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THE LLŶN HISTORIES

BOOK 1 OF 5

Prehistoric Llŷn

Tombs, stones and the first farmers



c. 3500 BC – c. 1000 BC

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THE DIGITAL HEART OF THE LLŶN

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Book 1: Prehistoric Llŷn

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Front matter

How to use this book

Each chapter is anchored to one or two real, visitable places. Open with a short scene-setting passage, then move into the evidence. Source notes appear at the end of each chapter and are collected at the back. The interactive map *Ancient Llŷn* carries every site mentioned here (and many more) at accessible length; this book goes deeper.

Chapter 1



Arriving on the Peninsula

Geology and landscape; why Llŷn attracted early settlement

Stand on the high ground of Mynydd Rhiw on a clear day and the whole early story of Llŷn is laid out below you. To the south the sea runs in long arcs toward Porth Neigwl and the tip of the peninsula. North and east the hills of Yr Eifl rise, their summits later crowned by some of the densest hillfort remains in Wales. Between them lies a landscape of ridges, valleys and coastal plains that has drawn people for more than eight thousand years.

The rock beneath your feet is the first character in the story. Mynydd Rhiw is an elongated hill rising to 304 m, formed of hard volcanic ridges interspersed with finer-grained shaley rock. That finer material splits in a way useful for tools. The same geological accident that created a usable stone also created a distinctive profile visible for miles. Early communities did not choose this place at random; they chose a hill that offered both raw material and a stage.

The earliest traces of people are subtle. Mesolithic communities left scatters of worked flint and stone tools on headlands and coastal edges — Trwyn Llanbedrog, Pen Cilan, the western side of Pencilan, near Bwlchtocyn, and at Porth Ceiriad. These are the remains of hunter-gatherers who moved along the shore and inland after the last ice retreated. No permanent houses survive from this time. The tools are small, the sites ephemeral. Yet they prove that people were already using the peninsula between roughly 9000 and 4000 BC.

By the early fourth millennium BC the first farming communities had arrived. They cleared woodland, herded animals, sowed crops, and began to mark the land with permanent stone monuments. The change was profound. Where Mesolithic groups had travelled light, Neolithic groups invested labour in places that would outlast any single lifetime. Higher ground offered visibility, a measure of defence for resources, and a platform for ancestral memory. The same hills that would later carry Iron Age forts and medieval citadels were already special.

Why Llŷn? The peninsula's position between the Irish Sea and the mountains of Snowdonia created both isolation and connection. Contacts across the Irish Sea are visible in pottery styles and in the architectural language of the tombs. At the same time the local rock provided a valuable resource that did not need to be imported. On the upper slopes of Mynydd Rhiw, Neolithic people dug into drift deposits and a dipping seam of fine-grained rock. They created a series of quarry hollows. Radiocarbon dating places the main activity between roughly 3650 and 3050 BC. The debris of axe and scraper manufacture still forms the banks around those hollows, now largely obscured by gorse and heather.

From the same hill the first monumental tombs were raised. At Tan y Muriau, on the lower eastern slopes, a portal dolmen was built and later remodelled. Near Clynnog Fawr the portal tomb of Bachwen still stands with its densely cup-marked capstone. By the Early Bronze Age the focus of burial shifted to individual or small-group cremations under stone cairns, often placed on summits. The great cairn on Mynydd Carnguwch is among the largest in Wales. Standing stones were raised across the lower ground — solitary markers whose precise meaning remains uncertain but whose siting is rarely random.

What the stones do not tell us is as important as what they do. Settlement evidence for the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age on Llŷn is scarce. We see the ceremonial and funerary landscape far more clearly than the everyday one of houses, fields and middens. Dating relies on typology, a modest number of radiocarbon determinations, and comparison with better-excavated sites elsewhere. Some cup-marks and secondary uses of monuments are later than the original construction. The axe factory produced far more waste than finished tools that can be tracked across Wales, reminding us that local production and use may have been the dominant pattern.

This is the deep-time foundation. The same hills and coastal routes that carried the first farmers would later support Iron Age communities, medieval princes, and the pilgrim roads to Bardsey. The monuments remain, weathered but still legible to anyone willing to walk the ground and read the evidence with care.

Visitor note

Mynydd Rhiw is accessible on foot from National Trust parking near Rhiw. The ground is rough and can be wet. Allow time. The views repay the effort.

