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THE VENERATION OF DWYNWEN

In 2003, the Welsh Language Board, in conjunction with the Tesco supermarket chain, distributed 50000 St. Dwynwen's Feast Day cards that were printed in both Welsh and English (BBC News World Edition 2003). The Welsh language board used the occasion, January 25, to draw attention to the Welsh language. In doing this, both organizations were upholding a tradition of very long standing, that of using Dwynwen as a means for political, economic, and/or religious aspirations. And yet, even during the times when there was no one promoting or monetizing it in some way, the idea of Dwynwen as the Welsh patron saint of lovers does not completely die out and I would like to consider why this is.

Very little is actually known about Dwynwen the person. MacKillop places her in the 5th century as one of the daughters of Brychan. The hagiographies say that Brychan was an Irish chieftain who took advantage of the power vacuum left by the retreating Romans. Brychan had multiple wives and over 20 children, many of whom became saints. (MacKillop 2004) Interestingly, marriage and children did not seem to recommend themselves to much of his family- several of his daughters including Eluned, Tudful, and Ceinwen seem to have gone to extremes to avoid marriage. One interesting theory suggested by T. Thornley Jones pertains to the term 'daughters' and ways it might have been used. While his does not seem to be a popular theory, there is really nothing substantial known about either Brychan or Dwynwen so it is interesting to consider. Jones raises several questions about the children of Brychan and ponders why the names and numbers of his sons is much less stable than those of his daughters. He also notes that there seem to be several generations between some of the daughters. He writes

'The tradition of the twenty-four daughters of Brychan appears to point to the existence of a group of female landowners in the Brecknock area. This suggests that succession through the female line tended to be a custom there. Exceptionally, individual women may obtain a controlling influence when the right of inheritance belongs to the sons, but such instances tend to be few and isolated. A group like the "daughters of Brychan" in a comparatively restricted region would seem to indicate that female landowning was the rule rather than the exception. The Welsh genealogies are all patriarchal in form, but it is well to remember that in the fifth and sixth centuries patriarchal inheritance ought not always to be assumed unquestionably. (T. T. Jones 1976-77)

The marker on Ynys Llanddwyn puts Dwynwen's death in 465 and while everything about Dwynwen is conjecture, this date is generally accepted. The church at Llanddwyn was a prebend of Bangor's cathedral which was itself reputed to lie on the site of a pre Norman *clas* whose patron saint, Deiniol, is said to have died in 584. (Pearson 2000) Although the setting seems remote, the proximity to both Bangor and the multiple religious sites on Anglesey mean that it was not isolated.

The earliest written mention of Dwynwen is in a poem by Dafydd ap Gwilym (c. 1315-1360) in which he asks for her help, in her capacity as the saint of love, with his affair with a married woman. (Gwilym n.d.) It is not apparent that Dwynwen has any great experience or joy as far as love goes so her designation as the saint of lovers seems somewhat surprising but it is apparently not only accepted based on one of her wishes, but promoted. Several of Dafydd ap Gwilym's poems are about the area near Ynys Llanddwyn, a place that he was seemingly familiar with. The same local knowledge is true for the c. 15-16th century poet and canon Syr Dafydd Trefor who was from Anglesey and described visitors sending metaphorical petitionary arrows towards the sea at Llanddwyn and he writes of the large numbers of visitors looking for miracles. Another early poem is by Dafydd Llwyd ap Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, of Mathafarn (c. 1420 - c. 1500) who was a strong proponent of Welsh independence.

The earliest image that we have is an engraving by the Buck brothers dated 1742 which shows complete walls.



It was not until 1748 though, more than a thousand years after her death and 200 years after the English Reformation, that there was a publication by Edward Williams who was writing at that point under the name 'Iolo Morganwg' in which he purports to elucidate who Dwynwen was, based he claimed, on earlier writings that he had access to.

