramatically on a cliff overlooking the estuary. When the castle was built the estuary ran just beneath the castle so it could be easily re-supplied from the sea. This was a hallmark of Edwardian castles including, Rhuddlan, Conwy, Caernarfon, Flint, and Aberystwyth. What strikes people first is the castle's massive and seemingly impenetrable gatehouse, protected by a curtain wall, twin towers, a portcullis, and passageway featuring murder holes above. Once inside the castle the rear gatehouse complex is just as impressive with twin double towers and rear wall that extend above the wall walk surrounding the top of the castle.

There are the typical interesting castle structures inside the castle courtyard, but at Harlech, the real star here the castle wall walks. You can take either the sometime outer staircase of the interior conical stairs inside the walls to get there. (If it's raining it's safer to take the interior stairs.) Either way you climb you will be rewarded with some spectacular views of the surrounding countryside along with an understanding of why this castle was so defensible; so difficult to take. Harlech (the actual castle) was technically never defeated in battle, however the castle was surrendered (due to a prolonged siege) on two notable occasions; once by forces loyal to Welsh patriot Owain Glyn Dwr, and during the Wars of the Roses when it was surrendered by Lancastrian forces. With another great day behind us we decided to return to Plas Talgarth a bit sad because it was our final night in this most remarkable, beautiful part of Wales.

The following morning we had one final site to investigate before leaving for south Wales. On the agenda was a visit to the aforementioned church of St. Peter Ad Vincula in Pennal. The church was founded in the 6th century by Celtic missionaries from Brittany. It is the only church in Wales dedicated to Saint Peter in Chains (ad Vincula), whose story can be found in the Acts of the Apostles XII. Although its history spans some 1500 years, the church is most famous for its association with Owain Glyn Dwr, who came to Pennal in 1406. Here Glyndwr composed his famous "Penal Letter," discussed below, a copy of which is found in the church. The church also features a large oil painting depicting Glyndwr's visit to Pennal.

The church features many items of historical interest, including:

- Aneurin Jones' painting "The Welsh Assembly of 1406", which celebrates the signing of the Pennal Letter.
- A facsimile of the Pennal Letter - the original is housed in the Archives Nationales, Paris, France.

Following the example of his illustrious ancestor, Prince Llywelyn ap Iorwerth (Llywelyn the Great), who summoned his Council of Chiefs to the mouth of the River Dovey in 1216, it was the Merionethshire village of Pennal, during Lent 1406, that Prince Owain Glyndwr presided over the last Assembly of an independent Wales. Inheritor of the mantle of King Arthur, Owain was the last Welsh Pendragon, was crowned "Prince of Wales by the Grace of God" in 1404. Supported by his outlawed clerics and the nobles and princes of his race, Owain drew up a policy for the Welsh nation and its Church. Known for posterity as The Pennal Policy, it was a radical program, breathtaking in its breadth of vision, which to this day continues to capture and fire the imagination.

This was the perfect way to end our stay in the beautiful and historic village of Pennal. We had a wonderful week exploring the sites and landscapes of this part of west Wales, including, historic and impressive welsh castles, carved pre-medieval crosses, a Bronze Age stone circle, Iron Age village and fort, and an important site associated with Owain Glyn Dwr, a 15th-century Welsh hero who dared to dream of an independent Wales. I simply can't imagine how the week could have any better.

Part II: Brynmawr & Surrounds

For the remainder of our holiday we returned to southeast Wales and spent time in my ancestral home of Brynmawr. We visited the local history center and spent time with locals who I had been in touch with over the Internet. We explored some of the remains of the area's industrial heritage, including ruined iron and coal works. A highlight was our trip to the nearby Big Pit National Coal Museum and Mine in Blaenavon. Big Pit is part of a network of coal workings established in Blaenavon in the first half of the nineteenth century by the Blaenavon Iron and Coal Company as part of the development of the Blaenavon Ironworks which means it has some of the oldest large scale industrial coal mining developments in the South Wales Coalfield. We had visited a coal mine in Scranton, Pennsylvania, where my ancestors settled and worked, but it was nothing like Big Pit. This was no cozy ride in a coal car. You got out at the bottom of the pit and walked, and walked, and walked, crouching down in the spaces where our ancestors worked. It's the only place I've visited that gives a true sense of what my ancestors experienced as miners. It made me appreciate their efforts even more, efforts that paved the way to help make my life better.

We rounded off this part of the trip with a visit to St. Fagans National Museum of History outside Cardiff (formally the Welsh Folk Museum), a wonderful collection of buildings and history spanning several centuries. Those who have been here know that this is one of the best educational resources in all of Wales (if not the best). Then we returned to London for a few days, visiting museums, etc., before flying home.

In summing up our 2004 trip, we had already enjoyed time in south Wales, north Wales, mid-Wales, the Gower Peninsula, and St Davids, and I didn't know exactly what to expect in remote west Wales. What we found was peace, tranquility, and pure enchantment exploring the beauty and heritage of what is now one of my favorite parts of Wales. It was amazing.