Key sources

Coflein NPRN 302263 and related landscape records; Houlder 1961; Burrow 2011; National Trust Llŷn history pages; Frances Lynch, *Gwynedd* (1995); Julian Maxwell Heath, *From Hunter-Gatherers to Early Christians* (2023); Gwynedd Archaeological Trust historic landscape characterisations; Natural Resources Wales National Landscape Character Area description for Llŷn.

Chapter 2



The Mynydd Rhiw Axe Factory

Neolithic stone-tool quarrying, 5th–3rd millennium BC

The discovery was almost accidental. In the late 1950s, while checking aerial photographs for the Royal Commission inventory of Caernarfonshire, surveyors noticed a line of roughly circular hollows on the upper slopes of Mynydd Rhiw. At first they were interpreted as the remains of round huts, hidden by vigorous dwarf gorse. A period of burning revealed that the banks surrounding the hollows were composed not of ordinary earth and stone but of fine-grained rock debris bearing abundant signs of artificial flaking. Closer examination showed this was the waste from stone-axe manufacture.

Christopher Houlder's excavations for the Royal Commission in 1958 and 1959, with further work sponsored by the Prehistoric Society and the Board of Celtic Studies, demonstrated that the hollows were the silted remains of quarry pits. Five main pits were identified, a maximum of about 15 m in diameter, following a seam of suitable rock that dipped into the hillside at roughly 25 degrees. When one section was exhausted it was partially back-filled with debris as the scene of activity moved on; the resulting hollows were then used for shelter. A series of open hearths showed that people had camped in the exhausted pits while work continued nearby.

The rock itself is a fine-grained Ordovician shale that splits in a manner useful for tools — axes, knives, scrapers. Neolithic people were digging into a drift deposit up to two metres deep to extract loose blocks rather than always quarrying solid bedrock. The

separate hollows visible on the surface today are all that remain of what was once a more or less continuous opencast working, originally about 30 m long by 6 m across.

A second programme of survey and excavation directed by Steve Burrow for National Museum Wales in 2005–2006 examined the eastern side of the mountain. Traces of quarrying and manufacture — shallow scoops, hollows and scree — were identified over a 600-metre length of hillside. Radiocarbon dating indicates the hill was visited for this purpose from about 3650 BC until about 3050 BC, with later use of the stone associated with the building of cairns and possible agricultural activity on the mountain.

Despite the scale of the workings, only about a dozen axes of Group XXI material have been identified across Wales — in Flintshire, Glamorgan and the borders. This has caused a rethink of the site's role. It appears to have supplied local and regional needs far more than long-distance prestige exchange of the kind documented at the great Cumbrian quarries of Great Langdale and Scafell Pike. The factory therefore tells us as much about everyday tool requirements as about specialised production. The sheer quantity of waste relative to the number of finished tools that can be tracked suggests that many axes were used and discarded locally, or that the finished products were not always moved far.

Today the hollows are largely obscured by heather and gorse. The site is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (Cadw CN207). Walking the slopes, one still finds the distinctive fine-grained flakes among the vegetation — small, sharp reminders of the people who worked here more than five thousand years ago. The same hill carries two Neolithic burial tombs on its lower slopes (Tan y Muriau and Bron Heulog) and several Bronze Age cairns on the summit. The concentration of monuments shows that Mynydd Rhiw held special, ceremonial associations across more than two millennia.

Visitor note

Access is on foot from the National Trust parking area on the eastern side of the mountain. The ground is rough, the vegetation can be dense, and there are no formal paths to the quarry hollows themselves. The best time is after controlled burning or in winter when the gorse is less vigorous. Take care; the site is fragile.

Key sources

Coflein NPRN 302263 and 421093; Houlder, *The excavation of a Neolithic stone implement factory on Mynydd Rhiw in Caernarvonshire*, *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 27 (1961); Burrow, "The Mynydd Rhiw quarry site: recent work and its implications", in *Stone Axe Studies III* (2011); Barker & Burrow 2008; Cadw scheduling description; National Trust summary; Meillionydd project booklet (Bangor University) for landscape context.