'Maelon Dafodrill and Dwynwen, the daughter of Saint Brychan, mutually loved each other: Maelon sought her in unappropriated union but was rejected: for which he left her in animosity, and aspersed her, which caused extreme sorrow and anguish to her. Being one night alone in the wood, she prayed that God would cure her of her love; and

the Almighty appearing to her, while she was asleep, gave her a delicious liquor, which quite fulfilled her desire; and she saw the same draught administered to Maelon, who, thereupon, became frozen to a lump of ice.

The Almighty, also, deigned to give her three choices; and she first desired that Maelon should be unfrozen;- next, that her supplications should be granted in favor of all true-hearted lovers; so that they should either obtain the objects of their affection, or be cured of their passion;- and thirdly, that, thenceforth, she should never wish to be married; and the three requests were conceded to her; whereupon she took the veil, and became a saint. Every faithful lover, who, subsequently invoked her, was either relieved from his passion or obtained the object of his affection...' (Williams 1848, 473)

These few paragraphs are the basis of most contemporary versions of the story of Dwnwyn and *may* have been based on something that Williams/Morganwg had read or heard but this is somewhat problematic. It is the first that we hear of her having become a nun. The three wishes she is given along with the freeze and defrosting of Maelon have a fairytale aspect. She is no longer 'just' a holy woman. Unfortunately, Iolo Morganwg has been shown, in the words of Ronald Hutton, to 'write the sort of thing he believed the genuine records should have produced...' (Hutton 2022, 163) His motivations may have been similar to those of the instigators of the collaboration of Tesco and the Welsh Language Board- money and a strong nationalistic interest in Welsh culture. Unfortunately, his fabulist tendencies, exacerbated by a long-term opium dependency, have succeeded in tainting especially his later writing as 'fruit from a poison tree.' The fact that he was also extremely knowledgeable and able to write convincingly fake accounts just serves to further complicate matters.

While not considered a saint in either the Roman catholic or Anglican liturgies, Dwynwen and her feast day of January 25th, are part of the Orthodox liturgy. Dimitry Lapa acknowledges the question of her origin story.

, '... she retired to a remote and tiny islet... By the end of her life the holy virgin may have founded a small monastic community on her isle, but there is not sufficient evidence to prove the existence of a convent there ...it is certain that this saint led an ascetic life in Llanddwyn for many years and became the patron of love and marriage afterwards for very many centuries. Thousands of pilgrims from Wales and even beyond flocked to her chapel, the shrine with her relics and the holy wells associated with her at Llanddwyn every year, in spite of the extreme remoteness of that site, and asked for her protection – and numerous miracles were recorded.' (Lapa 2017)

Lapa does not elaborate on the miracles. The 'thousands of pilgrims' that he refers to are mentioned in almost all of the sources. All three of the poets describe the numbers of people journeying to Llanddwyn and the English translation of Dafydd ap Gwilym poem Galw ar Ddwynwen lines 2-3 includes 'a chancel filled with blazing candles' and 'your golden image' (Gwilym n.d.). Near the end of the fifteenth century Dean Richard Kyffin had a stained glass window depicting Saint Dwynwen put into the choir of Bangor Cathedral and a mass for the feast of St. Dwynwen dating from around the same time was discovered on the flyleaf of a missal belonging to Lord Kenyon. (The Earliest Bangor Missal 1939) The text of the mass, which is in Latin, refers to her walking on the sea from Ireland to Wales in order to escape the tyrant Maelgoin who was, confusingly, a Welsh king. Crossing the Irish Sea is a common motif in Celtic hagiographies but it is not usually accomplished by simply walking on water.

It is during this time that the pilgrimage to Llanddwyn was at its height. In the *Antiquities Parochiales*, we find that during the earlier part of the reign of Henry VIII (1491-1547)

'The rents and produce of the church, whatever they were, together with the other emoluments which went to the support of the incumbent and the decoration of the fabric, were derived not so much from tithes, which certainly for a long time must have been poor and scanty, as from oblations of all kinds brought by the superstitious common people, flocking hither at stated times as was once their custom. To this I may add that they were not wanting crosses, sacred bones, fortune-telling wells, ordeals of chastity,... salutiferous places and other similar vein fancies of darkness, to ensnare devout women of the lower orders, who, in the madness of their superstition, used to flock hither from distant places in a surprising manner.' (Rowland 1846, 131).

