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THE LLŶN HISTORIES

BOOK 4 OF 5

Sacred Llŷn

Saints, shrines and the pilgrim road



c. 616 AD – present

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THE DIGITAL HEART OF THE LLŶN

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Book 4: Sacred Llŷn

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Front matter

This book is for anyone who has stood in the oversized church at Clynnog, or watched Bardsey rise from the tide at Aberdaron, and felt that the place was trying to say something. It can be read on its own. It is also the natural nonfiction companion to the novel *The Bardsey Silence*.

The outline is simple. In the early seventh century a saint of royal blood founded a community at Clynnog Fawr that became one of the great ecclesiastical centres of early medieval Wales. Over the following centuries that community, and the network of churches and wells around it, sustained a major pilgrimage route to the small island at the end of the land — Ynys Enlli, Bardsey, known as the Island of 20,000 Saints. Three journeys there were held to equal one pilgrimage to Rome. The traffic shaped the landscape, enriched churches, and left traces that are still visible: a church far too large for its village, a massive wooden chest, holy wells that still flow, and a ruined abbey tower on an island that retains an uncommon power.

The Reformation ended the official cults. Popular devotion survived in quieter forms. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries the road has been deliberately revived. The North Wales Pilgrim's Way is now waymarked from the Dee estuary to the tip of Llŷn. People still walk it — for faith, for history, for the simple experience of moving slowly through a sacred landscape toward an island that still feels like the edge of the world.

This volume follows that road in both directions: back into the seventh century and forward into the present. It is written to be read slowly.

Chapter 1

Beuno comes to Clynnog

The founding of the clas community, c. 616 AD

The road from Caernarfon runs through ordinary green country until a large church appears, far bigger than the village around it. Crenellated, built of warm local stone, it dominates the shallow valley. This is St Beuno's, Clynnog Fawr. The ground it stands on has been sacred for fourteen centuries.

In the early seventh century a monk named Beuno came here. The traditional date is 616. He was of royal stock, descended from the princes of Powys, and had already founded churches further east. According to the medieval *Life*, he quarrelled with King Cadwallon of Gwynedd over land. Cadwallon's cousin Gwyddaint then gave him the site at Clynnog "to God and to Beuno for ever." There Beuno established a *clas*.

A *clas* was a distinctively Welsh institution — a community of clergy living under local custom rather than a continental monastic rule. It combined elements of monastery, collegiate church and centre of learning and mission. Some members could be married; offices were sometimes hereditary. The abbot of a major *clas* held high status. Later Welsh law texts record that the abbot of Clynnog was entitled to a seat at the court of the king of Gwynedd, a privilege shared only with the abbot of Bangor. That single detail shows how important the foundation became within a few generations.

Beuno died at Clynnog, traditionally on the seventh day of Easter (Low Sunday) in 640 or 642. His tomb quickly became a focus of devotion. People slept on it in hope of healing. The nearby spring, still known as Ffynnon Beuno, was credited with curative power. The original wooden churches have long gone. The site was burned by Vikings in 978 and again in the Norman period. What stands today is a grand collegiate church of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, one of the finest late-medieval buildings in North Wales. Its size is itself evidence of the wealth and prestige the community eventually commanded.

The early layers are not entirely lost. The small chapel attached to the west end, reached by a low barrel-vaulted passage, is believed to occupy the site of the original church and of the saint's tomb. Inside lies the stone called Maen Beuno, marked with a simple early cross and said by tradition to carry the imprint of the saint's fingers. In the churchyard stands a rare sundial of the late tenth to early twelfth century, a reminder that the monastic hours once structured the day here. A short walk away the holy well still rises.

To stand in the chapel or beside the well is to stand at the beginning of the sacred story of Llŷn. Everything that follows grows from this seventh-century foundation.

Visitor note

The church is normally open daily from Easter to October. The chapel and well are accessible year-round. The building only makes full sense when you understand both what once stood here and what the site later became.

Key sources

Medieval *Life* of Beuno; Dictionary of Welsh Biography; Welsh law references to *clas Beuno*; architectural histories (RCAHMW, Cadw, listed-building records); National Churches Trust and British Pilgrimage Trust summaries.

Chapter 2

The clas and the pilgrim economy

How Clynnog Fawr grew wealthy on the road to Bardsey

By the high Middle Ages Clynnog was both a major ecclesiastical centre and the principal staging post on the pilgrimage route to Bardsey. Pilgrims travelling from the northern shrines, especially St Winefride's Well at Holywell, passed through in significant numbers. They needed food, lodging, spiritual preparation and the chance to make offerings. Clynnog provided all four and grew rich in the process.

The wealth is still visible in the fabric. The present church was raised in stages between about 1480 and the early 1500s: first the chancel and transepts, then the great nave, then the tower, vestry and rebuilt shrine chapel. It became one of only six collegiate churches in Wales. A college of clergy lived here, supported by the old *clas* lands, by renders, and by the steady income of the pilgrim traffic. Cattle dedicated to the saint were marked with a distinctive ear-notch — *Nod Beuno*. A book of the community's rights was known as *Llyfr Beuno*. The river weir was *Cored Beuno*. The landscape around the church was stamped with the saint's name and the community's privileges.