Chapter 3



Tan y Muriau: the tomb that shouldn't be there

Portal dolmen (c. 5,500 years old) remodelled c. 3000 BC in a style otherwise found between Oxford and Bristol

On the lower eastern slopes of Mynydd Rhiw, a short distance from Plas yn Rhiw, stands one of the most intriguing megalithic tombs on the peninsula. Tan y Muriau (sometimes rendered Tan-y-Muriau) is a multi-chambered monument originally covered by a long cairn more than 100 m in length. The main chamber at the north-western end is a classic portal dolmen: four supporting stones and an impressive, whale-backed or fin-shaped capstone under which a visitor can still sit. Behind it lies the remains of a smaller lateral chamber consisting of two supporters and a thinner capstone. Antiquarian observers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries — J.G. Williams in 1871 and W.F. Grimes later — recorded evidence of a possible third chamber at the south-eastern end of the cairn. A single large stone may be all that remains of it today.

The monument has never been excavated in modern times. Its form, however, has been carefully described by Frances Lynch and others. Lynch noted an indentation in the cairn material behind the main chamber and suggested this may indicate construction in two stages — a pattern known from the multi-phase tomb at Dyffryn Ardudwy further south in Gwynedd. Although Tan y Muriau is not a textbook Cotswold-Severn long barrow of the type found between the Severn and the Cotswolds (roughly between Oxford and Bristol), it shares enough features of plan and chamber arrangement to place it within a wider western British tradition while remaining distinctly local. Portal tombs of this general type belong to the early centuries of the Neolithic, in the centuries after 4000 BC; a date around 3500 BC is reasonable for the primary phase here.

The tomb sits at about 125 m above sea level on a hillside with views toward the sweeping bay of Porth Neigwl. Its position is typical of early Neolithic portal tombs: elevated, visible, and related to the surrounding landscape rather than hidden. The builders chose a place that commanded both the coastal plain and the approaches to the higher ground of Mynydd Rhiw, where the axe factory was already, or would soon be, in operation. The same hill therefore carried both the production of everyday tools and the construction of monumental tombs for the dead.

Today the cairn material is reduced and the chambers stand more exposed than they once did. Bracken and vegetation can obscure parts of the site in summer. The monument is scheduled (Cadw CN026). It remains one of the clearest demonstrations that the first farmers of Llŷn were participating in architectural ideas that stretched far beyond the peninsula, while adapting them to local stone and topography. The “tomb that shouldn’t be there” is, in fact, exactly where it should be — a local expression of a wider Atlantic tradition.

Visitor note

The site lies on private land near Tan y Muriau house. Access is sensitive; check current arrangements and respect the working farm. The chamber is dry and can be entered with care (watch your head on the underside of the capstone). The best light is often in the morning or late afternoon when the capstone is thrown into relief.

Key sources

Frances Lynch, *Gwynedd* (Cadw, 1995) and related commentary on multi-phase tombs; field descriptions and antiquarian notes summarised in *Modern Antiquarian* and German-language syntheses drawing on Lynch and Grimes; Cadw/People’s Collection Wales aerial record (1990); unexcavated status confirmed across all modern sources; comparative discussion of portal tombs in Kytmanow and Cummings & Whittle.

Chapter 4



Bachwen and the cup-marked stone

Early Neolithic long cairn; the meaning of cup-marks

A short distance west of Clynnog Fawr, in a field with open views to the sea and toward the ridge of Yr Eifl, stands the portal tomb of Bachwen (also known as Bach Wen or Clynnog Dolmen). Four slender orthostats, each over a metre high, support a large, thin, wedge-shaped sedimentary capstone measuring roughly 2.5×1.6 m (some measurements give 2.4×2.7 m). The upper surface of the capstone is densely covered with cup-marks — reports consistently cite around 110, roughly 5 cm in diameter and 2 cm deep, with additional marks on the sides and two shallow grooves linking some of the cups. All the marks are positioned on the southern and upper faces.

The monument was examined in the nineteenth century. Paving was noted on the chamber floor, together with black material that may represent the residue of a fire. The southern orthostat was restored in the twentieth century. The original covering mound or cairn has largely disappeared, leaving the chamber exposed; estimates suggest the mound may once have measured around 14×7.5 m. It is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (CN008).

Cup-marks on megalithic tombs raise difficult questions of dating and meaning. In many cases across Britain and Ireland the marks appear to be later additions, carved when the covering material had eroded or been removed and the stone was again accessible. At Bachwen the weathering and density of the marks are consistent with this pattern, though absolute dating of the cups themselves is not available. Similar simple cup-marks occur on other Welsh megaliths and on natural outcrops; more complex cup-and-ring

motifs are rarer in this region. George Nash and others have discussed the possibility of ritual or shamanic associations, but the evidence remains interpretive rather than conclusive. What is certain is that the marks transform the capstone from a purely structural element into a surface of repeated, deliberate human action. They invite the modern visitor to consider not only the original builders of the tomb but also the people who returned to it generations later and left their own marks.

