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THE LLŶN HISTORIES

BOOK 5 OF 5

Reading the Land

How to see prehistoric and historic Llŷn for yourself

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A field companion to the series

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THE DIGITAL HEART OF THE LLŶN

THE LLŶN HISTORIES

Book 5: Reading the Land

How to see prehistoric and historic Llŷn for yourself

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Front matter

This book is the working companion to the four narrative volumes. It is written for the reader who has followed the tombs, the forts, the castles and the pilgrim road on the page and now wants to stand on the ground and see them with understanding. It assumes no prior archaeological knowledge. It does assume you are willing to walk, to look carefully, to get wet, and to treat the land and its present inhabitants with respect.

Llŷn is not a heritage park with neat paths and laminated panels at every turn. Most of the sites described in Books 1–4 are open to the sky. Some lie on land managed by Cadw or the National Trust; the majority do not. They are reached by public footpaths, open-access land, or quiet roads, and they are interpreted largely by what the eye and the map can teach you. This volume shows you how to find them, what to look for when you arrive, how the shape of the peninsula itself helps you read the archaeology, and how to stay safe and considerate while you do it.

Carry it (digitally or printed) together with the interactive map *Ancient Llŷn*, a good Ordnance Survey map (Explorer 253 covers most of the peninsula), and the earlier books if you wish. The map gives precise location and basic period. This book teaches the skill of seeing.

The goal is not to collect sites like stamps. It is to develop a way of looking until the landscape begins to speak in complete sentences — prehistoric, medieval and present at the same time.

Chapter 1

How to read a landscape

What the shape of the land is trying to tell you

Before you hunt for individual monuments, learn to see the grain of the peninsula. Llŷn is a long spine of hard igneous and volcanic hills running roughly north-east to south-west, falling away to coastal plains, drowned valleys and the sea. The high ground offered defence, long views, and, in the Neolithic, the tough rocks that could be worked into axes. It also offered the dramatic skylines that prehistoric communities chose for their tombs and cairns. The lower ground offered pasture, better soils, and easy access to the shore.

When you reach any summit — Tre'r Ceiri, Carn Fadryn, Garn Boduan, the ridge of Mynydd Rhiw — stop and turn a full circle. Ask three questions:

1. What can I see from here that I could not see from the land below?
2. What routes, natural or man-made, does this place control or overlook?
3. Where does the eye naturally come to rest — on a neighbouring hill, a stretch of coast, a distant mountain?

The major prehistoric and medieval sites of Llŷn were rarely placed at random. They sit on the junctions of visibility, movement and resources. Once you begin to notice these relationships, the individual monuments stop being isolated “dots on the map” and become parts of a working system.

Look also for the quieter signatures. A level platform cut into a slope, a patch of ground that is stonier or greener than its surroundings, a length of wall thicker and more carefully faced than the rest, a circular hollow that is not quite natural — these can be the surface traces of roundhouses, clearance cairns, old field boundaries or robbed burial mounds. Modern LiDAR and aerial photographs reveal a great deal, but a patient pair of eyes on the ground still notices things that remote sensing misses.

The single most useful habit is this: when you arrive at a site, spend the first ten minutes doing nothing but looking. Do not immediately search for the information board or the best camera angle. Let the place show you its shape, its relationship to the land around it, and the way light and weather move across it. Only then begin the closer inspection.

Carry a compass or use the one on your phone. Knowing which direction is the open sea, which is Snowdonia, and which way the weather is coming from changes how every site on the peninsula is understood.

Chapter 2

Finding and understanding the prehistoric sites

Tombs, cairns, axe-working places and cup-marks

The Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments of Llŷn are often understated. A portal dolmen may appear as three or four upright stones supporting a single capstone, sometimes still half-buried in the remains of its cairn. A round cairn can look like a natural outcrop until you notice the deliberate kerb stones or the central hollow left by robbing. Cup-marks are easy to miss unless the light is low and raking across the surface.

The Mynydd Rhiw cluster (south-west)

One of the richest and most rewarding areas on the peninsula. The Neolithic axe-factory workings survive as shallow pits and spreads of flaked stone on the higher slopes; they are easy to overlook if you do not know what you are seeking. Tan y Muriau portal dolmen sits on lower ground nearby and is one of the more complete burial chambers. The double-ringwork of Meillionydd lies on private land and should not be entered without permission, but its setting in the wider prehistoric landscape is clear from public paths. Use Plas yn Rhiw (National Trust) or careful roadside parking near Rhiw as a base. The ground is rough, often wet, and crossed by livestock. Good boots and patience are essential. This single area lets you see the long sequence from Neolithic stone-working and burial through to later prehistoric settlement in one concentrated landscape.

