



## Remains of Earlier Ages in Llŷn

**The area around Plas yn Rhiw has many remains of earlier ages. On the slopes there are a variety of remains, from a Stone Age stone tool factory to dolmens, cairns and hill forts.**

Stone tools were discovered near the coast and on Enlli / Bardsey Island, dating from the Mesolithic Age, showing that people lived here between 8,000 and 4,000 BC and they were the earliest people. Around 3,000 BC people were excavating stone to make tools on the slopes of the mountain at Mynydd Rhiw, not far from Plas yn Rhiw. The same development was happening across Europe, at an age when people were changing from being hunters to farmers.

Large portal dolmens (cromlechi) were built in those times, like the ones to be seen in Llŷn. There are similar ones along the west coast from Cornwall and over to Ireland. The cromlech at Tan y Muriau, just across a field from Plas yn Rhiw, is a typical example.

The standing stones (*meini hirion*) that are common in Llŷn were erected early in the Bronze Age (2500-1500 BC). We can only wonder why these tall stones were put up, now standing in the middle of fields, in walls or serving as gateposts. Some may have been moved from

their original sites for some reason. The stone at Tan y Foel is the nearest one to Plas yn Rhiw, close to the middle of the village of Rhiw.

In the Bronze Age, people would cremate their dead and bury them under cairns. Those were often on the tops of hills such as Carnguwch and other places with the element 'carn' in their names.

The summits were places of the supernatural, magical and frightening. Tribal leaders would be buried there.

The summits and the uplands were important to farmers during the next age – the Iron Age (750BC – 43 AD). They built their hill forts in the uplands, surrounded by ditches, and banks of stone or wood and soil. This was to protect and defend their families and animals.

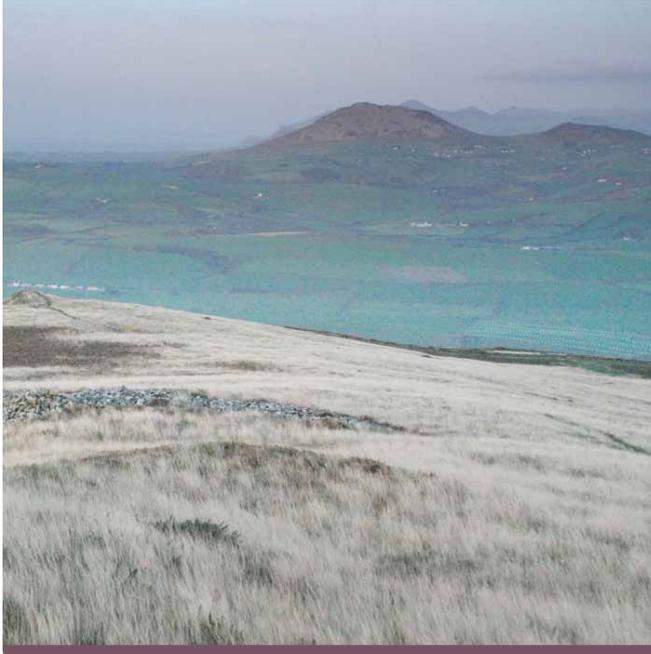
Tre'r Ceiri and Garn Boduan hill forts are on summits, as well as Creigiau Gwinau, Rhiw.

In Plas yn Rhiw and on the headland at Trwyn Cilan there are remains of coastal forts from the same period. Would the pilgrims have visited these primitive remains, or ignored them because of their 'pagan' connections?

Round huts were built recently at Felin Uchaf, Rhoshirwaun as part of a Visionary Social Enterprise.



## Stone Age Axe Factory on Mynydd y Rhiw (SH 234299)



**Directions:** Take the mountain road from Rhiw towards Bryn croes/Botwnnog on the eastern slopes of Mynydd y Rhiw. Use the National Trust parking area and walk up the slope.

In the late 1950s experts realized the remains at this site on the north-east slopes of Mynydd Rhiw were not round huts but instead five small quarries. The rock here was Ordovician Shale that would split like flint, and people could quarry the rock, shape and sharpen it to make effective tools. They had discovered a valuable layer under about 1m of glacial deposit. As they dug and went from one quarry pit to the other they would leave the rubble in the hole they were working and move up the slope.

By now about twenty axes have been found across Wales, which suggests there would have been considerable trade going on. When there were excavations at Meillionydd on the western slopes of Mynydd y Rhiw stone tools were found that had been re-used in the Iron Age. No sharpened and finished tools were found at Mynydd y Rhiw, and that suggests they were made somewhere else. At Porth Neigwl there were remains of stone tools, with axe heads amongst them.