The setting remains powerful. From the chamber the eye is drawn seaward and inland toward the higher ground that would later carry the great hillforts of Tre'r Ceiri and Garn Boduan. Bachwen is both a burial place and a landscape marker — one of the most distinctive Neolithic monuments on Llŷn. The fact that the cups are concentrated on the outward-facing surfaces suggests they were meant to be seen.

Visitor note

The tomb stands in a working field, often with cattle. It is fenced for protection. Access is usually possible from the lane; respect the livestock and the monument. The best photographs of the cup-marks are obtained in low, raking light.

Key sources

Cadw/People's Collection Wales aerial and descriptive records; field measurements and cup-mark counts in Nash and related papers; Scarre on significant stones; general literature on cup-marks (Bradley, Waddington, Simpson 1867 historic illustration); German-language structural synthesis; scheduled status CN008.

Chapter 5



The cairn-builders of Carnguwch

One of Wales's largest Bronze Age burial cairns

On the summit of Mynydd Carnguwch (approximately 358 m), a dome-shaped hill near Llithfaen, stands one of the most substantial Bronze Age burial cairns in Wales. Cadw describes it as a massive cairn at least 30 m in diameter and up to 6 m high, built around a natural outcrop of rock. A revetment wall is exposed halfway up the structure to a height of about 1.5 m. The top has been disturbed: the centre is hollowed and other hollows have been dug into the eastern side. Coflein records a more conservative core measurement of a ruined, dressed-rubble-revetted oval cairn roughly 17.7 m north-east to south-west by 11.6 m and 3.2 m high, set within a wider area of loose rubble (c. 40 × 30 m) interpreted as the result of its partial collapse or robbing for later wall-building.

The precise dimensions matter less than the effect. The builders used the natural summit outcrop to create a monument that dominates the skyline far more effectively than the same volume of stone would have done on flat ground. From the top the views take in the sea, the three peaks of Yr Eifl (including the later hillfort of Tre'r Ceiri), and much of northern Llŷn. Similar, smaller cairns occupy other summits on the peninsula — Mynydd Rhiw, the peaks of Yr Eifl themselves, and elsewhere. These upland cairns belong to the Early or Middle Bronze Age (broadly c. 2000–1150 BC), a period when the earlier tradition of collective megalithic tombs gave way to individual or small-group cremation burials under stone mounds, often accompanied by Food Vessels or Collared Urns.

The Carnguwch cairn has never been excavated. Its form and position, however, are typical of the ceremonial and funerary landscape of the period. Summit cairns may have served as territorial markers, ancestral memorials, or both. Local tradition later associated high places with the supernatural; the scale of this particular cairn suggests it was intended to be seen and remembered across a wide territory. Gwynedd Archaeological Trust notes good evidence for vertical or slightly battered revetments on both the Carnguwch cairn and those on Tre'r Ceiri — careful construction, not casual heaps.

Walking up to it today is still an act of effort and orientation. The path is steep, the ground rough and rocky above 200 m, and the final approach reveals the full bulk of the stone pile against the sky. It remains one of the most powerful prehistoric statements on the peninsula.

Visitor note

Access is possible from the road between Llanaelhaearn and Nefyn via field paths and enclosure walls. The ground is intractable and can be wet. There is no formal path to the summit. Allow plenty of time and suitable footwear. The views are outstanding on a clear day.

Key sources

Cadw scheduling description CN043; Coflein records and RCAHMW aerial photography notes; Gwynedd Archaeological Trust historic landscape characterisation (Area 12 — northern mountains); field observations; Heath 2023; comparative discussion of Welsh upland cairns.

Chapter 6



Standing stones and lost monuments

Surviving stones across the peninsula; what has been lost since antiquarian surveys

Scattered across the fields and lower slopes of Llŷn are solitary standing stones — *meini hirion*. They are less dramatic than the great tombs or the summit cairns, yet they form an essential part of the prehistoric landscape. Most are assigned to the Early Bronze Age (c. 2500–1500 BC), though few have been excavated and absolute dates are rare. Their original purpose is uncertain. Possibilities include commemorative markers for individuals, way-markers on routes, territorial indicators, or foci for small-scale ritual. Many are carefully chosen for visibility or for the quality of the stone itself (sometimes quartz-flecked).

