

Small Pilgrim Places Journal 32:

Llanfihangel Y Traethau, Ynys, Gwynedd



Tremadog Bay, looking towards Ynys

I walked to the hamlet of Ynys, overlooking Tremadog Bay to the north of Harlech in North Wales, by taking the 7km pilgrimage route, St Tecwyn's Way. I began at another Small Pilgrim Place, St Tecwyn's Church, perched high on the foothills of the Snowdonia range at Llandecwyn. At the start, the track above me was of grassy rock, an ancient route of possibly Neolithic origin winding upwards before disappearing into the folds of a steep hill. Below was a metalled surface barely wide enough to be called a lane, and lined with slate walls, bracken and stunted oaks.

The few buildings I passed were old, weathered barns built of large slate stones under slate roof tiles. After a while on my descent I came to a small tree-lined lake dotted with water lilies where fishermen and free-campers were soaking up the autumn sunshine around its edge. Carrying on downhill several hundred feet through a wooded valley and a few cottages I reached the wide river mouth of the Afon Dwyrdd stretching across to Minffordd. I headed for the Barmouth-Carnarvon railway line running arrow-straight along the flat estuary plain from Harlech northeastward, where it crosses the river and turns west towards the Llŷn peninsula.

My route took me over the rail track and onto a high bund snaking alongside the estuary as a sea defence: inland, flat grassland for livestock; on the seaward side, acres of tidal salt marsh and then sandbanks. Walking atop the bund I passed huge numbers of birds on and near the tidal waters. Swans, Canada geese, seagulls and herons drifted lazily in the shallow waters, and small passerines darted away from me out of the rocks and rushes of the bund. It was just past high tide, and in one or two places where I had to cross the salt marsh, shoals of tiny steel-grey fry, caught by the receding tide in deep puddles, darted around my submerging boots.



Llanfihangel Y Traethau church

Coming to a metalled lane on dry ground, I ate a picnic lunch on a bench looking across the estuary to the absurdly Italianate Portmeirion on the opposite bank, and then set off on the final short leg across the fields to the church of Llanfihangel Y Traethau (St Michael of the Shores) at Ynys. This church was one of several "St. Michael's Mounts" along the shores of the ancient Celtic world, including the famous St Michael's Mount in Cornwall and Mont Saint-Michel in Normandy.

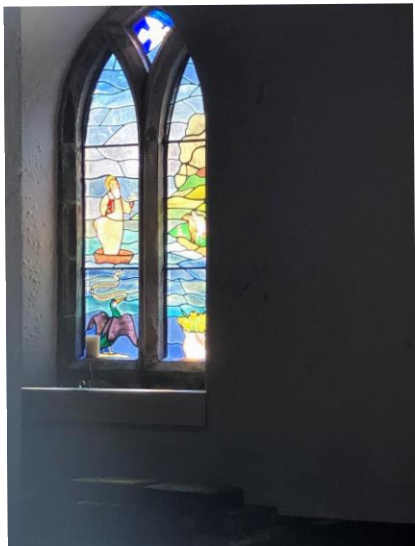
The building, dating from the 12th century (before Harlech Castle was built), would once have been surrounded by water at high tide (Ynys means

island in Welsh), and this location had been a port and ship-building centre. The gravestones in the churchyard attest to its seafaring connections, with the names of many sailors and sea captains inscribed on the headstones. With the encroachment of silts and sandbanks in the late Middle Ages, and draining of the marshland in the 19th century, the church now stands on dry land, ringed by a roughly square wall surrounded by fields and livestock.

Another interesting feature in the graveyard is a stone shaped like a pencil thrust into the ground and about the height of a man. I could see a Latin inscription, too obscure to read, but I've since found this translation: "Here is the grave of Wleder mother of Hoedliw who first built this church in the reign of King Owain". Owain ap Gruffudd was king of Gwynedd from 1137 to 1170, so the stone gives an indication of a 12th century date for the first church here.



Twelfth century gravestone



Stained glass window depicting St Tecwyn arriving in a coracle

With COVID restrictions in place I was unable to enter the church, but I did manage to peer in through a leaded window to see the nave and noticed a brightly-coloured, modern stained glass window on the south wall below the chancel. It was made by artist Polly Hope in memory of author Richard Hughes and his wife Frances. Hughes lived locally in later life, was churchwarden here and is buried in the churchyard. His likeness is used to depict St Tecwyn in a coracle arriving at the shore to be greeted by a dog and two horses, watched by a cormorant below the text "Croeso i Decwyn Sant" - "Welcome to Saint Tecwyn".

Ali Green