Hugh Owen writes of “*preeminence of wealth which it doubtless owed to the pilgrims who came to kiss the shrine and pour money into the coffers.*” (Owen 1920)

The practices that Rowland and Owen describe have more in common with beliefs ascribed to superstition, pagan practices, or a belief in magic rather than usual Christian practices and they were both writing several hundred years after the religious buildings ceased to be in regular Christian use. Their descriptions of the shrine and its veneration sounds very much like a form of idolatry. It is noteworthy that Rowland ascribes the practice to women but it is unclear whether that tells us more about the practice or about Rowland himself as this is the only mention I have found of that particular observation.

Ynys Llanddwyn, ‘the island of the chapel of Dwynwen’ is the primary place with which she is associated and may have been an actual island at one time but is now only cut off from the mainland at high tides. The few archeological investigations in the nearest village of Newborough, 3 km away, indicate a prehistoric settlement underlying that village. The evidence, including two granaries, is indicative of at least the Bronze age and possibly Iron age habitation. It is assumed that more would be found upon further investigation. (Craig Beuno 2018) . George Nash, who has twice participated in archeological digs on Llanddwyn, once in 2011 and again in 2023, used Lidar to distinguish between the 12th century remains of a church, the Benedictine monastic buildings approximately 60 meters to the south of it, and fields that were used by the families who were there to man the 18th and early 19th century lighthouses and pilot boats. He found that the church was constructed in three phases.

‘The northern portion (representing the nave and chancel), with its low-angled pitched roof, probably dates from the 16th century and appears to have originally stood as a separate unit. This is partly evidenced by the presence of long and short quoins that run up the south-eastern returns – however, within its walls we find features that clearly suggest an earlier incarnation. The presence of three Early English Decorative style windows and their associated moulded stone casements seemingly suggests a medieval date. By contrast, though, the eastern transept has a steeper pitched roof and contains two window openings of the Perpendicular style (with associated tracery), which probably date to the 16th century.’ (Nash 2021)

Nash points out that the cruciform church, unusually, is oriented Northeast to Southwest. Owen describes the setting and there is an implication that the setting was in part a response to the elements.

‘Lying in a hollow in the centre of the island, it is situated in as sheltered a spot as the nature of the ground would permit, the rising ground largely protecting it from the force of the western gales, while the highly inclined schistous rocks, rising like walls, afford it shelter on the the north and south...’ (Owen 1920).



View of St Dwynwen's Church within its enclosure showing the cruciform plan of the church. Paul R. Davis Collection (2020).

The currently semicircular churchyard which may have originally been a complete circle as can be seen in the 1742 engraving. There are occasional references to burials within the churchyard but nothing remains inside of the turf-stone wall to visually indicate that. A circular area around the church would be consistent with a shape typical of early Celtic ritualistic activity. Looking at the 2020 photo, it can be seen that a concrete floor has been put in to help stabilize the ruin. As to the presence of the Benedictines and the monastic buildings, Hugh Owen writes

'It has been stated that impressed by the potentialities of the shrine, a band of Benedictine monks erected a house there: that their prescience was justified inasmuch as it proved a Golconda: that in the reign of Henry IV the income exceeded that of any other monastery in North Wales: and that in the time of Henry VIII it was the wealthiest house in the Principality.' (Owen 1920).

The death of Charlemagne in 814 resulted in a period of upheaval that may have made pilgrimages to lesser known and closer to home sites a much safer option and coincides with the period of Llanddwyn becoming increasingly popular. In her writing on pilgrimage during the Medieval period, Bailey says that 'Social historians have concluded that the majority of local pilgrimages in England at this time were

relatively short ones' (Bailey 2012). Ronald Finucane found that pilgrims usually travelled no further than about fifty miles to a healing shrine, and that the most popular pilgrimages were those which could be achieved in a round trip of a single day in general but usually a lesser amount of time and distance were undertaken by women (Finucane 1995).