The northern hills and Yr Eifl

Tre'r Ceiri dominates (see Chapter 3), but the wider massif and the lower slopes carry cairns and the occasional standing stone or cup-marked rock. Cup-marks repay low sunlight — early morning or late afternoon — when the tiny hollows cast small shadows and suddenly become visible.

Scattered tombs and cairns

Many of the smaller monuments lie on open-access land or within a short walk of public footpaths. Always check the current access situation. Never climb on the stones. Capstones and orthostats have stood for four or five thousand years; they do not need your weight, and a single thoughtless scramble can undo millennia.

When you reach a chambered tomb, look first at its orientation and its relationship to the horizon and the sea. Then look at the construction itself: the size and dressing of the orthostats, the presence or absence of a forecourt, the remains of the covering mound. These details link the individual monument to the wider traditions described in Book 1.

Practical cautions

Livestock are almost always present. Dogs must be kept on leads. In the spring and early

summer, nesting birds require extra care — stay on existing paths. Wet rock is slippery.
Mobile coverage is unreliable on the higher ground; do not depend on it.

Chapter 3

The hillforts: how to walk them

Tre'r Ceiri, Garn Boduan, Carn Fadryn and the smaller enclosures

The great stone-walled forts are the most visually spectacular prehistoric monuments on Llŷn and, once you know what to look for, the easiest for a visitor to understand.

Tre'r Ceiri

The outstanding site and the one that most repays careful time. Park at the small car park above Llithfaen (signed for Nant Gwrtheyrn) or use the alternatives near Llanaelhaearn. The ascent is steep and entirely exposed. Allow a minimum of two to three hours for the round trip and time spent inside the fort; more if you want to explore properly. Once through the main entrance, walk the entire circuit of the rampart before descending into the interior. Notice how much of the wall still stands close to its original height, the remains of the wall-walk and breastwork, the long controlled passage of the north-west gate, and the dense packing of stone roundhouse foundations. The Bronze Age cairn on the highest point is centuries older than the fort that surrounds it. Weather changes fast; carry full waterproofs and an extra warm layer even on a bright morning. The late-twentieth-century conservation work is visible in places — newer stone is usually distinguishable from the original.

Garn Boduan

Access from the B4354 a short distance from Nefyn. A track rises through forestry before emerging onto the open summit plateau. The plateau is extensive; the rings of collapsed roundhouses are easiest to see when the sun is low. The later stone citadel on the eastern crag is the most dramatic single feature and links directly to the early medieval story begun in Book 2. The hill is windy and open; there is little shelter.

Carn Fadryn

Park near the church on the southern side of the hill. Paths are clear but steep in sections. Walk both of the Iron Age defensive circuits and then the compact medieval citadel on the highest rock. The panoramic views explain at once why the site was chosen and re-used across so many centuries.

Smaller and subtler sites

Castell Odo, near Aberdaron, consists of low banks and scarps rather than towering walls. A simple plan (or the *Ancient Llŷn* map) is almost essential if you are to make sense of the sequence from open settlement to palisade to double bank. Other double ringworks and minor enclosures are often on private land; view them from public rights of way and leave them undisturbed.

On every fort, train yourself to notice the same elements: the number and design of entrances, the way the builders used or modified natural slopes, the density and variety of internal buildings, and any clear evidence of later alteration or re-use. These observations turn the visit into a direct continuation of the arguments in Book 2.

Chapter 4

Castles, churches and the medieval landscape

Criccieth, Clynnog, Aberdaron and the pilgrim road

Criccieth Castle

A Cadw site with parking and facilities in the town below. The twin-towered gatehouse is the architectural highlight. Walk the inner ward slowly and look for the clear change in masonry that marks the heightening carried out after the English conquest. Stand on the seaward side and the original logic of the site becomes obvious: a rocky headland with steep cliffs on three sides and only a narrow landward neck to defend. Combine the castle with a walk along the waterfront for the full setting described in Book 3.

Clynnog Fawr

The church is unmistakable from the A499. Park in the village and approach on foot. Inside, locate St Beuno's Chest, the low passage that leads to the chapel, and the stone known as Maen Beuno. Outside, find the holy well and the early sundial in the churchyard. The overwhelming size of the building is the central lesson of the visit: this was a place of real wealth and importance on the medieval pilgrim road (Book 4).

Aberdaron and the last stage of the road

Park in the village. St Hywyn's Church sits only metres from the beach. Inside are the early inscribed stones; from the churchyard the island of Bardsey lies full in view on a clear day. Y Gegin Fawr, the fourteenth-century "Big Kitchen," is a rare surviving piece of the hospitality infrastructure that once served the pilgrims. A walk westward along the coast path toward Uwchmynydd deepens the sense of arrival at the end of the land.