Clynnog was not merely a convenient overnight stop. It was itself a place of pilgrimage. The well was sought for healing. Sleeping on the saint's tomb was believed to bring cure. The combination of a powerful local cult and the long-distance traffic to Bardsey created a self-reinforcing cycle: more pilgrims brought more offerings, which paid for a finer church, which in turn attracted more pilgrims. The enormous building that still overwhelms the small village is the direct result of that economy of devotion.

When you walk the length of the nave today, under the late-medieval roof, every stone is, in part, the gift of people who were on their way to the island at the end of the land, or who had already been there and were returning.

Key sources

Architectural phasing and collegiate status; traditional accounts of the cult and its privileges; secondary literature on the economics of medieval Welsh pilgrimage.

Chapter 3

St Beuno's Chest

Relics, offerings, and paying for sin

In the nave stands a massive wooden chest, dark with age, hollowed from a single trunk of ash. This is *Cyff Beuno* — St Beuno's Chest. Into it went the coins and gifts of centuries of pilgrims. Some gave in thanksgiving. Some gave in hope. Some, in the language of the time, paid for their sins. The chest is one of the most direct physical links we have to the lived reality of medieval pilgrimage on Llŷn.

Local tradition sometimes claims that Beuno himself made it. That is unlikely; the chest is almost certainly medieval. Its survival is rare. Most such collection boxes have disappeared. This one remains in the church for which it was made.

Around it other traces of the cult survive: the stone Maen Beuno with its early cross; the tradition of the tomb in the chapel; the well that still flows a short distance away. Together they form a small constellation of holy things — the memory of a body, water, stone, and the chest that received the material expression of devotion.

The Reformation closed the official channels of the cult. Yet the memory of the chest and of the saint's protective power over livestock lingered in local custom into the nineteenth century. People still understood that this had been a place where the boundary between the everyday and the holy was thin.

To look at the chest is to look at the medieval pilgrim economy made visible, and at a form of hope: the hope that a journey, a prayer and a gift could change the course of a life or a soul.

Key sources

Church inventories and guidebooks; descriptions of the chest and associated relics; comparative material on medieval shrine offerings.

Chapter 4

The North Wales Pilgrim's Way

Holywell to Bardsey — the four great medieval sites

Medieval pilgrimage in North Wales was a network rather than a single path. Four sites formed its essential structure: St Winefride's Well at Holywell, the church and well of St Beuno at Clynnog, the final sequence of churches along the Llŷn peninsula, and the island of Bardsey itself.

Holywell, linked with the seventh-century martyr Winefride (Gwenffrewi) and in legend with Beuno, was one of the great healing shrines of Britain. Its importance continued through the Reformation to the present day. From there pilgrims moved west. Many passed through Clynnog, where they could honour Beuno, drink from his well, and prepare for the last stages. On Llŷn the northern route continued by way of Llanaelhaearn, the cliff-top church at Pistyll, Llangwnnadr, and finally Aberdaron. A southern route took in other churches and wells before the same gathering point.

At the end of the land lay the island. Three pilgrimages to Bardsey were held to equal one to Rome. That equivalence — whether formally granted or simply accepted by popular belief — made the journey both accessible and of the highest spiritual value. A Welsh pilgrim did not need to cross Europe; the edge of his own country offered a reward of the first order.

The modern North Wales Pilgrim's Way, waymarked and supported by churches and heritage bodies, re-creates this journey for contemporary walkers. It is not a precise reconstruction of any single medieval itinerary. It is something more useful: a living route that allows people to move at human speed through the same sacred geography, stopping at the same kinds of places, and ending with the same sea crossing when the weather allows. Some walk it in one hard push. Others take it in stages over years. The path is open to anyone.

To walk even a section of it is to understand the medieval experience more deeply than reading alone can provide. The churches are small and frequent. The sea is often in view. The final island lies always ahead, sometimes clear, sometimes lost in rain or haze. The journey itself becomes the point.

Key sources

Medieval references to the Bardsey pilgrimage (including Gerald of Wales); traditions of equivalence with Rome; modern route documentation from the North Wales Pilgrim's Way and British Pilgrimage Trust.

Chapter 5

Aberdaron: the last parish

The final stop before the crossing to the island

Aberdaron is the end of the road. The stone church of St Hywyn stands so close to the sea that high tides once threatened its walls. Founded, according to tradition, in the early sixth century by Hywyn, a companion or cousin of the Cadfan who established the monastery on Bardsey, it became the last major mainland station for pilgrims waiting to cross.

The present building contains Norman work — the west doorway is deeply worn by weather and hands — and major late-medieval expansion, including fine timber roofs that still catch light reflected from the sea. Inside are two of the earliest Christian monuments on the peninsula: sixth-century inscribed stones commemorating priests named Senacus and Veracius. Senacus is recorded as having been buried “with the multitude of the brethren.” Some have heard in that phrase a distant echo of the later tradition of the 20,000 saints.