While qualities of both the physical place and the pilgrimage may have changed over time, they are the basic aspects of the veneration of Dwynwen and have remained constant for longer than there are written records for. Her story, and the way she is venerated, like Ynys Llanddwyn itself, changes depending on the prevailing winds and tides. Presumably the Reformation and Henry VIII's decree of 1538 resulted in the destruction or at least decline of the religious structures at Llanddwyn as after that period it is only referred to as a ruin. It disappears from church records and the area went into private ownership until it was made part of the first coastal National Nature Reserve declared in Wales in 1955. The 1960s saw the first marketing of Saint Dwynwen's Day cards. (Lafferty 2022). The repurposing of the stone from the religious buildings for other structures is not surprising and is yet another example of the seemingly stable fluidity of the area. The land, buildings, worship, and stories of Dwynwen all constantly shift and reform. The archeology work that has been done in Newborough indicates that there is a .85m layer of sand below the surface level that may be due to a single event documented in December of 1330. (Carr 2011) It is to be expected that the same event may have covered parts of Ynys Llanddwyn so it is possible that there are remains of older buildings buried beneath the dunes. It is not known what drew Dwynwen to this particular place or what she called it during her lifetime.

Ynys Llanddwyn is only .3 km² and yet it is among the first 100 Geological Heritage Sites designated by UNESCO due to the geology being of 'high international importance'. The rationale for the inclusion is the 'spectacular, accessible and well-preserved exposures of late Neoproterozoic-Cambrian *mélange* with more than 200 years of study' (IUGS 2022). These exposures look disconcertingly like giant slabs of meat. While the geology of the area is not specifically known to have been incorporated into the veneration of Dwynwen, she cannot be separated from this place, it is why we remember her name. Place names often remain even after the language of a country or region has changed. When the name of the person becomes the name of a place on the earth, that name is constantly,

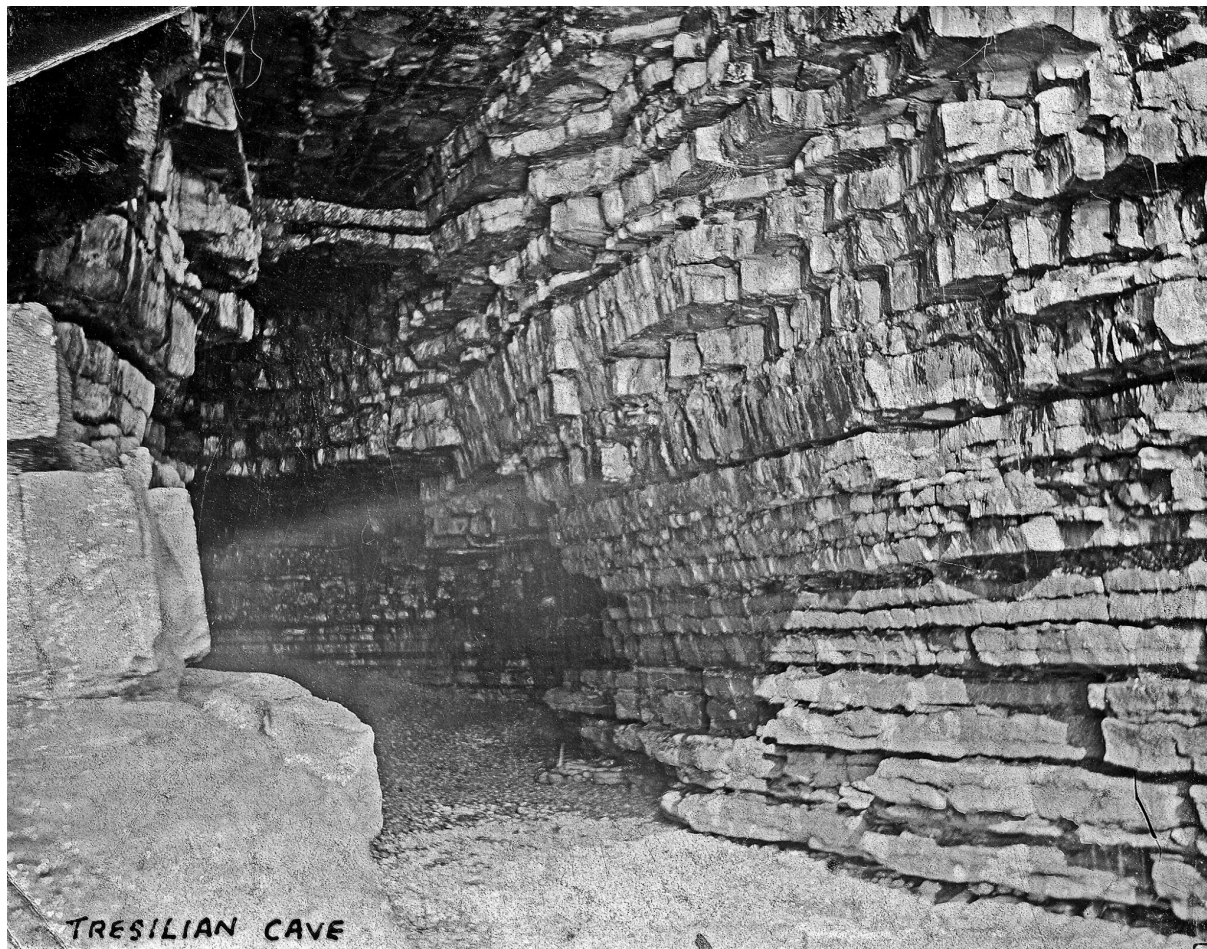
though usually not consciously, evoked. The geology and geography can be looked at without considering the saint, but the opposite is not true, the saint cannot really be considered independently from the landscape associated with her.



