

History

Wherever you go in Wales, history is in evidence: the landscape rises and falls with the outlines of Stone Age tombs, Celtic earthworks, countless castles, disfigured hills and rusting machinery; towns display their medieval walls, dour chapels and evocative graveyards; and people talk – about their saints, their princes and their national heroes. Travel through Wales with its history in mind and you'll find it easier to understand Welsh anger and pride.

PREHISTORY & THE CELTS

Little is known about Wales' early history, but rare discoveries, including a human tooth in a cave near Denbigh, date the earliest human habitation back to 250,000 BC. The country is, however, littered with stone monuments and burial chambers dating back to Neolithic times, such as the massive Pentre Ifan dolmen in Pembrokeshire (p195).

It was much later, around 600 BC, that the first wave of Celtic warriors arrived on Wales' shores from central Europe and with them the poets and druid-priests who would change the course of Welsh history forever. The Celts had a defining role in Wales, making enormous technical and artistic advances and introducing a new language, social hierarchy and belief system. Their all-knowing druids were the driving force behind the changes and acted as godlike go-betweens with the pantheon of gods they worshipped. Revered as much for their knowledge as their divine power, the druids were integral to the start of an oral tradition of storytelling and song writing – one that is celebrated to this day.

THE ROMANS

By the time Julius Caesar landed in Britain in 55 BC, the Celts had occupied Wales for almost five centuries; when the Romans invaded in mid-1st century AD they put up staunch resistance. Mona (Anglesey) was the centre of druidic power and the site of a raging battle in AD 60. Although the Romans took control of Wales they never really conquered it. The interior held little attraction for them, few roads were built and the Celts managed to live alongside the Romans, adopting and adapting to the new cultural force.

The best surviving remains from this time are at Segontium (p256) and at the incredible Isca Silurium (p108), where a stunning amphitheatre and baths are open to the public.

BIRTH OF WALES

Wales' isolated position meant that it missed out on the heaving battles that spread across Europe in the wake of the Roman departure, and this comparative lull gave rise to a number of separate kingdoms. Around this time a British leader, possibly by the name of Arthur, emerged and proved victorious against Saxon invaders. Whether this was the legendary King Arthur or not is largely immaterial; the seed of a story, now embellished by years of romanticism, had been planted.

Along with Irish invaders came faithful missionaries, spreading Christianity and founding basic churches. The most important of these was St David (see

Go to www.bbc.co.uk/wales/history/davies for the accessible web version of leading historian John Davies' acclaimed work *A History of Wales*, an authoritative, wide-ranging and detailed guide from the earliest times to the 20th century.

The superb *When Was Wales*, by Gwyn Williams, uses myth, legend, poetry and the stories of ordinary Welsh people to explore Welsh national identity since the time of the Celts.

To survey the history, culture and traditions of Wales try the easily navigated www.britannia.com/celtic/wales.

TIMELINE 250,000 BC

Earliest evidence of human habitation in Wales

600 BC

Celtic people begin to settle in Wales

the boxed text, below), who performed miracles, wooed the crowds and established his eponymous town as a centre of religion and learning (see p184).

The written word gradually moved from biblical purposes to literature, and the poems of Taliesin and Aneirin, from the late 6th and early 7th centuries, are the earliest surviving examples of Welsh literature. By then a distinct Welsh language had emerged and *Cymry*, a word describing the land and its people, had been established.

Isolated and compressed, the once disparate people were becoming something new, distinct and solid: Welsh. Their stories became legends and their beliefs religion. An intense, highly durable culture was born.

EARLY WELSH RULERS

Despite cultural assimilations, territorial scuffles continued throughout the country. One present-day reminder of this unstable time is Offa's Dyke (p63), a 178-mile fortification built in the 8th century to mark the boundary between two kingdoms: the Welsh on one side and the English (the Saxons in the form of the Kingdom of Mercia under King Offa) on the other.

During the 9th and 10th centuries savage coastal attacks in the south by Danish and Norse pirates forced the small kingdoms of Wales to cooperate. Rhodri Mawr (Rhodri the Great, d 878), a charismatic leader, managed to unite most of the kingdoms, only to see them split among his sons. His grandson, Hywel Dda (Hywel the Good, d 950), reunified the country and then went on to consolidate its laws, decreeing communal agricultural

The Taliesin Tradition, by Emyr Humphreys, brilliantly traces the identity of Wales and the Welsh over a millennium and a half, exploring the influence of literature, history, religion and politics on the Wales of today.

WHO WAS ST DAVID? *Nona Rees*

St David, or Dewi Sant, is the only truly native patron saint of his country in the British Isles. His biography was compiled in the 1080s by Rhygyfarch ap Sullien, using earlier material. His parents, Sant and Non, were of noble descent and David's life spanned most of the 6th century.

His birth probably took place on a cliff top near present-day St David's (p184). His mother, Non, was protected from the murderous intent of a local chieftain by a mighty storm and by standing stones that moved to protect her. A spring of water miraculously burst forth, which today is a holy well. David was hence known as the Waterman and drank only water. He subdued the appetites of the flesh by standing up to his neck in cold water and reciting the psalms. He was attended by an angelic presence and worked miracles of healing.

Like many young men of good birth, David was educated by monks. He went on to found churches across South and East Wales. In company with Saints Teilo and Padarn he made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, eventually returning to West Wales.

David established his monastery beside the River Alun where the cathedral now stands. His claim to the site was disputed by Boia, a local chieftain, whose scheming wife made her maidens dance naked in the river to tempt the monks. Predictably it did not work: she went mad and disappeared and a passing pirate murdered Boia.

David's healthy, if spartan, way of life required a diet of bread, herbs and water, early rising, manual labour, care for the poor, reading, writing and prayer. Fellow churchmen acclaimed his spiritual stature when he preached at the Synod of Brefi (Ceredigion). The ground rose under him and a dove, representing the Holy Spirit, landed on his shoulder.

David died on Tuesday, 1 March, in either 589 or 601. In 1123, Pope Callistus II recognised his sainthood and he became a focus for Welsh identity. His emblem is the leek.

Nona Rees is the author of St David of Dewisland.

practices and affording women and children greater rights than other legal systems of the time.

Ironically, as Wales was becoming a recognisable entity, it was forced to acknowledge the authority of the Anglo-Saxon king of England in return for an alliance against the marauding Vikings.

WALES UNDER THE NORMANS

By the time the Normans arrived in England in 1066, the Welsh had returned to their warring, independent ways. To secure his new kingdom, William the Conqueror set up powerful, feudal barons – called marcher lords – along the Welsh border. From here the barons repeatedly raided Wales, taking as much territory as possible under their control.

Curiously enough, Welsh literature flourished during this time of strife. Under the patronage of the warring kings, court poets honed their craft and fantastic tales were soon transcribed. You can see the oldest surviving Welsh-language manuscript, the 12th-century Black Book of Carmarthen, in the National Library of Wales at Aberystwyth (p213).

Bards and musicians were also greatly valued in the royal courts and it was one of Wales' great leaders, Rhys ap Gruffydd (Lord Rhys), who convened the first bardic competition – Wales' original *isteddfod* (see p47) – for a seat of honour in his house.

Meanwhile, conflict continued, with the Welsh being pushed back further and further until only Powys and Gwynedd remained independent. Successive Welsh monarchs regained territory through more bloody battles, but it was not until Llywelyn ap Gruffydd (Llewellyn the Last) that a true leader emerged. Having gained control of most of Wales, he adopted the title 'Prince of Wales' and by 1267 had forced England's Henry III to recognise him as such.

Llywelyn's triumph was short-lived, however, and by 1277 he had lost much of what he had achieved. Edward I campaigned hard to control the Welsh upstart and eventually killed both Llywelyn and his brother Dafydd. He then set up his 'Iron Ring' of imposing castles to prevent further Welsh revolt. Four of these (Conwy, p289; Caernarfon, p255; Harlech, p248; and Beaumaris, p278) stand as testimony to the bravado of Edward's plans. Caernarfon, perhaps the most famous of all, is the ultimate expression of military and royal authority, and it was here that Edward fulfilled his promise to give the Welsh a prince who didn't speak English. His infant son, Edward II, was born here and crowned Prince of Wales, a title bestowed, to this day, on the eldest son of the reigning monarch.

OWAIN GLYNDŴR

By 1400 resentment against the English was rife throughout Wales and years of famine, plague and greedy lords boiled over into rebellion. Owain ap Gruffydd (better known as Owain Glyndŵr, or Owen Glendower to the English), a descendant of the royal house of Powys, became the uprising's unlikely leader, declaring himself Prince of Wales and attacking neighbouring marcher lords.

Henry IV reacted harshly and passed a series of penal laws imposing severe restrictions on the Welsh. This only increased support for the rebellion and by 1404 Glyndŵr controlled most of Wales, capturing Harlech and Aberystwyth and summoning a parliament at Machynlleth. Crowned Prince of Wales at

10th-century Welsh law allowed women to divorce their husbands on the grounds of impotence, leprosy or bad breath.

Wales has more castles per square mile than any other country in Western Europe. For all you'll ever need to know about the castles and strongholds of Wales visit www.castlewales.com.

AD 410

Rome severs ties with Britannia, and a number of Welsh kingdoms emerge

1066

The Normans invade Wales and a prolonged period of Welsh resistance begins

1400

Welsh hero Owain Glyndŵr leads the Welsh in rebellion

1536 & 1543

The Tudor Acts of Union unite Wales and England, and grant equal rights and parliamentary representation to the Welsh

THE LANDSKER LINE

The so-called Landsker Line, which runs roughly along the present-day A40 through Pembrokeshire, is considered something of a cultural divide between the 'Welshry' and coastal 'little England'. The line was originally created by a series of castles and strongholds built by the Normans after their invasion of West Wales in the 11th century. The *landsker*, the Norse word for frontier, marked the edge of their conquered lands and protected them from the Welsh in the north. The south of what is now Pembrokeshire became anglicised, leaving the north a bastion of Welsh language and culture – a feature still evident today.

the meeting of parliament, he began forming alliances with Scotland and France, whose enmity with England made them natural allies.

Glyndŵr met his match in Prince Henry, son of Henry IV and hero of the Battle of Agincourt. After a series of defeats, his allies deserted him and in 1406 Glyndŵr was forced to retreat north. Gradually the English regained control and Glyndŵr simply disappeared.

To follow Glyndŵr's attempts to unite the country, visit the Owain Glyndŵr Centre (p233) or tackle some of Glyndŵr's Way (p63), a long-distance path passing many sights connected with the rebellion.

THE TUDORS & THE ACTS OF UNION

The remainder of the 15th century saw the Welsh and English learning to coexist in many ways, though old tensions remained.