There are a number of places around Rhiw of particular historical interest. This suggests the area was sacred to Stone Age people and that influenced people's lives in the ages after that. Is there a relationship between this site and the dolmens (*cromlechi*) at Tan y Muriau (SH 23772878) and Bronheulog (SH 23202810)?

## Dolmens



*Coeten Arthur, Cefnamwlch*

The cromlechi (dolmens) of Llŷn were built in the Early Neolithic Age (up to 4,000 BC). These were tombs in conspicuous places, on higher ground, on the coast or in places with a clear view of a mountain.

This is what we find at Tan y Muriau cromlech (SH 23772878) which is very close to Plas yn Rhiw, and what remains of Bronheulog cromlech (SH 23202820).

They were built because people were burying their dead in groups and burying the bones or cremating them. Burying the dead like this would release the spirit and be an opportunity to commemorate families and honour ancestors.

It's also likely there would be ceremonies around the dolmens. There people would honour the gods and celebrate the significance of the solstice and important events in the calendar. Astronomy would also play a prominent part in the lives of the people.

It's not known how the stones were moved and lifted, at a time centuries before the pyramids were built in Egypt. The site for the cromlech would be selected first, rather than choosing a place where the stones were available. The massive capstones weigh at least 25 tonnes and it would have been a tremendous task to move them and the other stones any distance. They were probably built centuries before they became burial places.

To add to the mystery, the centre axis of the majority of them runs north – south and the capstone is angled at



23½°, which is the tilt of the earth in relation to the sun. What is the significance of this?

By now, only the large stones are to be seen in Llŷn, the soil and stones that covered them have disappeared. We can see where the burial chamber was, under the capstone, and the entrance between two of the standing stones. This entrance is what gives it the name of 'portal dolmen'.

Would the pilgrims on their journey to Enlli perhaps have taken any notice of it?

## Local Dolmens



### Cromlech Tan y Muriau, Rhiw (SH 23772878)

**Directions:** Take the road from Mynytho to Rhiw and after 8km turn for Plas yn Rhiw. Go past the manor house and along a farm track towards Tan y Muriau'. The dolmen is up on the left.

This dolmen (cromlech) has two chambers and it's at the western end of a long cairn extending up the slope. There were three chambers here at one time, representing three generations of dolmens.

This is a significant dolmen, an example of a new development in the design of portal dolmens and rare in this part of Wales.

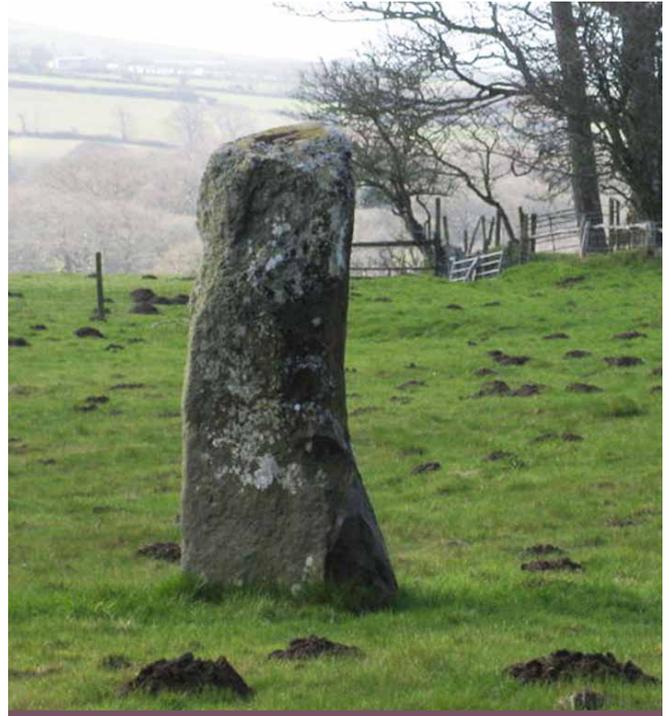
There are similar dolmens in the south of England, which suggests there was some contact between the different areas.

### Cromlech Bronheulog, Rhiw (SH 23202810)

**Directions:** Take the road to Tan y Muriau dolmen. Go up the hill towards Eglwys Rhiw church, walk to the well of Ffynnon Aeliw and south west for another 300m across the fields.

The capstone and the scattered stones are all that have survived. Is there some link between the two dolmens in Rhiw and is it only coincidence the dolmens and the well are so close to each other?

## Standing Stones



Maen Hir Meillionen, Boduan

It's still a mystery exactly when these stones were set up, but experts agree they were erected in the early Bronze Age (2500-1500 BC).

We can only wonder why these stately stones stand in the middle of fields, within walls or were used as gateposts in entrances.