Documented examples include stones at or near:

- Tudweiliog (one of the more significant),
- Gwynus, Pistyll (SH 3460 4210),
- Penfras, Llwyndyrys (SH 3800 4170),
- Nant y Gledrydd, Madryn (SH 2935 3650),
- Sarn Mellteyrn (SH 2371 3284),
- Plas ym Mhenllech, Penllech (SH 2225 3452),
- Llangwnnadl (SH 2080 3250),
- Tan y Foel, Rhiw (SH 2261 2767),
- Pandy Saethon, Nanhoron (SH 2880 3230), and others recorded by Gwynedd Archaeological Trust and local surveys.

Some stand in open fields; others have been incorporated into walls or used as gateposts. Antiquarian surveys and early Ordnance Survey maps record monuments that have since disappeared — cairns robbed for wall-building and road metal, stones removed or broken, tombs reduced to single slabs. The Llŷn Crop Marks Project of 1989–90, followed by geophysical survey and excavation, demonstrated that aerial photography can still reveal ploughed-out ring ditches and enclosures invisible on the ground. At Bodnithoedd, Botwnnog, a ring-ditch cemetery was investigated; at Mellteyrn Uchaf an enclosed Middle Bronze Age settlement was examined; other sites yielded late prehistoric and Romano-British evidence. These discoveries show that the surviving standing stones and upstanding cairns are only a fraction of what once existed.

The distribution of the stones, sparse yet widespread, suggests a landscape in which individual markers were as important as the great communal tombs of the preceding centuries. Walking between them today is an exercise in reconstructing a vanished density of meaning. Some may have aligned with natural features or with other monuments; others simply marked a place of significance to a family or community. Without excavation and absolute dating, the precise stories remain out of reach. What survives is the stone itself, still upright after three or four thousand years.

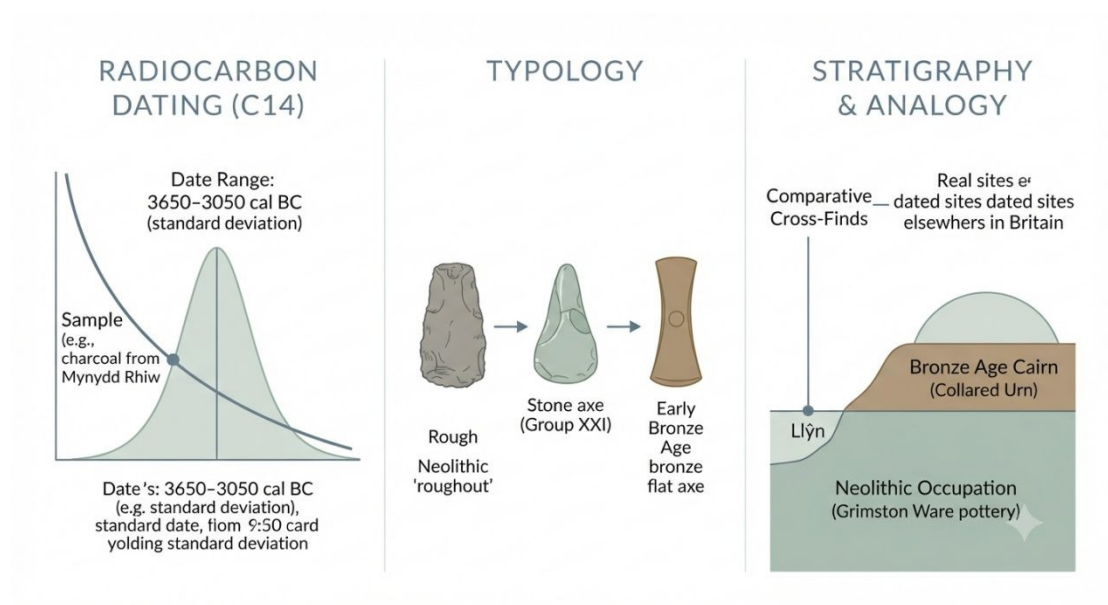
Visitor note

Many stones stand on private farmland. Always seek permission where necessary, leave no trace, and be prepared for livestock. A map and the *Ancient Llŷn* interactive resource are the best guides to current locations and access.

Key sources

Snowdonia Heritage and local gazetteers listing stones with grid references; Gwynedd Archaeological Trust Historic Environment Record; Ward & Smith, “The Llŷn Crop Marks Project”, *Studia Celtica* 35 (2001); Heath 2023; general Early Bronze Age literature on menhirs.