As the English fought the civil Wars of the Roses, the Welsh waited for a prophesied ruler who would restore their fortunes and lead them to victory over their age-old enemy. Most agreed that Henry Tudor best fit the role. A descendant of the Tudor family of Penmynydd in Anglesey, who managed at best a shaky claim to the throne, Henry was the most prominent Lancastrian (red rose) in opposition to Richard III (white rose). After years of exile in Brittany, Henry defeated Richard in the Battle of Bosworth Field in 1485 and ascended the throne. This began the Tudor dynasty, which would reign until the death of Elizabeth I in 1603.

Welsh hopes were high but apart from a removal of restrictions imposed by the penal laws things didn't improve much. Little attention was paid to Wales until the reign of Henry VIII, when the Tudor Acts of Union in 1536 and 1543 finally established English sovereignty over the country. The lawless Marches (the border area between Wales and England) were reorganised and Welsh counties were established. Although the Welsh became equal citizens and were granted parliamentary representation, Welsh law was abolished and English was declared the official language of law and administration. The gentry – already mostly bilingual – leapt at the chance to enhance their status and cooperated fully with the Tudors, turning their backs on the Welsh language.

THE WELSH CHURCH & WELSH LANGUAGE

Throughout these volatile years the Cistercian abbeys at Valle Crucis (p297) and Strata Florida (p216) had become centres of Welsh culture and learning. Their glory years came to an end, however, when Henry VIII converted to Protestantism and then dissolved the abbeys in 1536.

William Morgan, vicar of Llanrhaeadr-ym-Mochnant, produced the first complete Bible in Welsh in 1588, solidifying Protestantism as the national religion and propping up the Welsh language. As a spoken tongue, its position was unassailable, and it would remain the language of the majority until well into the 19th century. It was the production of grammars and dictionaries during this period, however, that helped preserve Welsh as a literary language.

EDUCATION & NONCONFORMISM

The late 17th and early 18th centuries witnessed the first attempts to educate the masses in Wales. The first printing presses were established and a huge increase in the number of books printed in Welsh followed. Most of these were religious works, aimed at instilling knowledge of the Gospel.

A similar religious motivation fuelled the educational initiatives of the period, including the system of circulating schools founded by Griffith Jones in the 1730s. Jones decided to use Welsh as the medium of instruction, as 70% of the rural population spoke no English. By the time he died in 1761 more than 200,000 men, women and children had learned to read the Bible.

Welsh national feeling was high and the evangelical services of the Methodists became popular. The powerful preaching and uplifting hymns spread Methodism throughout the country by the end of the 18th century. Other Nonconformist (non-Anglican) groups, such as the Independents and the Baptists, experienced an increase in religious fervour. By the 19th century most Christian worshippers in Wales no longer chose the Established Church.

ROMANTIC WALES

Towards the end of the 18th century the influence of the Romantic Revival made the wild landscapes of Wales fashionable with genteel travellers. The works of landscape painters such as Richard Wilson did much to popularise the rugged mountains and ruined castles, and the rediscovery of Celtic and druidic traditions fuelled a growing cultural revival and sense of Welsh identity.

Scholars were increasingly concerned about the need to preserve the culture and heritage of their country and efforts were made to collect and publish literature. Edward Williams (Iolo Morganwg to use his bardic name) went on to revive ancient bardic competitions and held the first 'modern' *eisteddfod* in Carmarthen in 1819.

TWM SIÔN CATTI

The legendary Thomas Jones was born in 1530, the bastard son of a Tregaron landowner. It is said that Jones – who was living with his mother in near-poverty – turned outlaw at the age of 18 to save the two of them from starvation.

His banditry developed into a Robin Hood-style crusade to redistribute regional wealth. A master of disguise with a sense of humour, he relied on trickery rather than violence, retreating when necessary to a secret hideout near the River Tywi. His speciality was sheep and cattle rustling. He was never caught and in later life bought himself a royal pardon and went straight, writing poetry (winning a prize at the Llandaff *eisteddfod*) and stories (many about his own exploits), marrying the daughter of the high sheriff of Carmarthenshire and even serving as mayor of Brecon.

Welsh kids still grow up with stories about Twm Siôn Catti, most of them unfettered by genuine historical fact.

The equal sign in maths was invented by a Welshman, Robert Recorde of Tenby, in the 16th century.

A Welsh colony was founded in Patagonia in 1865 and you can still visit a Welsh teahouse there in the village of Gaiman.

1588

Translation of the complete Bible into Welsh, which established Protestantism and propped up the Welsh language

1759–82

Dowlais and Merthyr Tydfil ironworks started and Bethesda's slate quarry opened

1819

First modern *eisteddfod* is held as part of a Welsh cultural revival

1916

David Lloyd George becomes Prime Minister of the UK

A Machynlleth Triad, by Jan Morris and Twm Morys, is an insightful and often funny account of Machynlleth at the time of Glyndŵr, as it was in the mid-1990s and on into an unknown future.

At this time Augusta Hall (Lady Llanover) invented the Welsh national costume: she considered the out-of-date fashions worn in Wales to be quaint, and generations of schoolgirls have been condemned to wear her designs on St David's Day ever since.

INDUSTRIALISATION

The Welsh economy had long been based on agriculture, with few exports other than the herds of animals driven to market in England. When parliament restricted grazing rights on common land, smallholders were forced to migrate to the towns, fuelling a major development in Welsh history.

The iron industry had been growing in Wales since the mid-18th century. Ironworks proliferated around Merthyr Tydfil (p119) and workers arrived in droves. Roads, canals and tramways were constructed and English industrialists took control. The valleys were changed forever. Pioneering engineering developments from this period litter modern Wales, including Thomas Telford's spectacular Pontcysyllte Aqueduct (p299) and his graceful suspension bridges over the Menai Straits (p277) and at Conwy (p290).

The Industrial Revolution ploughed on, but its workers were getting fed up with the appalling working conditions and low rates of pay. Trade unions emerged and the first half of the 19th century was characterised by protests and calls for a universal right to vote. In 1839 the Chartist Riots broke out in towns such as Newport when a petition of more than one million signatures was rejected by Westminster. Between 1839 and 1843 the Rebecca Riots ravaged the rural southwest. The name 'Rebecca' refers to a biblical verse in Genesis: 'And they blessed Rebecca, and said unto her, Thou art our sister, be thou the mother of thousands of millions, and let thy seed possess the gate of those which hate them'. The 'Daughters of Rebecca' (men dressed in women's clothes) would act out a pantomime and tear down the turnpike tollgates on the order of 'Mother Rebecca'.

In 1847 the Commission on Education published a damning report, known as *The Treason of the Blue Books*, on the state of education in Wales. It questioned Welsh morality and blamed the influences of Nonconformity and the Welsh language for allegedly lax morals. The introduction of the 'Welsh Not', a ban on speaking Welsh in schools, created a tide of anger and drove an ever-widening rift between the Welsh Nonconformists and the English Anglicans.

POLITICS & DEPRESSION

By the second half of the 19th century industry had grown, coal had superseded iron and the sheer number of migrants from England threatened to weaken the fabric of Welsh society. Nonconformists began to politicise their teachings and liberalism gained a firm hold in Wales.

Finally in 1867 industrial workers and small tenant farmers were given the right to vote and elections in 1868 were a turning point for Wales. Henry Richard was elected as Liberal MP for Merthyr Tydfil, and brought ideas of land reform and native language to parliament for the first time.

The Secret Ballot Act of 1872 and the Reform Act of 1884 spread suffrage even further and gave a voice to the rising tide of resentment over the hardships of the valleys and the compulsion to pay tithes to the church. Liberal Nonconformity held sway over much of Wales during the late 19th and early

20th centuries, even producing a prime minister, David Lloyd George (see p36). In 1900 Merthyr Tydfil returned Keir Hardie as Wales' first Labour MP.

National sentiment grew and education improved substantially. During WWI Wales boomed and living standards rose as Welsh coal and agriculture fed the economy. A quarter of a million people were employed in Wales' coal industry in the 1920s; the results of this industrialisation can be seen at the former mining town of Blaenavon (p121), a Unesco World Heritage site.

Between the world wars the country suffered the results of economic depression and thousands were driven to emigrate in search of employment. The Labour Party weathered the storm and, as the 20th century progressed, became the political force of the nation, as rugby (see p40) had become its sport.

In 1925 six young champions of Welsh nationalism founded Plaid Cenedlaethol Cymru (the Welsh Nationalist Party; later shortened to Plaid Cymru) and began the slow but assured campaign for self-government.

POSTWAR WALES

The coal industry boomed during WWII, but afterwards went into decline; inefficient mines were closed and a bitter struggle ensued as unemployment levels rose to twice the UK average. The Welsh language was suffering and the people felt powerless.

In 1957 the village of Capel Celyn, near Bala, and the surrounding valley were flooded to provide water for the city of Liverpool, despite campaigning. There were too few Welsh MPs in the House of Commons to oppose the project and resentment still lingers over the issue, intensified in dry summers by the appearance of the chapel, school and farms above the waters of Llyn Celyn.

The 1960s became a decade of protest in Wales, and Plaid Cymru gained ground. In 1962 Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg (the Welsh Language Society) was founded, which campaigned for legal status for the language and for Welsh-speaking radio and TV. At the same time Welsh pop began to flourish and Welsh publishing houses and record labels were set up. Cardiff was declared the Welsh capital in 1955, and in 1959 Wales finally got an official flag.

In 1964 the position of Secretary of State for Wales was created and two years later Gwynfor Evans became the first Plaid MP. Support for Plaid Cymru soared in the wake of his victory and further electoral successes by the party in the 1970s started people thinking about a measure of Welsh self-government.

With only a shaky parliamentary majority the Labour Party was doing all it could to maintain Welsh support. In 1976 the Welsh Development Agency

MADOG

As part of Wales' Romantic renaissance, the story of Madog (Madog ab Owain Gwynedd, son of a prince of North Wales), who is said to have set off and discovered America in 1170, was also revived. Used during Elizabeth I's reign to justify the colonisation of America, it was now deployed to give the Welsh a sense of pride in their past. Madog and his followers had supposedly intermarried with native Americans, and early settlers to America had reputedly come across Welsh-speaking natives. In 1796 John Evans, the leader of a party that helped map the River Missouri, sought to find these Welsh-speaking Indians, but failed to find them. Given that many small American tribes disappeared soon after colonisation, due to the effect of European diseases and through loss of their lands and food sources, Evans' conclusion has not satisfied those who believe in the Madog story.

Eighteen signatories on the American Declaration of Independence were of Welsh descent.

Wales was the first nation in the world to employ more people in industry than in agriculture.

John Ford's Oscar-winning film *How Green Was My Valley* is an evocative Hollywood interpretation of the hardship and suffering of the industrial valleys.

Lawrence of Arabia, TE Lawrence, was born in Tremadog, North Wales, in 1888.

In Wales' worst mining disaster 439 men and boys were killed at the Universal Colliery, Senghenydd, about 4 miles northwest of Caerphilly, in 1913.