Not every stone that looks like one of these standing stones (*maen hir* in Welsh, plural *meini hirion*) is a genuine one, and some may have been moved for some reason from their original sites.

Is there something significant about where they stand, in relation to nearby mountains such as Garn Fadryn or Mynydd Rhiw. Were they sacred places in Ancient Times? Are they the gravestones of heroes or tribal leaders? Were they used in 'pagan' ceremonies and a Christian element was possibly added later? Were they put there to help with studying the stars? Is there some significance in their sites in relation to the seasons, sunrise on the Summer Solstice or the cycle of the moon? Or were they signposts to show travellers the way in earlier centuries? Who knows?



They weren't erected where they are now just by chance, because moving them there from some distance would have been a major task.

They were moved to their present positions with the intention, probably, of turning them into Christian sites.

A standing stone is also known as a *Maen Hir* – plural *Meini Hirion* and these are the ones in this area:

Nefyn area:

- **Maen Hir Gwynus, Pistyll** (SH 3457842053)
- **Maen Hir Penfras, Llwyndyrys** (SH 3795041690)

Porthdinllaen area:

- **Maen Hir Nant y Gledrydd, Madryn** (SH 2932536496)
- **Maen Hir Sarn Mellteyrn** (SH 2371232840)

Plas yn Rhiw area:

- **Maen Hir Plas ym Mhenllech, Penllech** (SH 2226534535)
- **Maen Hir Llangwnnadr** (SH 2080032500)
- **Maen Hir Tan y Foel, Rhiw** (SH 2261027670)

Glyn y Weddw area

- **Maen Hir Pandy Saethon, Nanhoron** (SH2878032300)

Plas Heli area

- **Maen Hir Bodegroes, Efailnewydd** (SH3680035350)
- **Meini Hirion Tir Gwyn, Llannor** (SH3442039130)
- **Maen Hir Glan Afon, Abererch** (SH39173600)

## Local Standing Stones



### Maen Hir Tan y Foel, Rhiw (SH 22612767)

**Directions:** Take the road south from the crossroads in Rhiw. Turn left for Tan y Foel (an old chapel) and the stone is on the left in the field boundary.

This is about 2m tall, and like many other standing stones it's part of a stone wall.

Immediately above it is the fort of Creigiau Gwinau and nearby are the dolmens of Tan y Muriau and Bronheulog as well as the Stone Axe factory of Mynydd y Rhiw. Is there maybe a connection between some of these?

### Maen Hir Plas ym Mhenllech, Penllech (SH 22263452)

**Directions:** From the B4419 road (Tudweiliog to Aberdaron) turn right onto the road down to Plas ym Mhenllech and Penllech Church. This standing stone is near the first group of buildings.

It's a short stone, used as a gatepost for the rick yard. What's special about it are indentations, the cup shaped markings, that were to be seen on it until weathering removed them to all intents and purposes. Are these early art or magic symbols used in ceremonies? Did this stone stand near the dolmen of Coeten Arthur (SH250350) at some time, and was it moved here?

### Maen Hir Penybont, Llangwnnadr (SH 20873255)

**Directions:** On the B4419 road (Tudweiliog to Aberdaron) near the farm of Penybont (Maen Hir), Llangwnnadr. This is in a field on the right, a few metres from the farm.

A tall stone, almost 3m high. It's similar to other stones at Sarn Mellteyrn and Nant y Gledrydd, which suggests they were erected by the same tribe of people.

The farm is called Pen y Bont Maen Hir after the stone (maen hir = standing stone)

## Cairns in Llŷn



Moel Garnguwch and Tre'r Ceiri (left)



Towards the end of the Neolithic Age the Beaker Folk (2800 – 1800BC) came to live in Britain. We don't have much evidence from that age but a 'cist' grave, with stone sides to it, has been found in Llithfaen. The body of a man about 1.8 metres tall was lying on its right side in it, together with a beaker.

But by the Early Bronze Age people usually cremated their dead and buried them under cairns, often on hilltops like the ones in Llŷn. A simple cairn of stones would be built, with a circle of larger stones around its base.

They vary in size, and the largest in Llŷn is on Moel Carguwch (SH 35004290). There was probably a conical tower of stones on it, but that was destroyed. The site would have been even more striking with the stones in place.

The local people would congregate here at Halloween to light a bonfire but they would have to hurry home before the *Hwch Ddu Gwta* (sow + black + short'), a sow from the supernatural world, could catch them.

The local people believed the summits were places of the supernatural and that they were magical and frightening. Tribal leaders would be honoured by being buried there and it's easy to believe the cairn would be an excellent memorial to them. From there, they could continue to dominate. These could also be memorials to people's traditions or mark their territory and authority.