In the Middle Ages the little port was busy with pilgrim traffic. Inns and lodging houses served those waiting for a fair wind. One building, Y Gegin Fawr (“The Big Kitchen”), survives from the fourteenth century and still serves food. The crossing of Bardsey Sound is short but treacherous; the currents are notorious. Many pilgrims waited days. Some never crossed. Some crossed and did not return. St Hywyn’s was a place of last preparation, of anxiety, of hope, and, for some, of final rest.

In the twentieth century the church gained another layer of meaning as the parish of the poet-priest R.S. Thomas. His austere poems about this landscape and its people have become part of the modern experience of the place. The visitor who stands in the churchyard and looks out to the island therefore stands in a landscape shaped by early saints, medieval pilgrims, and a great modern writer. The continuity is almost audible.

Key sources

Architectural history of St Hywyn’s; the early inscribed stones; records of pilgrim hospitality; R.S. Thomas’s connection with the parish; contemporary pilgrimage literature.

Chapter 6

Ynys Enlli: the island of 20,000 saints

Bardsey's reputation, burials, and 'three pilgrimages equal one to Rome'

From the cliffs above Aberdaron or the heights of Uwchmynydd the island looks close enough to touch — a low green-and-brown shape with a single hill at its northern end. In reality the crossing is two miles of some of the most unpredictable water in the Irish Sea. That difficulty was always part of the pilgrimage. The island had to be earned.

Tradition says that around 516 the Breton saint Cadfan, invited by Einion, king of Llŷn, founded a monastery here. His successor Lleuddad is said to have obtained a privilege from an angel: that no one who died on the island would be damned. The belief took root. Bardsey became known as the burial place of the bravest and best, a direct path to heaven, the gates of Paradise. By the later Middle Ages the tradition had hardened into a number: 20,000 saints lay in its soil. Three pilgrimages to the island equalled one to Rome. The claim appears in various forms; whether or not a specific pope ever formalised it, the belief itself is well attested and was clearly powerful.

Archaeology has not located the original sixth-century monastery. What remains is the ruined tower of the thirteenth-century Augustinian abbey, a modern Celtic cross commemorating the 20,000 saints, and a landscape that still feels set apart. Limited excavation has recovered medieval graves. Local tradition holds that one cannot dig anywhere without striking bone. The number 20,000 is legendary, but the intensity of the island's reputation is not in doubt.

The monastery was dissolved in 1537 and the buildings demolished or converted. The island passed into secular hands. Its atmosphere survived. Today it is managed as a place of natural and cultural importance, with a small resident population, a bird observatory, and a continuing tradition of retreat and pilgrimage. Those who make the crossing still speak of a change in the quality of the air, the light and the silence.

The island is the narrative climax of Sacred Llŷn. Everything on the mainland leads here. To stand among the ruins of the tower, with the sea on every side and the mountains of Llŷn across the Sound, is to understand why generations of pilgrims thought this was as close as one could come to the edge of the world and the gate of heaven.

Key sources

Medieval references (Book of Llandaff, Gerald of Wales, later tradition); archaeological surveys; Bardsey Island Trust materials; modern writing on the island's spiritual and cultural meaning.

Chapter 7

The road after the Reformation

Decline of formal pilgrimage and its modern revival

The Reformation ended the official structures of pilgrimage. Clynnog lost its collegiate status. The chest no longer received payments for sin. The monastery on Bardsey was dissolved and its buildings brought down. For a time it must have seemed that the great medieval traffic had ended.

Popular devotion proved more resilient. At Clynnog the custom of making offerings for the health of cattle continued into the nineteenth century. Holy wells were still visited. The memory of the road to the island never entirely disappeared from local knowledge. In the twentieth century that memory began to be deliberately recovered. Organised pilgrimages from Clynnog to Bardsey took place in 1950 and 1992. In the early twenty-first century the North Wales Pilgrim's Way was fully waymarked and launched as a long-distance path open to all.

The modern route is not a museum piece. It is used. People walk it in sections or in one determined effort. Churches along the way open their doors. The island still receives those who can make the crossing. Some walkers are religious; many are not. What they share is the experience of moving slowly through a landscape shaped by centuries of sacred journeying. The churches, the wells, the final view of the island — these things still work on the walker.

Sacred Llŷn is therefore not a closed historical subject. It is a living tradition that has contracted, survived, and expanded again. The same road that carried the devotees of Beuno and the seekers of the Island of 20,000 Saints still carries people today. The stones are the same. The sea is the same. The reasons people walk have multiplied, but the power of the places has not diminished.

To finish this book is not to finish the journey. The path is still there. The churches are still open. The island still waits at the end of the land.

Key sources

Evidence of post-Reformation popular devotion; records of the twentieth-century revivals; materials of the modern North Wales Pilgrim's Way and British Pilgrimage Trust; contemporary accounts of walking the route.

End matter

Collected source note

Medieval lives of Beuno and Cadfan; Welsh law texts; architectural and historical studies of Clynnog and Aberdaron; early inscribed stones; medieval pilgrimage references (including Gerald of Wales); Cadw, Coflein, National Churches Trust, British Pilgrimage Trust, Bardsey Island Trust; modern route guides and reflective writing on the spiritual landscape of Llŷn. Full bibliography in the final downloadable edition.

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