1925

Plaid (Cenedlaethol) Cymru, the Welsh Nationalist Party, is formed

1964

Jim Griffiths, first Secretary of State for Wales, is elected

1970s

Wales is the most feared opponent on the rugby field

1980s

Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government makes drastic cuts to Wales' coal and steel industries; unemployment soars

THE RISE OF LLOYD GEORGE (1863–1945)

A genuine political radical, David Lloyd George began his career as the champion of Welsh populist democracy and a critic of society and its institutions. He came from a family of staunch Nonconformists, preached at Temperance Society meetings and earned a reputation early as a fiery solicitor willing to defend the people against the authorities.

A talented and witty orator, he won his first seat as Liberal MP for Caernarfon Boroughs and at 27 became the youngest member of the House of Commons. As Chancellor of the Exchequer he launched a broad but controversial programme of social reform, including the introduction of old-age pensions, a 1909 budget that taxed the wealthy to fund services for the poor, and the 1911 National Insurance Act to provide health and unemployment insurance.

Elected Prime Minister in 1916 after a divisive alliance with the Conservatives, Lloyd George went on to become an energetic war leader; he excelled at a time when strong leadership was needed, dismissing red tape and forcing his opinion when necessary.

At the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, Lloyd George was credited with negotiating a middle ground between the harsh demands of Georges Clemenceau and the idealistic proposals of Woodrow Wilson. The treaty was well received in Britain and in August 1919 he was conferred with the Order of Merit by the king.

Domestic problems, however, continued to trouble him. Postwar industrial unrest and economic reconstruction dogged the country, while civil war raged in Ireland. Lloyd George eventually agreed to Irish independence, a solution the Conservative alliance never forgave.

Meanwhile, continuing accusations of corruption, extreme financial greed and the selling of honours began to ruin his reputation. Radicals, Welsh nationalists and campaigners for women's rights all felt betrayed. Whatever convictions he had begun with seemed to have been lost in a quest for power and fame. In 1922 the Conservatives staged a party revolt and broke up the shaky coalition. Lloyd George resigned immediately.

His popularity had faded, the Liberal Party was in disarray, political allies had abandoned him and both the Welsh and the British working class felt thoroughly deceived. Lloyd George's political career had reached a sad anticlimax. He died in 1945 at Llanystumdwy, where there is now a small museum devoted to his life (p268).

(WDA) was established to help Wales make the awkward transition to new sources of employment. Political responsibility began to devolve to Cardiff and on St David's Day in 1979 a referendum on limited devolution was put before the Welsh people. A resounding 'no' vote was returned.

The Labour Government collapsed soon after and Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party swept to power. In the 1980s the most drastic cuts to the now-nationalised but increasingly inefficient coal industry began. The Thatcher years of privatisation also led to severe cuts in the manufacturing and steel industry. Agriculture, too, was in a state of disarray and unemployment began to soar. Welsh living standards lagged far behind the rest of Britain, and with the collapse of the Miners' Strike of 1984–85 Welsh morale hit an all-time low. Extreme action on behalf of Welsh nationalism by activist group Meibion Glyndŵr (Sons of Glyndŵr) brought widespread condemnation as English holiday homes in North Wales were fire-bombed and the populace moved ever further from separatist ideals.

In 1982 the pressure on the Welsh language abated after a hunger strike by Gwynfor Evans forced the Conservatives to come good on election promises and establish S4C (Sianel Pedwar Cymru), the Welsh-language TV channel (see

p45). Support and enthusiasm for the Welsh language increased, night courses popped up all over the country, Welsh-speaking nurseries and schools opened, university courses were established and the number of Welsh speakers started to stabilise at around 20% of the population. At the same time Plaid Cymru began to broaden its base and develop serious policies, embracing all things European as well as arguing for a Welsh authority to oversee public expenditure.

DEVOLUTION

In 1997 a general election brought 'New Labour' to power and the devolution process got off the ground once again. In September of that year a referendum on the establishment of the National Assembly scraped through by the narrowest of margins.

The Assembly got off to a shaky start. Alun Michael, First Secretary in the new Assembly, was quickly ousted by a vote of no confidence and was replaced by the widely popular and populist MP Rhodri Morgan. Lacking the powers granted to the Scottish Parliament, the Assembly was always going to have a hard time convincing the world – and the Welsh – of its merit. Inane political debate, a lot of bad press and a farcical series of events over its new building didn't help the cause. Outside the political arena, though, Welsh pride flew high; Wales played host to the world's rugby elite in its sparkling Millennium Stadium, Welsh rock bands were making headlines with a slew of high-profile releases and the concept of 'Cool Cymru' swept through Britain.

The Assembly has now settled down (some say too comfortably) in a quest for a new national identity.

WALES TODAY

At the turn of the millennium, Wales and its capital city Cardiff both underwent major transformation. On 26 November 2004 the £106 million Millennium Centre opened belatedly as a new permanent home for, among others, the Welsh National Opera. The move marked the culmination of Cardiff's regeneration, which can be traced back to the mid-1980s when the Cardiff Bay Development Corporation was set up to oversee the transformation of the waterfront area. Over the years a total public and private urban renaissance project costing £1.8 billion has been put into effect with the aim of redeveloping 4.2 sq miles of deprived docklands in the bay formed by the estuary of the Rivers Taff and Ely.

The unveiling of the new National Assembly building and the ratification of the Government of Wales Bill (due to take effect from May 2007) have helped to assuage initial concerns about the validity of the new seat of government and allowed it, under Rhodri Morgan, to become part of the fabric of daily Welsh life. Furthermore, the renewed sense of confidence continues to filter down to all levels of society: Wales strides the sporting field like a colossus, Welsh-language culture is blossoming, and new industries are spreading like a hi-tech plague across the country, many flashing their green credentials alongside their desire to boost the local economy.

Age-old problems remain (rural poverty, manufacturing decline and depopulation) while the three biggest factors that will shape Wales' future (demographics, globalisation and climate change) are major concerns. But overall there's a sense that Wales today is not just moving forward but finally holding its head high once more.

The Welsh Extremist, a nonfiction work by Ned Thomas, explores the issues of oppression and freedom that spurred the anti-English bombings in the 1970s.

London's Big Ben was most likely named after a bulky Welshman – the industrialist and Commissioner of Works, Benjamin Hall.

1982

S4C, the Welsh-medium TV channel, begins broadcasting

1999

First National Assembly elected

2005

Cardiff celebrates its centenary as a city and its 50th year as Wales' capital with a year-long festival of cultural events. And Wales wins the Rugby Grand Slam.

2006

The Government of Wales Bill proposes the biggest transfer of power from Westminster to Wales since the Welsh National Assembly was set up in 1999

The Culture

In the past Wales has battled with the world's perception of it as an unsophisticated place, an uncool appendage to England. Much has changed in recent years and Welsh pride and international standing have been buoyed by the success of pop and rock stars, authors and film makers, and the establishment of the National (Welsh) Assembly. Never before has the sense of national identity and pride risen so high.

For a multitude of links about Wales try www.walesonline.com.

THE WELSH IDENTITY

A complex blend of historical association, ingrained defiance and Celtic spirit defines the notion of 'Welshness'. In recent years, though, Wales has evolved in many ways and the old stereotypes of the Welsh as pious but unsophisticated country folk have largely given way to a more cosmopolitan consciousness.

For the convivial Welsh the most prominent feature of their culture is the language: a wonderful, sing-song lilt littered with an incomprehensible mix of double 'T's and consecutive consonants. For centuries the Welsh have had to fight for its very survival and this has done much to underpin anti-English sentiment, especially in the heavily Welsh-speaking northwest, as well as strengthen their identity as a separate nation. In 2001 a political storm ensued when census forms did not include a box to tick for Welsh nationality.

Identification as a nation is one of the essential prerequisites for political power and the attitude to devolution has also changed in recent years, from firm opposition to cynical acceptance. Although the National Assembly's lack of power and limited authority dominate most criticism, few would consider a return to Westminster control. In the hope of gaining political clout the Welsh have also begun side-stepping Britain and aligning themselves with other small EU nations.

While urban Wales embraces international values and the young migrate to the cities, the ageing population of rural Wales clings to vanishing small-farm traditions. The decline in farming and subsequent losses to rural communities is a major concern. Since the foot-and-mouth epidemic of 2001, the Welsh rural landscape has become a higher priority for most, and a collective new voice championing the cause of sustainability has emerged.

LIFESTYLE

Welsh lifestyles can differ vastly from one part of the country to another. Urban residents live in a culture of hard work and long hours much like the rest of Britain, while in rural areas the pace of life tends to be slower and more traditional. Small family farms are still the cornerstone of rural society, but the farmers' way of life is under threat as incomes fall, the farming population ages and young people make for the bright lights of the city.

Expertly written and photographed, *Wales in Our Own Image*, by Gwenda Williams, will replace your romantic notions of Wales with a far more compelling account of this small nation.

Sheep outnumber people in Wales by almost four to one.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Probably the greatest insult you can give the Welsh is to refer to their country as 'England'. It may seem an obvious point but it's important to get it right.

England dominates the UK to such an extent that not only the English but most of the world tends to say 'England' when they mean the UK. When you cross the border into Wales, it pays to remember you're in another country. England, Scotland and Wales make up Great Britain; add in Northern Ireland and you've got the UK: the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

There has been a general loss of vitality in many rural communities; schools have closed and the deterioration of public transport in these areas has caused further isolation. Meanwhile, urban areas are expanding and developing, catering for these patterns of migration and resulting in a new-found affluence in the cities.

After the fallout from the collapse of industrial mining and steel manufacturing, Wales recovered by switching to light manufacturing. Women increasingly became the new breadwinners and there was a gradual change in thinking within the traditionally patriarchal society; however, many of the jobs created were low-skilled positions. The standard of living in Wales is among the worst in the UK and much of the country still qualifies for European Union (EU) funding, allocated to the most disadvantaged areas in Western Europe. Low-income employees earn about £11,000 per annum, while the average salary is roughly £20,000; top earners average about twice that figure. Both wages and disposable income fall well below the UK average, and unemployment levels, although declining, are higher than most of Britain.

The fabric of family life is also changing: children leave home rather than work the land; the birth rate is now the lowest on record; and as church-going figures fall, the pub has taken its place as the focal point for community life. Rugby is still the lifeblood of the nation though and the country's passion for sport has to be experienced to be believed.

Alternative Lifestyles

Attracted by the serene countryside, relative isolation and cheaper living, a steady stream of migrants have crossed the border into West and Mid-Wales in search of an alternative lifestyle. The process began in earnest in the 1960s, and by 1974 the Centre for Alternative Technology (p234) had been established to showcase the cravings for something new and wholesome. A few years later a controversial tepee camp was established as a permanent settlement in Carmarthenshire.

The 1980s saw a new wave of alternative lifestyle head west, and now you can bump your head on dream catchers, eat lentils, and source books

Wales is not represented on the British flag.