There are a number of cairns in the area, but by now they are in poor condition. They can be seen on the summit of Eifl (SH 36504470), Mynydd Rhiw (SH 23152975) and there are others, by now less conspicuous, on Garn Fadryn, Tre'r Ceiri, and Foel Gron, Mynytho. They were known as *Carnedd y Brenin Engan* (cairn of King Engan) on the most conspicuous summit in his territory.

There is also a cairn near Castell Odo on Mynydd yr Ystum, called Barclodiad y Gawres (apronful of the giantess) (SH 18702460).

### Iron Age Hill Forts



In the Plas yn Rhiw area there are two particular hill forts - Creigiau Gwinau, on Mynydd Graig, Rhiw because of its location and Castell Odo on Mynydd yr Ystum, Rhoshirwaun because of its complicated history.

People generally believe that the Celts established themselves in Wales during the Iron Age, 750 BC - 43 AD, and that they were responsible for building the hill forts that are so common in Llŷn. By now, some people believe a form of the Brythonic language was spoken earlier than that, and that Bronze Age people had started to build hill forts. Despite the name, they are not all on hilltops.

The Iron Age people were farmers, and it's obvious they planned the forts mainly to protect families and animals.

There are ditches and banks of stone, and sometimes also of wood and earth, around the forts – single or double.

There is evidence the forts were renewed or restored at different times, and so the older building work can be seen under the renewed fort.

In the west, the round huts had stone walls, as they have in Llŷn. The wooden supports for the roof would rest on the walls and the roof would be of straw, rushes or turf. The floor would be hardened earth, and it's easy to believe rushes would be spread on it, and screens put up to separate the living areas from the beds.

In Llŷn, there are hill forts on the summits: Tre'r Ceiri and Garn Boduan, or Castell Odo and Creigiau Gwinau and there are coastal forts like the one in Plas yn Rhiw and the other above the cliffs at Porth Ceiriad. There would be natural defences to protect them – the sea, a precipice or rocks, rather than stone ramparts.

To complicate things further, there may have been defences and buildings added in the Dark Ages (400 – 900 AD) on top of Iron Age forts. This is when the nation of Wales was formed, and the Welsh language evolved from the Brythonic.

Round huts were built recently at Felin Uchaf, Rhoshirwaun as part of the Felin Uchaf, Rhoshirwaun Project – a Visionary Social Enterprise.

### Creigiau Gwinau, Rhiw (SH 22862752)





**Directions:** You can set off for Creigiau Gwinau from two directions. At the top of the hill in Rhiw, coming from the direction of Porth Neigwl (follow the signs for Plas yn Rhiw from Mynytho to Rhiw) turn onto the Wales Coast Path towards the mountain (SH 22832777). Or leave the main road at the crossroads in Rhiw, go south towards Tan y Foel (an old chapel) (SH 22582772) and follow the path towards the mountain.

This is an Iron Age hill fort built after 600BC on the ridge of Mynydd y Graig, in a dramatic location above Porth Neigwl and with remarkable views in all directions.

Only a few remains can be seen – just some round huts. The fort was built using the natural landscape – the rock as ramparts and the steep cliff towards the south east are very effective defences.

### Castell Odo (SH 18702845)



*Remains of Ramparts to be seen on left and Carreg Samson in the centre*

Castell Odo is on Mynydd yr Ystum, opposite Bodwrdda and between Rhoshirwaun and Aberdaron (B4413). Not many remains have survived, but some of the double banks can be seen that surrounded the uneven ground in the middle. Excavations there found signs of burning, which proved that the only defences at that time were wooden.

In the 1950s, excavations led Leslie Alcock to the conclusion the site had been used during a number of periods of time. It was originally a village of wooden houses without any external defences, built in the Late Bronze Age (about 900BC or later). It was probably attacked and then left ruined for a while. The site was used again throughout the Iron Age and on into the Roman period, when it was attacked again, possibly by the Romans.

Some relics from that time have been found, such as a saddle quern for grinding corn, grindstones, stones for a throwing stick, a stone knife or scraper and pottery.

This was, according to legend, the home of Odo Gawr (Odo + giant), who was buried here under a stone cairn. There is also mention of Saint Odo and a reference to a chapel, Capel Odo. At the foot of the hill is the well Ffynnon Odo (but only its location can be found, not the well itself).

To the west of the site is Barclodiad y Gawres (apron full + giantess), a cairn from the early Bronze Age.

Here also is Carreg Samson, with a legend of a crock of gold hidden underneath it. If anyone interfered with the crock the most fearsome storm of thunder and lightning would happen!

### Follow the Story...



Find out more about prehistoric life by visiting Mynydd Rhiw – Once the location to a Neolithic 'axe' factory.