The lighthouse, pilot's house and St. Dwywen's Church on Llanddwyn Island photographed by the Royal Commission in 2015.

In Glamorgan, on the Severn Estuary, is a cave that can only be accessed for a few hours a day due to the tides and it also has associations with Dwywen. The cave is 85 yards long with an opening of about 40 ft2. It has an arch called the 'Dwynwenna Bow of Destiny'. David Pike, who grew up in the area, calls it

Reynaud's Cave and says that it was formerly called Dwynwen's Cave. In a newspaper photo it is labeled 'Tresilian Cave' The legend, exemplifying the fortune telling that accompanies Dwynwen's landscapes after the Reformation, is that 'An unmarried person who succeeds in throwing a pebble over the arch 3 times will be married within the year. Every failure is a delay of a year.' Pike claims this is a difficult feat (Pike 2012). An article in the Glamorgan Star reports that 'It was noted for clandestine marriages and in 1750 one was between Cecil Powell the heiress of Llandow and granddaughter of Edward Turberville of Sutton who married one of the Pictons of Pembrokeshire... This is recorded in the Llantwit Church register.' (Llantwit Major History Society 2023)



There is nothing to explain why this cave might be associated with Dwynwen but worth noting that it historically was and that like Ynys Llanddwen, it is both subject to the sea and can be accessed from the Wales Coast Path.



(Pike 2012)

The sea coast is always a liminal area with tidal islands, caves, and narrow peninsulas especially being places where the iconography of the earth itself seems infinitely manifest. There have been a variety of natural features on Ynys Llanddwyn which have been part of the experience of local rituals at various times although it is not certain anymore where the specific locations actually were any more. Wells and springs are often sites where rituals are enacted. Hugh Owen quotes a manuscript that he estimates is from around 1800 regarding the spring he calls *Ffynnon Fair*’ which was said to be the home of either sacred fish or eel.

‘There was a spring of clear water, now choked up by the sand, at which an old woman from Newborough always attended, and prognosticated the lovers’ success from the movements of some small eels which waved out of the sides of the well, on spreading the lovers’ handkerchief on the surface of the water...’
(Owen 1920).