Few houses in Wales have house numbers; most people prefer to name their homes.

SPA & YOGA RETREATS

If you're more of an overworked urbanite than adrenaline junkie and need some time away from it all, then just breathe deep, relax and let someone else massage your weary soul. Wales has a number of excellent spa and yoga retreats; choose from luxury countryside sanctuaries specialising in yoga, alternative therapies and meditation to hotel-based spas where five-star opulence will woo you into deep relaxation.

- **Celtic Manor** (www.celtic-manor.com) Exclusive five-star spa in the city of Newport that has every luxury on offer.
- **Gaia Cooperative** (www.gaiacooperative.org) A wide range of courses in healthy living and environmental awareness near Hay-on-Wye on the Welsh borders.
- **Heartspring** (www.heartspring.co.uk) Individual retreats in Llansteffan (south of Carmarthen) with a combination of tailor-made complementary therapy and teaching sessions.
- **Hurst House** (www.hurst-house.co.uk) Luxurious treatments and pampering at this countryside hotel.
- **Mary Madhavi Yoga** (www.marysyoga.co.uk) Holistic weekends featuring a full programme of yoga, relaxation and experiential classes.
- **St David's Hotel and Spa** (www.thestdavidshotel.com) Pop in for a quick fix or stay for a city break at Cardiff's top-notch hotel and spa.

on how to run a Native American-style sweat lodge in most small towns to be found across West and Mid-Wales.

POPULATION

For a look at what people have said about the Welsh and what they've said about themselves, see *A Most Peculiar People: Quotations about Wales and the Welsh*, edited by Meic Stephens.

With only 2.9 million people Wales is sparsely populated compared to the rest of Britain and even this figure is misleading, as large urban centres in South Wales account for a good chunk of the population, while Mid-Wales is serenely quiet. In many places sheep far outnumber people.

The indigenous Welsh are mostly of Celtic stock and about 20% of the population speaks Welsh. Anglesey and the Llŷn are bastions of the language and culture, with smaller strongholds in the Swansea Valley and eastern Carmarthenshire. The heavily populated, urbanised south has far fewer Welsh speakers. Migration trends are focused primarily on the move from rural to urban areas and the influx of English people; a huge chunk of the population – 22% – was born in England. That means there are now more English people in Wales than there are Welsh speakers – a worrying figure for Welsh-language activists.

SPORT

The Welsh are passionate about sport, in particular the Holy Grail of rugby and football. Roughly speaking, rugby is the national game, although followed with a particular passion in the south, while North Wallans reserve their most fervent support for football. For competition purposes Wales is a country in its own right and all home matches of the national rugby and football teams are played in the Welsh pride and joy: Cardiff's sparkling Millennium Stadium (p88). Arguably the UK's finest international sports arena, it has hosted football's FA Cup Final and the Rugby World Cup for several years now while the much-delayed Wembley Stadium project in London has been mired in problems.

Lawn tennis was invented in Wales.

Rugby

Rugby in Wales is more than just a passion – it has been turned into a national sport. Fans verge on the fanatical and the sterling performance of the home team, winning the Grand Slam in 2005, has served to fuel the fanaticism. Rugby Union, the 15-player form of the game, is by far the most popular, while Rugby League, the 13-player version, tends to languish in relative obscurity, although the newly formed Celtic Crusaders are doing their best to buck that trend.

The four Welsh regional clubs playing in the Celtic League are Newport-Gwent Dragons (playing at Rodney Parade, Newport); Llanelli Scarlets (Stradey Park, Llanelli); Neath-Swansea Ospreys (The Knoll, Neath); Cardiff Blues (Cardiff Arms Park). You can catch club matches between September and Easter.

For information and news, see www.wru.co.uk.

Football

Football (soccer) has been second fiddle to rugby in recent years, with the Welsh rugby team winning the Grand Slam in 2005. Nevertheless, Wales' national soccer squad have also shown promise. Wales narrowly missed out on qualifying for Euro 2004 under former player-turned-manager Mark Hughes and now, under new manager John Toshack, the aim is to rebuild the squad plus source new young talent to line up with established Premiership stars, such as Ryan Giggs (Manchester United) and Craig Bellamy (Liverpool).

The Welsh Premier League is a semiprofessional league and home to teams such as NEWI Cefn Druids and the New Saints. As Wales' national league, high-performing teams at this level qualify for European competition.

Dip into *The Wisdom of Wales*, Paul Barrett's collection of proverbs and superb photography, for some nuggets of wisdom from the land of the leek.

WELSH LANGUAGE WOES

Although support for the Welsh language has strengthened in recent years and other minority cultures look to Wales as a shining example, in reality the threat to the Welsh language is acute.

Economic hardship in rural areas, particularly Welsh-speaking communities, has led to migration to urban centres. Meanwhile, large numbers of non-Welsh speakers have been moving in, changing the cultural dynamic of rural Wales in a very short time. Few of these migrants learn the Welsh language or become involved in local traditions, and their presence inflates house prices and forces local people out.

During the rise of nationalism from the 1960s to 1980s, opposition to the English 'invaders' rose steadily and anti-English slogans and graffiti were common. Slogans such as '*Dal dy dir*' (Hold your ground) and '*lIdiwch!*' (Surrender) still adorn the mountain sides and rural walls. A radical underground organisation, the Sons of Glyndŵr, went even further, firebombing English-owned holiday homes and, in doing so, causing much harm to the nationalists' cause.

Today, peaceful 'No Colonisation' campaigns attack estate agents in England who are selling Welsh properties to outsiders, and pressure group Cymuned has brought the case for state regulation of the housing market to both the National Assembly and the UN. Several local authorities have now proposed controversial moves to limit the capacity of nonlocals to buy or build property – the favoured approach to redress the balance.

For more information visit www.wales4sale.com and www.bbc.co.uk/wales/history/sites/language/pages/timeline.shtml.

Cardiff City (Championship), Wrexham (League Two) and Swansea City (League One) play in the otherwise English Football League, though the high-flying Bluebirds have aspirations to play Premiership football.

Major English football events have been held at the Millennium Stadium until the new Wembley Stadium is finished, but you won't hear too many fans complaining. Cardiff City is the only club ever to take the FA Cup out of England, beating Arsenal in 1927, but for now at least, fans will have to contend with seeing English teams rule the roost, albeit on their home turf.

For more information, visit www.icwales.co.uk/soccernation.

Take a crash course in the Welsh language at www.nantgwrtheyrn.org.

MULTICULTURALISM

Wales has a small ethnic minority, only about 2% of the population, most of whom are based in Cardiff, followed by Newport (where there's a large mosque) and Swansea. Most of these communities are well integrated and Butetown (formerly known as Tiger Bay) in Cardiff is one of Britain's oldest and most successful multiracial communities.

The largest minority group in Wales is Asian people from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, and other groups are so limited in size and location that they do not fit in with the government policy of placing asylum seekers in communities where they will be easily assimilated and supported. Consequently Wales has received relatively few asylum seekers and has largely avoided the raging debates on asylum that have dogged the rest of the UK in recent years.

In northern Wales, however, young nationalists have recently been targeting non-Welsh speakers and the tiny minority population of Blacks and Asians. Although you shouldn't encounter any problems as a tourist, be aware that ill feeling can exist.

MEDIA

Welsh media has strengthened in recent years, though newspapers are generally populist titles taking a lightweight view of Welsh affairs and doing little to provoke thought or debate; significantly, the three major papers are controlled by one company (Trinity Mirror). Alternative voices are heard through

For comprehensive coverage of arts, politics and current affairs in Wales visit www.planetmagazine.org.uk.

A Welshman cofounded the *New York Times*.

an increasing number of top-quality Welsh magazines. Due to launch in 2007 is *Y Byd* (The World), the first-ever Welsh-language newspaper. For more details, check the website www.ybyd.com.

TV and radio in Wales are far ahead in terms of innovative programming and quality broadcasting, churning out many award-winning TV programmes and, at the best of times, working as a catalyst for change. BBC Radio Wales and BBC Radio Cymru transmit English- and Welsh-language news and features, while a host of commercial stations turn up the music for listeners. BBC Wales and local Welsh-language broadcaster S4C (Sianel Pedwar Cymru; see the boxed text, p45) successfully produce a variety of excellent TV viewing.

RELIGION

Although the Welsh once had a strong image as a god-fearing, church-going nation, this stereotype no longer holds true. Religion in Wales has a remarkable history but little contemporary support. About 72% of the population is Christian but church-going figures are thought to be as low as just 7%.

Since the 18th century, Nonconformist Protestant denominations have held most sway over the people of Wales, bringing a puritanical strain to Welsh life. Today, Methodists, based mainly in rural areas, are the largest group, followed by the Congregationalists, who are strong in South Wales, and smaller groups of Wesleyans and Baptists. Of non-Christian religions, Islam has the largest following.

The growth of alternative spirituality and paganism in Mid-Wales is largely undocumented, but many 'New Agers' subscribe to the concepts of ancient beliefs in some form or another. Celtic druidism (see the boxed text, p276), pagan shamanism and many traditional Eastern religions are now the focus of workshops and gatherings attended by increasing numbers of people.

ARTS

The Welsh arts scene, which has a history of showcasing fine works, is thriving at the moment thanks to some excellent creative talent and an injection of funds from the National Assembly. Launched in 2001, Cymru'n Creu (Wales Creates) is a consortium of public agencies aimed at encouraging a culturally diverse, creatively rich and entrepreneurial arts industry. The programme appears to be providing momentum and focus for emerging talent.

The National Museum of Wales in Cardiff and the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth celebrate their centenary in 2007.

Literature

Wales has an incredibly rich literary history, with storytelling firmly embedded in the national psyche. From 2000-year-old bardic poetry to the Welsh-inspired 'sprung-rhythm' of English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, latter-day Welsh writers have had a store of impressive works to refer to.

However, it is primarily 20th-century writing that has brought Welsh literature to a worldwide audience. A milestone was the 1915 publication of the controversial *My People*, by Caradoc Evans (1883–1945), in which he exposed the dark side of Welsh life with stories of 'little villages hidden in valleys and reeking with malice'. Up until then, writers had pursued established nostalgic themes.

In an international sense it was the 'roaring boy' of Welsh literature, Dylan Thomas (1914–53), who was Wales' most notable export, his reputation for outrageous living almost equalling that of his literary works. He is acclaimed for writing half a dozen of the greatest poems in the English language, including such timeless works as *Fern Hill* and *A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by*

Fire, of a Child in London. Thomas, however, is probably most famous for his hugely comic radio play, *Under Milk Wood*, describing a day in the life of an insular Welsh community.

Although Thomas rarely touched on it, a recurrent theme across Welsh literature was the pain and politics of coalminers and quarry workers in the Depression years. Richard Llewellyn (1906–83) brought these hardships and the suffering to a world audience with his romantic roller coaster of a novel, *How Green Was My Valley*, a popular but dubious gathering of all the myths, stereotypes and truths of the industrial valleys.