Walking sections of the pilgrim road today

The modern North Wales Pilgrim's Way is fully waymarked. Even a single day-stage — for example from Clynnog to the northern coast, or the final approach into Aberdaron — gives a strong bodily sense of the medieval journey. Use the official route information, treat the churches as living places of worship, and remember that the crossing to Bardsey remains weather-dependent and should never be attempted lightly.

Chapter 5

Practical fieldcraft

Maps, timing, weather, equipment and etiquette

Maps and navigation

Ordnance Survey Explorer 253 is the single most useful sheet for most of the peninsula. The *Ancient Llŷn* interactive map supplies precise locations, periods and basic descriptions. Do not rely on mobile-phone coverage; it is patchy or absent on many of the higher and more remote sites. A paper map and a compass (or a proven offline digital equivalent) remain essential.

Timing and light

Long summer days give the most time on the high forts. The low, raking light of early morning, late afternoon, or winter is often better for seeing subtle earthworks, wall faces and cup-marks. Short winter daylight and harsher weather require more careful planning.

Weather

Llŷn is exposed on all sides. Wind, driving rain and sudden mist are normal. The summits of Yr Eifl, Carn Fadryn and Garn Boduan can become dangerous in strong winds. Always check a reliable forecast and know your own limits. Turning back is a mark of good judgement, not failure.

Equipment

Sturdy waterproof walking boots, layered clothing, a waterproof jacket and overtrousers, water, high-energy food, map, compass or reliable GPS, fully charged phone (with emergency numbers saved), and a small first-aid kit. A head torch is wise if there is any chance of a late return. In summer, sun protection matters; there is little shade on the open hills.

Etiquette and conservation

Close gates behind you. Keep dogs on leads in the presence of livestock. Stay on established paths where they exist, especially through farmland and in the nesting season. Never climb on walls, ramparts or chambered tombs. Take only photographs. Leave only footprints. If you notice fresh damage, erosion or inappropriate behaviour, report it to Cadw, the National Trust or the Gwynedd Archaeological Trust as appropriate.

Access

The majority of prehistoric sites lie on open-access land or close to public rights of way. A small number of important sites remain on private land; enjoy them from the path and

move on. Cadw and National Trust properties have their own opening times, fees where applicable, and rules — check before you go.

Chapter 6

Putting it all together

Suggested ways of seeing and sample itineraries

The aim is not to race through a checklist. It is to give yourself enough time at each place for the landscape to make sense.

A single focused day – the great forts

Start early. Climb Tre'r Ceiri while the light is clean and the wind is still moderate. In the afternoon move to Carn Fadryn. If strength and daylight remain, add the shorter ascent of Garn Boduan. One day spent this way shows the density, variety and strategic logic of Iron Age fortification on the peninsula more clearly than any amount of reading.

Two days – deep prehistory and the pilgrim road

Day 1: the Mynydd Rhiw area (axe-factory landscape, Tan y Muriau, the wider setting of the double ringworks) together with Castell Odo.

Day 2: Clynog Fawr in the morning, then a section of coast path or pilgrim route leading toward Aberdaron, ending at St Hywyn's with the island in view.

A slower week or a series of shorter visits

Base yourself in different parts of the peninsula and work through the themes of Books 1–4 on the ground. Give a full day to the Yr Eifl massif. Walk a proper length of the Pilgrim's Way. Cross to Bardsey if conditions allow. Leave empty time simply to sit, look, and let the relationships between sites sink in.

Return visits repay more than first visits. A fort that seemed only a confusion of stones on a first encounter becomes a readable plan on the second or third. That deepening is the real purpose of learning to read the land.

Chapter 7

After the walk

Recording, continuing, and coming back

While the experience is still fresh, write down what you actually noticed: the direction a chamber faces, the way a rampart sits on a natural scarp, the sound of the wind on a particular summit, the moment when a cup-mark suddenly became visible in the light. These personal observations become part of your own knowledge of the place and cannot be replaced by any guidebook.

The earlier volumes in this series, the *Ancient Llŷn* map, and the online resources of Cadw, the Royal Commission, the Gwynedd Archaeological Trust and the National Trust will take you further when you are ready. But the most important next step is simply to return. Llŷn changes with the season, the weather, the light, and your own growing familiarity. The land keeps teaching those who keep walking it.

End matter

Collected practical sources

Cadw site information and access notes; National Trust Llŷn pages; Ordnance Survey mapping; Gwynedd Archaeological Trust guidance; Wales Coast Path and North Wales Pilgrim's Way materials; reliable walking guides for specific routes. Always verify current access, opening times and weather before setting out — conditions and permissions can change.

THE LLŶN HISTORIES

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