Although he says it is ‘choked with sand’ a quick internet search shows a variety of pools and places claiming to have been the one he referred to and the name ‘Ffynnon Fair’ is used for springs throughout Wales. Owen also mentions a rock called *Gwely Esyth* where one’s pains could supposedly be cured by first sleeping on the rock and then cutting one’s name in the sod. His notes indicate that it may be that

the older lighthouse now stands on said rock. Another of the notes mentions the burning of candles on the enclosed porch of the church as a memorial of thanks which was supposed to protect livestock, another of Dwywnwen's special talents (Owen 1920). Again, not essentially Christian practices.

The one facet of the veneration of Dwywnwn that does not change is the act of pilgrimage to Ynys Llanddwen which name roughly translates into English as the 'island of the church of Dwywnwen'. There is a language in which feet constantly mark the practices of veneration and remembering. John Chryssavgis, writing on Orthodox spirituality from an environmental point of view, explains that the earth can be perceived as an icon and that every aspect of it is an opening to spirituality. Rather than a manmade icon, the earth is god-made and thus, the preeminent icon. (Chryssavgis 2010) Pilgrimage can be a form of prayer or sacrament in almost every religion and considered as a form of both spiritual and physical travel. It can be solitary or an exercise in *communitas*. Richard Beck claims that of all of the forms of Christianity, it is the Celtic version, by which I assume he means that practiced in the Gaelic speaking regions, that emphasizes a holiness of nature and a particular awareness of what he refers to as 'thin places', those where liminality is pervasive (Beck 2021). The Turners point out that many pilgrimage routes were being traveled long before Christianity arrived (Turner 1978).

In *How Societies Remember* Connerton discusses the reproduction of performance and the embodiment that accompanies it. He says '*We frequently do not recall how or when or where we have acquired the knowledge in question; often it is only by the fact of the performance that we are able to recognize and demonstrate to others that we do in fact remember.*' (Connerton 1989, 22-3). A walking path might be seen as an invitation to either explore or remember. The genre of horror film often plays with ancient ritual and taking a wrong turning is a standard motif of horror films because there is something recognizable or remembered, in that. People may have gone to Ynys Llanddwen for different reasons after the Reformation but perhaps the main reason might always have been because it is what it is- a very unusual place at the edge of land that has drawn people to it for millennia. Rowland mentions unusual seashells that were found on the beach and it would be interesting to investigate whether distinctive shells from Llanddwyn made their way to other places as a token in the way of scallop shells. It

is difficult to imagine that the unusual shells and rocks did not often end up in pockets as a variety of religious souvenir.

Dwynwen is primarily Welsh, female, and the patron saint of lovers. Walking to Ynys Llanddwyn with any of those in mind would have been, and still may be, a way of performing a conscious act of embodiment. Or it could just be a lovely spot for a picnic. Or both. The Reverend Jones, writing of domestic Medieval pilgrimages mentions ‘congenial companions’ ‘lively song’ and ‘merry jests. (R. G. Jones 1912, 299) making it sound very much like *The Canterbury Tales*. Whereas Iolo Morganwg may have given us a version of the Dwynwen story as he thought it should be, there is also a romantic version of pilgrims and pilgrimage as people think they should have been that we find in early 20th century writing (R. G. Jones 1912, Owen 1920).

The Turners divide pilgrimages into four categories that occasionally have some overlap. The pilgrimage to Ynys Llanddwyn would fall into the ‘archaic’ category. Archaic pilgrimages ‘bear quite evident traces of syncretism with older religious beliefs and symbols’ (Turner 1978, 18). The story of Dwynwen with her three wishes and the freeze and defrosting of her intended are not usual Christian motifs any more than consulting eels in a pool for answers is. Much of the superstitious practices that became popular in the Middle Ages might fit into this category of reflecting older beliefs and symbols. The Turners refer to this as ‘baptizing the customs’. I am not aware of what term might apply when the baptism no longer represents an important aspect of the path or the place whether it reverts or evolves into something with meaning other than one condoned by institutionalized religion. There are two crosses at Ynys Llanddwyn, one plain and the other a Celtic cross but they seem to imply echoes of history and sacredness rather than specific religious practice.