Welsh literature matured in the work of home-grown heroes taking on the clichés of valley life and developing more realistic, socially rooted works. Poet and painter David Jones (1895–1974) began the trend with his epic of war, *In Parenthesis*, published in 1937. His testament to WWI was based on his experiences in the trenches and the language produced is an enduring literary achievement.

Remembered best for her short stories and novels, Kate Roberts (1891–1985) explored the experiences of working men and women in rural Wales, often evoking qualities of a time since past. One of Wales' most outstanding 20th-century writers, her novel *Feet in Chains* explores the struggles of a North Wales slate-quarrying family over almost 40 years, and her novel *Tea in Heather* is an insightful observation of the struggles of a little girl growing up in Gwynedd in the early 20th century.

Finely observed and incredibly dark and witty, Rhys Davies' stories in *A Human Condition* examine small-town life and rural mentality. The elegant *On the Black Hill*, by Bruce Chatwin (1940–89), also evokes the joys and hardships of small-town life, exploring Welsh spirit and cross-border antipathy through the lives of torpid twin-brother farmers.

Poetry has been strongly represented in recent years with fine work tumbling out of Wales from a number of authors. Names to look out for include Robert Minihinnick (editor of *Poetry Wales*), Gillian Clarke, T Harri Jones and John Barnie.

For a compelling overview of Wales and the Welsh, take a look at the *Land of the Living* sequence of seven novels by Emyr Humphreys. The first novel, *Flesh and Blood*, is a triumph of character and a beautiful observation of the ways in which people are shaped by their environment.

POET, PRIEST & PATRIOT

One of Wales' most passionate and most reclusive modern writers, the priest-poet RS Thomas (1913–2000), was an outspoken critic of Welsh 'cultural suicide' and a staunch supporter of unpopular causes. Nominated for the Nobel Prize for literature, his uncompromising work has a pure, sparse style, which he used to explore his profound spirituality and the natural world.

RS Thomas was also more politically controversial than any other Welsh writer, becoming the Welsh conscience and campaigning fervently on behalf of indigenous language and culture. His unflinching support of Welsh issues did not always extend to his compatriots, however, with him proclaiming at one point that they were 'an impotent people/sick with inbreeding/worrying the carcass of an old song'. In the late 1980s and early 1990s he was at the centre of a highly public row when he publicly praised the arsonists who firebombed English-owned holiday homes in Wales. He claimed that English speakers were destroying the country and asked 'What is one death against the death of the whole Welsh nation?' His inflammatory views were picked up by the rock band Manic Street Preachers (see p47), who used a line of his for their hit album *This is My Truth, Tell Me Yours*.

Despite his fierce passions, English is the language of his poetry, although he wrote some prose, including his enigmatic autobiography '*Neb*' (Nobody), in Welsh.

Discover Welsh legends and folktales through the eyes of a child in the beautiful quirky memoir *A Welsh Childhood* by Alice Thomas Ellis.

Lime, Lemon and Sarsaparilla is Colin Hughes' wonderful evocation of Italian life in South Wales when the café was central to many small communities' social life.

St Patrick was a Welshman.

Mon Mam Cymru: The Guide to Anglesey, by Philip Steels & Robert Williams, is an excellent guide to the island home of the druids.

Check out the latest books, reviews and publications at www.gwales.com.

Another excellent introduction to Wales and an insight into its changing values is *The Green Bridge*, edited by John Davies, a compendium of short stories by Wales' leading authors, exploring love, politics, sport, satire, industry and the countryside.

Except for Leonora Brito's *Dat's Love*, a heady tale of life and love, mundanity and surrealism in Cardiff's cultural melting pot, the literary voices of Blacks and Asians in Wales are rarely heard. Charlotte Williams, however, also broke the mould with her exploration of Welsh-Guyana roots in her autobiography *Sugar and Slate*, an examination of belonging and geographical, cultural and racial dislocation.

The most recent contemporary novels from Wales are an irreverent look at youth culture and its strange mix of sketchy tradition and drug-infused haze. Lewis Davies' critically acclaimed debut novel, *Work, Sex and Rugby*, is a hideously funny weekend odyssey of nights on the pull and days on the dole in the South Wales valleys. Other authors, such as Richard John Evans in his darkly comic novel *Entertainment*, have explored a much darker side of the postindustrial, drug-dissipated valleys.

For a bizarre look at modern Wales, the Chandler-esque crime caper *Aberystwyth Mon Amour*, by Malcolm Pryce, is as ridiculous as it is sublime. Its deadpan delivery of the most absurd events is clever comedy at its best.

For more information on literature in Wales, visit www.seren-books.com or www.gwales.com.

James Hawes' *White Powder*, *Green Light* is a scathing yet hilarious look at the Welsh media industry, Welsh-language die-hards and Soho bigwigs.

WALES' LITERARY MOVEMENT *Iwan Llwyd*

The loss of the referendum for devolution in March 1979 was a catharsis for modern Welsh literature in Wales. Like the investiture of Prince Charles as the Prince of Wales in July 1969, it heralded a flood of political and engaged writing and poetry, most notably the left-wing historian Gwyn Alf Williams' re-evaluation of Welsh history in his masterpiece *When Was Wales?*

Also important were the poets T James Jones and the Welsh-American Jon Dressel's *Janus* poems, submitted for the Crown at the National Eisteddfod in Caernarfon, also in 1979. Judged the winning entry by the adjudicators, the poems, comparing the debacle of the devolution referendum in 1979 with the death of Llywelyn ap Gruffydd, the last native Prince of Wales in 1282, were declared invalid by the Eisteddfod establishment because they were the work of more than one poet.

This apparent capitulation to the inevitability of the death of Welsh Wales sparked a renaissance among a younger generation of Welsh poets and novelists. Poets such as Steve Eaves, Menna Elfyn, Gerwyn Williams, Myrddin ap Dafydd, Ifor ap Glyn, Elin ap Hywel and Iwan Llwyd decided that poetry had to be taken out of the chapel, study and lecture room and performed in pubs, clubs and cloisters. This led to a series of poetry tours such as *Syched am Sycharth* (celebrating the Welsh rebel Owain Glyndŵr) and *Taiith y Saith Sant* (a celebration of the Celtic saints of the dark ages), making Welsh-language poetry once again a popular medium of protest and performance.

At the same time Welsh-language novelists such as William Owen Roberts, whose seminal work *Y Pla* (Pestilence) has been translated into several European languages, Mihangel Morgan, Bethan Gwanas, Eurig Wyn, and Caryl Lewis have recharged the Welsh imagination with a combination of humour, satire and magic realism.

Boosted by the establishment of S4C and BBC Radio Cymru, the Welsh-language TV and radio stations, during the 1980s (see opposite), a generation of professional Welsh-language writers have for the first time enabled Welsh poetry, drama and prose to have a life outside the traditional amateur and academic enclaves.

Recent years have also seen an increasing crossover between Welsh and English poetry and literature, as well as poets and musicians such as Twm Morys and Gwyneth Glyn establishing new audiences with their blend of words and music.

Iwan Llwyd is a poet and author based in Porthmadog.

Cinema & Television

Welsh TV and film-making have been leading the cultural revival in Wales and although English media still dominates the moving image, Wales has recently been packing a punch disproportionate to its size.

The stereotypes of Welsh life as depicted in early classics (such as *The Citadel*, the story of an idealistic doctor in a Welsh mining town, and *How Green Was My Valley*, a film that probably annoys the Welsh more than any other) held fast for many years despite the fact that they featured non-Welsh actors, English or American directors and few if any Welsh locations. The first genuinely Welsh film was Karl Francis' *Above Us the Earth* in 1977. Based on the true story of a colliery closure, it featured an all-amateur cast in real valley locations.

In recent years the beginnings of a new film industry have emerged. Film workshops have been established, as well as a Welsh media agency, BAFTA awards and an international film festival. Meanwhile, S4C (see below) has been instrumental in supporting emerging talent and promoting Welsh culture to the outside world.

This renewed confidence and greater independence has strengthened the Welsh film identity once forged only by Hollywood greats Sir Richard Burton, Sir Anthony Hopkins and, more recently, Catherine Zeta-Jones. Rising Welsh star Rhys Ifans, previously lead singer in the band Super Furry Animals (see p47), has also made it big in tinsel town with appearances in *Notting Hill*, *51st State* and *The Shipping News*, and at home with the funny but clichéd revenge comedy *Twin Town*.

Two of S4C's greatest success stories have been Welsh-language docudrama *Hedd Wyn*, nominated for an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film in 1994, and *Solomon a Gaenor*, nominated in the same category in 1999. Another S4C production *Eldra*, a coming-of-age tale about a young

Hedd Wyn, directed by Paul Turner, is a film of the life of a farmer's son, who was conscripted into WWI and killed without knowing he had won the highest honour for a Welsh poet.

Solomon and Gaenor, directed by Paul Morrison, is a tale of forbidden love set against the backdrop of the South Wales coalfields at the turn of the 20th century.

BRINGING WALES TO THE WORLD

It took a hunger strike by Welsh nationalist Gwynfor Evans and heavy campaigning by Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg (the Welsh Language Society) to prevent the government from reneging on the promise of a Welsh-language TV station. Yet today, the broadcasting baby is credited with rejuvenating a threatened language, strengthening Welsh national identity and bringing Wales to the world.

Although heavily subsidised, Sianel Pedwar Cymru (S4C; Channel 4 Wales) has been an enormous success since it began broadcasting in 1982. The channel has been instrumental in the renaissance of the Welsh language and encouraging people to learn Welsh. Long-running soap opera *Pobol y Cwm* (People of the Valley) is even transmitted with subtitles to the rest of Britain. The establishment of a Welsh channel has also created jobs and attracted young people to places such as Bangor and Caernarfon, previously unknown to young media graduates, and is helping to reverse the brain-drain to Cardiff and London.

The station has also helped to establish a stronger sense of cultural identity for Wales both within the country and internationally. Oscar-nominated films, such as *Solomon a Gaenor* and *Hedd Wyn* (see above), have helped raise the profile of Wales and Welsh film-making, and acclaimed documentaries such as *The Celts* and *Space Tourists* have been sold worldwide, further strengthening the Welsh presence in the international arena.

However, it is the channel's assault on the world of animation which has won it the most international respect. In 1982 its cuddly yellow bear, *Super Ted*, became the first-ever British animation series to be broadcast by Disney. Success continued worldwide with *Fireman Sam*: Oscar nominations for *Famous Fred* and *The Canterbury Tales*: a worldwide cult following for the dysfunctional Stone Age family *The Gogs*: cutting-edge film-length animation in *Other World*: and a slew of South Korean and Israeli children following the adventures of *Sali Mali*, a forgetful little old lady with a heart of gold.