Chapter 7



What the stones don't tell us

Interpretation, dating methods, and honest uncertainty

The monuments of prehistoric Llŷn are eloquent, but they are also silent on many of the questions a modern visitor wants answered. Who exactly built them? How many people lived here at any one time? What did the cup-marks mean to the people who carved them? Why were some tombs multi-phase and others simple? Why did the focus of burial shift from collective chambers to individual cairns? The evidence does not allow firm answers, and any honest account must say so.

Dating rests on a combination of methods, each with its own strengths and limits. Typology places portal tombs early in the Neolithic sequence, in the centuries after 4000 BC. Radiocarbon determinations from the Mynydd Rhiw quarries give a firm bracket of roughly 3650–3050 BC for the main phase of axe production. Bronze Age cairns are dated by analogy with better-excavated examples elsewhere in Wales and Britain, and by the general cultural shift from collective to individual burial rites around the end of the third and beginning of the second millennium BC. Absolute dates for most individual monuments on Llŷn remain scarce. Cup-marks on capstones are particularly difficult; many are accepted as later than the original construction of the tombs, added when the covering cairn had eroded or been removed.

Settlement evidence is even thinner. The ceremonial and funerary monuments dominate the visible record. Everyday houses, fields and middens of the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age are largely invisible — either destroyed by later agriculture, never substantial enough to survive as earthworks, or still buried and unrecognised. Only with

the later Bronze Age and Iron Age do enclosures and roundhouses become clearer on the ground (the subject of Book 2). The Llŷn Crop Marks Project showed that more settlement evidence survives as buried features than the upstanding monuments alone suggest, but even that work sampled only a fraction of the peninsula.

Interpretation must therefore remain provisional. The tombs may have been ancestral houses, territorial claims, statements of identity, or all of these at once. The summit cairns may have marked the resting places of important individuals or groups and simultaneously asserted control over upland pasture and the visual landscape. The standing stones may have been simple memorials, route markers, or more complex ritual foci. The axe factory supplied practical tools and, perhaps, a sense of specialised knowledge and place. Modern theories — from landscape phenomenology to shamanic interpretations of rock art — can illuminate possibilities, but they cannot replace the limited archaeological record.

What is certain is the continuity of landscape use. The same hills and coastal routes that attracted the first farmers continued to attract their successors for millennia. The monuments we see today are the most durable parts of a much richer, largely vanished world of wooden houses, organic offerings, spoken stories and seasonal movements. Standing among them, the modern visitor is invited not to invent stories the stones cannot support, but to recognise both the limits of the evidence and the extraordinary depth of time they represent.

This volume has traced that deep-time foundation from the first clearances and quarries to the summit cairns of the Bronze Age. The next book picks up the story as the peninsula fills with hillforts and the age of the forts begins.

Key sources

Synthesis of all preceding chapters and their cited works; methodological literature on radiocarbon dating, typology, and the interpretation of megalithic monuments and rock art; Heath 2023 as the most recent full synthesis of Llŷn prehistory.

End matter

Collected source note

All factual claims in this book are traceable to the sources listed at the end of each chapter. The principal collections and works are:

- Coflein / Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales (individual site records and aerial photography).
- Cadw scheduling descriptions and guides.
- Gwynedd Archaeological Trust / Heneb Historic Environment Record and historic landscape characterisations.
- National Museum Wales (artefact collections and Burrow's work).
- Houlder 1961; Burrow 2011 and related papers; Frances Lynch, *Gwynedd* (1995) and earlier work on Welsh megaliths; Julian Maxwell Heath, *From Hunter-Gatherers to Early Christians* (2023); Ward & Smith 2001 (crop marks); Bangor University Meillionydd project materials (landscape context).
- National Trust Llŷn pages; Natural Resources Wales landscape character assessment.

A full bibliography with page references will appear in the final illustrated edition. Where evidence is incomplete or disputed, the text has said so explicitly.

Further reading

Heath (2023) is the essential modern synthesis. Lynch (1995) remains the best single-volume guide to the wider Gwynedd evidence. Coflein is the starting point for any individual site.

Connection to the range and to Ancient Llŷn

This book supplies the deep-time foundation gestured at in the Llŷn Novels. Every site discussed here appears on the standalone interactive map *Ancient Llŷn*, written at GCSE-accessible length with key facts and a self-test question. The map is organised by category, not by book chapter, and will continue to grow independently. Book 2, *Hillfort Country*, continues the chronological story into the Iron Age.

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