Many pilgrimages have a specific location that is designated as the goal that is traveled to and have infrastructure to accommodate visitors, but that does not appear to have been true with Ynys Llanddwyn, at least as far as a place accommodating large numbers of devotees. Visiting the chapel might have been the stopping point or it may have been popular in part because it would be on the way to Bardsley Island. The poets mention the throngs of people but what remains seems fairly meager in size for a church that was reputed to take in so much money. It is as though the tidal island is itself the religious site and the church on the island was comparable to an altar. There are many pilgrimage routes that involve either

islands or narrow peninsulas and it is the act of walking the route that is the important part, upon arrival, a person sometimes just sits. Often one cannot spend an extended period of time at the end point as there is not infrastructure or there is a limited amount of time allowed to accomplish prescribed actions and then there may be accommodation a short distance away. The environment at the end of a pilgrimage is both very powerful and seemingly incidental in that it is another place to depart from, either to return home or to continue on to other places. If viewed from the perspective of the environment itself being the sacred space, then the reformation may have changed or destroyed the lesser symbols but not what is perhaps the primary symbol, the island itself (Davies 2023).

There are two sides of the veneration of Dwynwen and both seemingly have been occurring for as long as the islet has been called Llanddwyn in an appropriately tidal pattern. There is one side which involves people spending time and the experience of walking near the sea and among sand dunes and spending time and possibly praying in an area of great natural beauty. The other aspect is that of trying to promote the cult of Dwynwen as a way to combine making a profit, an activity which for several hundred years, at least since Iolo Morganwg was writing, has allied with promoting Welsh culture. In discussing the Saint Dwynwen's Day Parade held in Aberystwyth in January of 2023, the town council said the parade was part of a "programme of Welsh historic and cultural events to strengthen Aberystwyth's sense of place and identity whilst at the same time creating memorable images that people will talk about and hopefully return to see again and again". The article also quotes Aberystwyth Mayor Cllr Talat Chaudhri "These are incredibly difficult times for our businesses, and we want to support them." (Davies 2023) Another promotion for Llanddwyn was the BBC documentary series *1900 Island* which was filmed using the pilot cottages and tried to show what life might have been like for the people who had lived in those houses (Hughes 2019). Covid may have played a part in both the audience size of people seeing a television show and in the desire of people to visit outdoor rather than indoor venues. The number of visitors to Newborough Nature Reserve, of which Llanddwyn is a part, increased from an estimated 485,533 people in 2019 to 559,539 in 2021. (Research and Insights Team 2022) Anglesey was also home to William and Kate early in their marriage and photos of the Prince of Wales and his wife spending time on the island dedicated to the Welsh patron saint of love draws the attention of people who might otherwise never have heard of it. The photos of the royal pair show them doing what people have always done on Llanddwyn, walking together or with other family members. The popularity has reached such a level that

in June of 2023 it was addressed at a local council meeting in Newborough. Bro Aberffraw councillor John Ifan Jones said: "Llanddwyn Beach has become so popular now to the point that the village is broken." (Coles 2023).

For those interested in a more traditional mode of visiting Llanddwyn, there is the 130-mile Anglesey Coastal path beginning at Holyhead which is itself a part of the 870-mile-long Wales Coast Path. Whereas formerly there were people visiting the pool for fortune telling, there is a group of pools that are popular for bird watching, especially of migratory birds. What we might assume was at one time a spiritual experience has become a form of tourism, a day's outing, but that does not mean that it has not always been a bit of both. While travel, comradeship, and an atmosphere of festivity have probably always been a part of pilgrimage, so have sore feet. The awareness of doing something that has been done for longer than there are records for, other than maybe wheel ruts worn in stone, cannot come without the cognizance that the walking path is not the same now any more than pilot houses are not a chapel which is, in turn not a pile of rocks. It is much of the same materials but a different form. It is the earth itself, despite the rearrangements of materials, that stays the same and that is the reason that the name of Dwyndwen is remembered after centuries, because it is associated with a very particular and unusual spot on the earth.

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