The Englishman Who Went Up a Hill but Came Down a Mountain is a light-hearted film about a village changing its image – and doing whatever it takes.

Ivor the Engine, a wannabe choir-singing locomotive, entertained children for 30 years on British TV.

1960s hero Bob Dylan changed his surname in homage to the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas – he was previously known as Bob Zimmerman.

Romany girl growing up in a slate-quarrying community in North Wales, won the 2003 'Spirit of Moondance' award at the Sundance Film Festival in Colorado. Other films to look out for include the edgy *Human Traffic*, which immortalised Cardiff's club scene, and for novelty value Charlotte Church's cinematic flop *I'll Be There*, a tale of a rebellious teen pursuing her dreams of becoming a singer.

S4C and BBC Wales have also been a springboard for small-screen success, challenging preconceptions and fuelling independent production. Between the religious and farming programming, soap operas and game shows are some Welsh gems. One recent BAFTA award winner was the hard-hitting documentary *Ar y Stry* (Streetlife), which follows the lives of homeless heroin addicts. The film did much to dispel the myth that the issue remained an imported problem by including middle-class Welsh speakers.

More recently the revival of BBC TV series *Doctor Who*, set in Cardiff, and its spin-off series, *Torchwood*, have introduced sci-fi fans to Cardiff as the centre of alien activity.

Wales' oldest claim to cinematic fame, however, is as a location. Popular with directors since the 1920s, the country now hosts major productions on a regular basis. The stunning landscape of Snowdonia is by far the leader of the pack with modern movies such as *First Knight* and *Tomb Raider 2* being shot here. TV classics were also filmed in Wales, with Portmeirion used as the backdrop for cult classic *The Prisoner*.

See the boxed text, p303, for more.

Music

Music has always been important in Wales and could never be stamped out despite years of both political and religious suppression. However, the ancient traditions of competitive performance and the sweet sounds of country folk hardly grabbed the world and made it listen.

ROCK & POP

Sixties sex bomb Tom Jones injected some much-needed life into the otherwise predictable music flow, and the brazen allure of Shirley Bassey singing *Goldfinger* brought James Bond fans to their knees. The 1970s saw the emergence of great rock bands such as Man and Budgie, but their fine quality did not translate into fame. It took a roar from the red dragon in the late 1990s to hit the international big time with the heady sounds of

a host of mega-groups, including Manic Street Preachers, Catatonia and Stereophonics. Their innovative sounds, clever lyrics, rabble-rousing rock and poignant ballads have escaped across the borders and have changed the staid image of Wales as a nation of melodious harpists and male voice choirs forever.

The Manics paved the way with a series of successful albums after *Generation Terrorists* (1992) established it as a key 1990s band. The three-piece Stereophonics followed with a string of infectious singles, and Cardiff-based Catatonia shot to stardom after *International Velvet* (1998) and its now-classic anthem, 'Every day when I wake up I thank the Lord I'm Welsh'.

Meanwhile, bilingual cult band Super Furry Animals churned out a blend of infectious alternative sounds, proving its stellar talents to the world with *Mwng*, the biggest selling Welsh-language album of all time. Other big players worth looking out for are Feeder and Lostprophets.

Today, the Welsh music scene may not be as overhyped by the media as it once was, but its true substance has come to the fore. An important new network of artists, labels and agencies has been established. Young pop scamps the Automatic are blazing a trail for Wales, while from the dark heart of the Rhondda Valley come soon-to-be-stadium-sized rock giants Funeral For a Friend and Bullet For My Valentine, heading a fertile metal scene. And there's an eclectic array of rising stars waiting in the wings for their main chance, from the expansive rap of Akira the Don and blissed-out Welsh-language folktronica pioneer Jakokoyak, to the decadent pop of the Hot Puppies and wired guitar rock of the Poppies.

The 1995 disappearance and presumed suicide of Manic Street Preachers guitarist Richey Edwards was a turning point for the band. Their 1996 album, *Everything Must Go*, made them famous worldwide.

TOP 10 MUST-HAVE ALBUMS

- Manic Street Preachers *Everything Must Go* (Epic)
- Catatonia *Way Beyond Blue* (Blanco Y Negro)
- Super Furry Animals *Mwng* (Placid Casual)
- Gorky's Zygotic Mynci *Bwyd Time* (Ankst)
- Man *Endangered Species* (Evangeline)
- Budgie *Squawk* (Notworthy)
- The Alarm *Strength* (IRS)
- Y Cyrrff *Atalnod Llawn 1983–1992* (Rasal)
- Ffa Coffi *Pawb Am Byth* (Placid Casual)
- Llwrbr Llaethog *Hip-Dub Reggae-Hop* (Ankst)

As compiled by Spillers Records of Cardiff, see p101.

THE EISTEDDFOD

You could put the *eisteddfod* (ey-steth-vot; plural *eisteddfodau*, ey-steth-vuh-dye; literally a gathering or session) down as nothing more than a hick country folk festival, but miss it and you'll overlook one of Europe's strongest cultural traditions.

A truly Welsh celebration, the *eisteddfod* is the descendant of ancient tournaments in which poets and musicians competed for a seat of honour in the households of noblemen. The first genuinely regional tournament seems to have been held in 1176 at Rhys ap Gruffydd's castle in Cardigan, though references exist to earlier gatherings. *Eisteddfodau* grew less frequent and less lively following the Tudor Acts of Union, a process accelerated in the 17th and 18th centuries as dour Nonconformism took hold. But in the late 18th century Edward Williams (better known by his bardic name, Iolo Morgannwg) reinvented the *eisteddfod* as a modern festival and an early, informal one took place in Carmarthen in 1819.

The first **Royal National Eisteddfod** (www.eisteddfod.org.uk) was held in 1861 and has since become Europe's largest cultural shindig. Poetry, theatre, choral singing, rock music, dance, pageantry and tradition collide in this quintessentially Welsh event, which attracts over 150,000 visitors. Over the years it has become a barometer of Welsh culture with aspiring bands and emerging artists making their debut here. The whole event takes place in Welsh but larger events are simultaneously translated and there's loads of help on hand for non-Welsh speakers. The festival is held during the first week of August, alternately in North and South Wales.

Another massive session takes place every July in Llangollen, where the **International Musical Eisteddfod** (www.international-eisteddfod.co.uk) kicks off for a week of unrivalled action. As many as 50,000 music disciples pour in from over 40 countries to get their fix of folk tunes, choral harmony, rock, dance and recitals. Competitions take place daily and famous names take to the stage for gala concerts every night.

The third national event is the roving **Urdd National Eisteddfod** (www.urdd.org), a festival of performing and visual arts for children. This is Europe's largest youth festival, and brings together roughly 15,000 performers chosen from all over Wales. Most self-respecting young adults, however, head for the fringe activities of the Royal National Eisteddfod.

FOLK

If you'd like to see some traditional folk music the best place is at the annual *eisteddfodau* (see p47), but you can also stop in at a session at pubs, folk clubs or smaller festivals. Robin Huw Bowen is Wales' leading harpist. Elinor Bennett, Delyth Evans and singer-harpist Sian James are hot on his heels. Bands such as Hin-Deg, Calenning and Mabsant blend traditional and contemporary Welsh sounds with international influences and are all worth looking out for. Also worth catching are Twm Morys, for his upbeat Celtic rock, and Dafydd Iwan, a captivating performer with a political bent to his songwriting.

CLASSICAL

Classical music also enjoys a high profile in Wales and it's well worth attending performances by the BBC **National Orchestra of Wales** (NOW; www.bbc.co.uk/wales/now) and the **Welsh National Opera** (WNO; www.wno.org.uk). The WNO has fostered the careers of many young opera singers but by far its biggest name these days is Bryn Terfel, plucked from a North Wales sheep farm to become the nation's hero.

Architecture

Wales is a great place to delve into the past for architectural gems. The industrial age left some fine testimonies in the country. Blaenavon's (p122) great ironworks, quarries and workers' houses are now a source of national pride, as are the superb engineering works by Thomas Telford: Pontcysyllte Aqueduct (p299) and his suspension bridges over the Menai Strait (p277) and the River Conwy (p290).

Ecclesiastical attractions include secretive St David's Cathedral (p184) and also the magnificent ruined abbeys of Tintern (p115), Strata Florida (p216) and Valle Crucis (p297). On the secular side, there are several fine country houses, including Tredegar House (p108) and Plas Newydd (p281).

It is probably castles that are the country's most famous architectural attraction and Wales is covered in them – 'The magnificent badge of our

The triple harp is the predominant instrument in Welsh folk music.

Wales is home to about 600 castles and has the dubious distinction of being one of the most densely fortified countries in Europe.

STAYING IN HISTORIC BUILDINGS IN WALES *Dr Greg Stevenson*

Historic buildings make enjoyable day trips, but staying in them is an entirely more satisfying experience. Those travellers who are looking for accommodation with a difference should investigate the following:

- **Elan Valley Trust** (www.elanvalley.org.uk) has the best-preserved long house in Wales (Llanerch y Cawr) as well as the wonderfully isolated farmhouse of Tynllidiart, a mile down its own track.
- **Landmark Trust** (www.landmarktrust.org.uk) lets a tower in Caernarfon castle, a Victorian fort in Pembrokeshire and what is probably Britain's fanciest chicken shed at Leighton.
- **National Trust Cottages** (www.nationaltrustcottages.co.uk) lets Abermydyr, a Georgian estate cottage designed by no less than the architect John Nash, as well as the Old Rectory at Rhossili, which is the only building above what is possibly Wales' finest beach.
- **Portmeirion** (www.portmeirion-village.com) provides the opportunity to stay in Clough's architectural masterpiece in either self-catering cottages, the waterfront hotel or the newly converted Castell Deudraeth.
- **Under the Thatch** (www.underthethatch.co.uk) specialises in traditional thatched cottages but also lets a converted Edwardian railway carriage by the sea at Aberporth and a couple of traditional Romany caravans.

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subjection', as the writer Thomas Pennant put it. The finest are those built by Edward I in North Wales: Caernarfon (p255), Harlech (p248), Conwy (p289) and Beaumaris (p278), collectively listed as a Unesco World Heritage Site. Meanwhile, Cardiff boasts two rather different castles – Cardiff Castle (p85) and Castell Coch (p105) – designed by William Burges, a Victorian specialist in love-it-or-hate-it re-pro-Gothic.

The equivalent of the National Trust in Wales is **Cadw** (www.cadw.wales.org.uk), the division within the National (Welsh) Assembly with a responsibility for protecting, conserving and promoting an appreciation of the historic environment.

Visual Arts

Wales has a long tradition of visual arts and currently has more energy, inspiration and experimentation in this area than at any time in its history. In a brave attempt to stake Wales' claim to international recognition, the landmark Artes Mundi (Arts of the World) award, the world's largest art award ever at £40,000, has been established. Elija-Liisa Ahtila, a visual artist and film-maker from Finland won the 2006 prize for her video installations; the 2004 prize was won by Xu Bing, a printmaker and installation artist born in China, but now based in New York.

Wales was first recognised by the arts world as a fashionable place for landscape painters, particularly at the end of the 18th century, when the French Revolution effectively closed Europe to British artists. The rugged mountains and rolling valleys around Dolgellau (p241) made it a popular retreat, while rolling hills and romantic ruins were popular with artists such

Magnum photographer David Hurn's beautiful book *Wales: Land of My Father* looks at the dramatic cultural changes that took place in the last two decades of the 20th century.

For Welsh arts information online visit www.artswales.org.uk or the National Galleries of Wales site at www.nmgw.ac.uk.

ICONIC WELSH BUILDINGS *Dr Greg Stevenson*

Welsh architecture has far more to offer than just castles and cottages, but it is these that seem to catch the imagination of most visitors. You are never very far from a castle in Wales and the pick of the South must include **Pembroke** (p171), **Carreg Cennen** (p158) and **Caerphilly** (p105) with its famous sinking tower that even out-leans that of Pisa. For pure fantasy indulge yourself in the fairy-tale castles of **Cardiff** (p85) and **Castell Coch** (p105), which were refurbished to the Victorian tastes of the world's wealthiest man.

To talk about Welsh architecture as opposed to that which is British, you must look to the rich vernacular traditions of the principality. Isolated from the fickle fashions of urban England, much of rural Wales developed regionally distinctive building forms that used locally available materials to create buildings that answered local needs. These are best exhibited in the rural cottages and farms that vary from county to county (and in some cases from village to village). Look out for locally distinctive traditions such as slate roofs grouted with cement washes in Pembrokeshire, ancient oak-framed buildings in Montgomeryshire, and humble earth-walled thatched cottages in Ceredigion and Carmarthenshire. Selections of the best traditional buildings have been re-sited at the **St Fagans National History Museum** (p104), and the **St David's peninsula** (p184) will reward with untouched farmsteads and simple rustic cottages. For towns and villages made picturesque by their traditional buildings, visit **Dolgellau** (p241).

Although it is probably Wales' historic buildings that draw in most of its visitors, its more recent architecture deserves some attention. Portmeirion, designed by the eccentric **Sir Clough Williams-Ellis** (p252), brings a touch of Italy to Penrhyndeudraeth; the **Millennium Stadium** in Cardiff (1999; p88) brings the capital to life on match day; and Norman Foster's Great Glasshouse (2000) at the **National Botanical Garden of Wales** (p157) embodies a simple beauty. Among the mostly unadventurous apartment blocks of Cardiff Bay, the **Wales Millennium Centre** (2004; p90) stands out alongside the **Senedd** (home to the **National (Welsh) Assembly**, p88) completed in 2005 by the Richard Rogers Partnership.

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as Richard Wilson and later Turner, who painted both the Wye Valley (p111) and Valle Crucis (p297).

Introduced to the world at the 1913 Armory Show in New York, Augustus John (1878–1961) created the 'Bohemian' figure in painting and rivalled Dylan Thomas for his outrageous private life. He was, however, an incredible draughtsman and created big, bold canvases often showing the influences of postimpressionism from Europe.

Frank Brangwyn (1867–1956), poet-painter David Jones (1895–1974; see p43) and Ceri Richards (1903–71) make up Wales' 20th-century hall of fame. Richards, influenced particularly by Matisse, is probably the most notable figure and his work can be seen on permanent view at the Glynn Vivian Gallery in Swansea (p143).

Industrial Wales, particularly the parts found in the coal valleys, was the subject of a number of fine artists in the second half of the century and was also the subject matter of the 'Rhondda Group' – Ernest Zobole (1927–99), Charles Burton (1929–) and Glyn Jones (1936–). The thickly layered oils on canvas of Sir Kyffin Williams showed a return to the Welsh landscape for inspiration, while the younger Welsh artists such as Kevin Sinnott and Peter Prendergast have brought a new vigour to the sights and figures of South and North Wales respectively.

In recent years radical art at the cutting edge of political engagement has brought Iwan Bala, Ivor Davies and David Garner fame. Other names to look out for include Brendan Stuart Burns and Mary Lloyd Jones, and sculptors David Nash and Robert Harding.

It's well worth dropping into local galleries and exhibitions to check out what's on show. For big names try the National Museum and Gallery of Wales (p86), while you'll generally find more contemporary work at Wales' two leading arts centres: the Aberystwyth Arts Centre (www.aberystwythartscentre.co.uk; p215) and Cardiff's dynamic Chapter Arts Centre (www.chapter.org; p99).

Theatre & Dance

Wales is awash in theatre, from amateur Welsh-language shows in rural hired halls to top English-language productions with world-class stars in Cardiff. There are some 20 major theatre companies and a host of smaller community and educational groups. Many Hollywood stars, including Charlie Chaplin, Sir Anthony Hopkins and Catherine Zeta-Jones, first trod the boards at these regional theatres.

Cardiff, Bangor, Mold and Milford Haven all have their own well-regarded theatre companies, but attempts to establish a Welsh national theatre have failed due to bickering between regional factions.

MALE VOICE CHOIRS

Born out of the Temperance Movement in the mid-19th century, the male voice choir (*cor meibion*) was one solution to the grave problem of drink. The Methodists in particular encouraged this wholesome activity and breathed life into what became an institution in the coal-mining towns of the southern valleys.

With the collapse of the old coal-mining communities, choirs have struggled to keep numbers up and some have even allowed women to join their ranks. You'll still find choirs hanging on tenaciously in all the main towns, practising religiously and many competing internationally. Most choirs are happy to have visitors sit in on rehearsals. One of the best can be found each Monday at the Greyhound Hotel in Builth Wells (p218).

For artists and artworks, old and new, take a look at www.welshartsarchive.org.uk.

For more information on Welsh companies and performances visit www.theatre-wales.co.uk.

Wales' leading English-language professional company is **Theatr Clwyd** (www.clwyd-theatr-cymru.co.uk) at Mold, attracting top names such as Sir Anthony Hopkins and Janet Suzman. One of its main aims is to put new Welsh writing on an international stage.

Cardiff's acclaimed theatrical organisation the **Sherman Theatre Company** (www.shermantheatre.co.uk) produces a wide range of productions each year, including theatre for young people, inventive adaptations of classic dramas and new writing projects.

The highly acclaimed Music Theatre Wales, a pioneering force in contemporary opera, has a growing international reputation and tours annually across Europe. Its innovative productions vary from contemporary classics to newly commissioned works, and win rave reviews wherever they go.

Two big names on the Welsh-language stage include **Theatr Gwynedd** (www.theatrgwynedd.co.uk) in Bangor (see pp288), and **Dallier Sylw** (☎ 01222-236650), at the Chapter Arts Centre in Cardiff (see p99). Experimental theatre companies include the **Fiction Factory** (www.fictionfactoryfilms.com), geared to original work with a Welsh voice, and **Green Ginger** (www.greenginger.net), a bizarre Tenby-based group that produces street and fringe shows as absurd as they are memorable.

Dance lovers should look out for **Earthfall** (www.earthfall.org.uk), Wales' leading dance-theatre company and one of the most sought-after companies across Europe. Its pioneering dance theatre combines political and social agendas with live music and strong visual imagery.

A good place to catch a variety of performances from modern and classical drama to solo recitals is the Bute Theatre in Cardiff. The university theatre has six separate performing areas and is often free for daytime events.

The Welsh National Opera is one of the world's leading opera companies.

Environment

For a small place, Wales packs an incredible punch. You can lurch from craggy peak to rugged coast across a patchwork of rolling fields littered with sheep and still have only touched on it. The landscape has astounding diversity and is incredibly important to the Welsh people, for historic, cultural and economic reasons. The National (Welsh) Assembly has recognised this, making Wales one of only three countries in the world with a commitment to sustainable development built into its constitution. An elusive concept at the best of times, it remains to be seen whether the Assembly can turn theory into firm policy.

THE LAND

Wales can claim one of the richest and most diverse geological heritages in the world; and it is geology, more than anything else, that has helped shape the destiny of Wales in modern times. Its mountainous terrain helped protect the Welsh from rampaging invaders who rarely made it across the peaks to the coast, and the Welsh language flourished in these protected western locations, strongholds of the culture to this day.

As early as the 17th century, geologists were drawn to the mysteries of Wales' rippled rocks, ice-scooped valleys and puzzling fossils. Some of the oldest exposed rocks in the world are around St David's Head (p189), while the rest of the country is an evolutionary baby at only 200 million years old. The jagged peaks and u-shaped valleys of Snowdonia, darlings of the climbing set, were created when an ancient ocean dissecting Britain was obliterated by a dramatic continental collision. Marine life was entombed as fossils on the summit of Snowdon and it took the persistent power of an Ice Age to carve out the steep slopes of the valleys. The only remnants of these long-lost glacial monsters are the dark dramatic waters of lakes such as Llyn Idwal near Capel Curig.

In South Wales, extremes of temperature split and shattered the rock, and the mountains eroded into the red-sandstone moorland and grassy, flat tops of the Brecon Beacons. The porous limestone cliffs then became perforated with waterfalls, creating massive cave systems such as Dan-yr-Ogof (p138).

The ultimate inspiration for Welsh daydreams, *Eternal Wales* looks at places of significance in Welsh history and consciousness through the vivid accounts of Gwynfor Evans and the stunning photography of Marian Delyth.

The dune system near Porthcawl on the Glamorgan coast is the largest in Europe, rising to over 61m.

Britain's deepest cave is in Ogof Ffynnon Ddu near Abercraf. It has a depth of 308m below the surface and is 30 miles long.

TRAVEL WIDELY, TREAD LIGHTLY, GIVE SUSTAINABLY – THE LONELY PLANET FOUNDATION

The Lonely Planet Foundation proudly supports nimble nonprofit institutions working for change in the world. Each year the foundation donates 5% of Lonely Planet company profits to projects selected by staff and authors. Our partners range from Kabissa, which provides small nonprofits across Africa with access to technology, to the Foundation for Developing Cambodian Orphans, which supports girls at risk of falling victim to sex traffickers.

Our nonprofit partners are linked by a grass-roots approach to the areas of health, education or sustainable tourism. Many – such as Louis Sarno who works with BaAka (Pygmy) children in the forested areas of Central African Republic – choose to focus on women and children as one of the most effective ways to support the whole community. Louis is determined to give options to children who are discriminated against by the majority Bantu population.

Sometimes foundation assistance is as simple as restoring a local ruin like the Minaret of Jam in Afghanistan; this incredible monument now draws intrepid tourists to the area and its restoration has greatly improved options for local people.

Just as travel is often about learning to see with new eyes, so many of the groups we work with aim to change the way people see themselves and the future for their children and communities.

The geological history of both these areas changed the face of Wales and its history of settlement forever. Rich deposits of coal south of the Brecon Beacons and the slate mountains of Snowdonia fuelled the Industrial Revolution, and the hoards of workers who came to make their fortune settled in the rows of terraced houses lining the scarred slopes of the valleys today.

WILDLIFE

The wildlife of Wales may not be your first reason to visit, but certain parts of the country offer opportunities for unexpected encounters, from seal pups to dolphins and raucous sea birds to rogue sheep.

Animals

Ice ages and human intervention killed off big game long ago, and today any scurrying in the bushes is likely to be something small and furry rather than wild and dangerous. In the mountains you'll occasionally see herds of wild ponies, while pine martens and polecats can be found almost everywhere.

Coastal wildlife is still some of Wales' most fascinating. The main attraction is the Atlantic grey seals that give birth to almost one thousand pups on the Pembrokeshire shore in late September and early October. Other marine attractions include bottlenose dolphins in Cardigan Bay (see Endangered Species, below), the occasional passing porpoise and the cockle harvest at low tide in the Burry Inlet on the Gower Peninsula.

Offshore islands are internationally renowned habitats for sea-bird colonies, and even if you're not an avid twitcher the sheer numbers and raucous noise are quite something. Grassholm Island (p183) harbours one of the world's largest gannet colonies (30,000 pairs), while the rock faces of Skomer and Skokholm Islands (p183) are crowded with colonies of guillemots, razorbills, storm petrels, kittiwakes and puffins. Thirty per cent of the world's population of Manx shearwaters – that's 150,000 pairs – call this and Ramsey Island their northern home. Ramsey and Bardsey Islands are also host to a few pairs of rare choughs. The best time to visit sea-bird colonies is between April and mid-August.

Inland, the Dee estuary has Europe's largest concentration of pintails, while an exceptional number of red kites (see the boxed text, p54) nest in the southern Cambrian Mountains of Mid-Wales. Otters are re-establishing themselves along the River Teifi and in the border area of northern Powys, but salmon, sea trout and brown trout are diminishing. Most unusual of all, however, is the elusive gwyniad, a unique ice-age relic of a fish found only in Llyn Tegid (Bala Lake; p245).

ENDANGERED SPECIES

Almost 200 species in Wales have been identified as in need of conservation. Intensive farming, loss of habitat and acidification are all serious threats to diversity, but financial resources to reverse these trends are severely lacking.

Your best chance of catching up on endangered species may also be one of the most dramatic. A major group of bottlenose dolphins can be seen in Cardigan Bay (p211) year-round and further out to sea you can spot Risso's dolphins, common dolphins and minke whales.

Wales is the only place in the UK where you'll find horseshoe bats. You can see them between March and October at their recently restored home, St Cadoc's Church in Llangattock Lingoed, near Abergavenny. Barbastelle bats can be seen at Pengelli Forest National Nature Reserve in north Pembrokeshire or along wooded valleys across the country, during the summer months just before dark.

For government information on national wildlife conservation and environmental protection visit www.ccw.gov.uk.

Step carefully in Tregaron Bog: it's the British black adder's only habitat.

Check out activities, events and natural wonders in the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park at www.pembrokeshirecoast.org.

KITE COUNTRY

Doggedly fighting its way back from the verge of extinction, the majestic red kite (*Milvus milvus*) is now a common sight in Mid-Wales. This aerobatic bird with its 2m-long wingspan was once common across the UK and was even afforded royal protection in the Middle Ages. However, in the 16th century it was declared vermin and mercilessly hunted until only a few pairs remained.

This fragile breeding population in the Tywi and Cothi valleys of Mid-Wales was saved by a group of committed campaigners who launched an unofficial protection programme that was to last 100 years, the longest-running protection scheme for any bird in the world. Despite persistent threats from egg-hunters and poisoned baits (meant for crows or foxes), there are now more than 300 pairs throughout Wales. An ecotourism initiative, the Kite Country Project, was launched in 1994 to encourage visitors to see the red kite in action without disturbing or endangering the species. It runs six Kite Country Centres (see p226) where visitors can watch kites being fed at close range.

For more information contact **Kite Country** (www.kitecountry.co.uk) or the **Welsh Kite Trust** (www.welshkitetrust.org).

Plants

Agriculture, shipbuilding, charcoal burning and mining cleared Wales of its indigenous oak forests, and woodland now covers only 12% of the country. Most of this is non-native sitka spruce, a fast-growing timber crop disliked by most wildlife. To get an idea of how the Welsh landscape once looked, visit Pengelli Forest in Pembrokeshire or one of the areas managed by Forest Enterprise Wales, such as the Coed y Brenin Visitor Centre near Dolgellau (p245).

Cultivation and overgrazing have led to erosion in many parts of Wales, which in turn has damaged habitats and prevents rooting or reseedling of native species. Native ash, recognisable by its finely toothed leaves, however, is common everywhere, especially along rivers and in woods in the Gower Peninsula and Brecon Beacons. In its shade you'll find common dog violets, a delicate purple flower blooming from March to May, and several species of orchid with small deep purple, or sometimes white, flowers on a tall stem.

In mountainous areas such as Snowdonia and the Brecon Beacons, fragile alpine-Arctic plants breed away from grazing sheep and goats. Between the rocks you'll see purple saxifrage, a cushiony plant with tiny bowl-shaped flowers and overlapping leaves, and moss campion, a low plant with dense foliage covered in pink flowers. These plants live a precarious life on the higher slopes, so take care if you're hiking or climbing; you can do irreparable damage by disturbing them.

Myrtle, a strongly scented bush with dark green leaves and bright orange flowers, and crowberry, a small shrub with needlelike leaves and black berries, thrive in the inland bogs and soggy peatlands. Also look out for the rare, slender cotton grass, with its distinctive tuft of white cotton in midsummer, and bog pimpernel, a delicate pink funnel-shaped flower. Cwm Cadlan, near Penderyn, is a wet grassland boasting butterwort, one of Britain's few insectivorous plants. It has small blue or purple flowers on tall slender stems and large sticky leaves at ground level for trapping its prey.

On the coast, amid the sand dunes, you may find evening primrose, a tall plant with bright yellow flowers; sea bindweed, easily spotted by its pink-and-white striped flowers; and marram grass, the hardy windswept grass growing on the seaward side of dunes. The Gower Peninsula is a good place for thrift, a small pink flower on a tallish stem, and samphire, a strong-smelling small herb bush with long spiky leaves.

David Williams' *Landscape Wales/Tirlun Cymru* captures the moods and seasons of the Welsh landscape through powerful images, and makes suggestions for activities with maps and practical details.

The Making of Wales, by John Davies, traces how the landscape of Wales has evolved and been shaped by humans from prehistory to contemporary society.

ENDANGERED SPECIES

One of Wales' most endangered plants is the Snowdon lily. A remnant of the last Ice Age, it has survived on the slopes of Mt Snowdon for 10,000 years. The lily has thin leaves and looks a little like a grass plant until its white flowers emerge between late May and mid-June. Warming climates and overgrazing have shrunk its habitat and reduced plant numbers to worrying figures. Only six tiny patches of the plant now survive on Snowdon and there are no higher slopes where the plant can migrate for cooler conditions.

Another species on the critically endangered list is Ley's whitebeam, a distinctive large deciduous shrub that flowers in late May and early June and is only seen in the limestone outcrops north of Merthyr Tydfil (p119). Of more interest to most is the delicate green-flowered fen orchid (one of Europe's rarest plants), which is being closely protected in the Kenfig National Nature Reserve near Port Talbot.

NATIONAL PARKS

Almost a quarter of Wales is protected by its three national parks and five Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs).

On top of this, Wales has one marine nature reserve, more than 60 national nature reserves and over 1000 Sites of Specific Scientific Interest (SSI); all of which combine to make the highest density of nature conservation sites anywhere in Europe. There are at least six other categories of protected land as well.

These environmental assets have brought the local people economic benefits from tourism that outweigh any restrictions imposed by the parks' protected stature. For many years the parks of Wales have drawn crowds and as the Rev John Parker noted in 1831, "There is no place more public than the higher ground of Eryri (Snowdonia) in the summer".

The popularity of Snowdonia has ensured its future in a very real way. When a huge chunk of Mt Snowdon came up for sale in 1998, the National Trust (NT) began an urgent campaign to prevent it falling into the hands of commercial developers; £4m was needed in 100 days. Welsh-born actor Sir Anthony Hopkins donated £1m, and within four months, more than £5m had been secured and Snowdonia was saved. Hopkins basked in Welsh glory until he took out American citizenship two years later, to the disgust of his compatriots.

Brecon and Snowdonia include majestic mountain regions, while Pembrokeshire offers a protected coastline and wildlife islands. Snowdonia is the second largest national park in Britain at 845 sq miles, Brecon covers an area of 519 sq miles and Pembrokeshire is the smallest national park with 225 sq miles consisting mainly of the coastline of the County of Pembrokeshire.

NATIONAL PARKS IN WALES

National Park	Features	Activities	Best Time to Visit	Page Reference
Brecon Beacons	High plateau and rolling hills; ponies, grouse, pine martens	Walking, cycling, canoeing, caving	Apr-Oct	p123
Pembrokeshire Coast	Rugged cliffs and sandy beaches; gannets, grey seals, dolphins	Walking, kayaking, surfing, coaststeering	Apr-Oct	p163
Snowdonia	Dramatic mountains and ridges; polecats, buzzards, goats	Mountaineering, walking, rafting, windsurfing	May-Sep	p237

Snowdonia: The Official Park Guide, by Merfyn Williams and Jeremy Moore, celebrates the beauty and diversity of Snowdonia through evocative and authoritative text and some spectacular photography.

Visit www.eryri-npa.co.uk for the low-down on recreation, conservation, weather and places to visit in Snowdonia National Park.

Full of information on history, flora and fauna, Roger Thomas' vibrant *Brecon Beacons: The Official Park Guide* is essential for any trip to the hills. For information on activities, events, news and weather in the Brecon Beacons visit www.breconbeacons.org.

AREAS OF OUTSTANDING NATURAL BEAUTY (AONBS)

The five AONBs are: the Anglesey coast (p275), which has rocky coves, towering sea stacks and limestone cliffs and is popular for climbing and water sports; the Llŷn coast (p267), which features cliffs, coves and beaches and is a magnet for surfers and windsurfers; the Clwydian Ranges, a landscape of rolling green hills and upland moors, which is hiking heaven; the Gower Peninsula (p151), which has beautiful beaches and undulating farmland and is popular with surfers, kayakers and walkers; and the Wye Valley (p111), a majestic riverside glen, which plays host to walkers and canoeists.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

There is deep concern in Wales about the environment, on which many jobs and the success of the tourist industry depend. Much work has been done to clean up the worst industrial scars; the air is cleaner than it has been for centuries and the government has committed itself, and the country, to a sustainable future; however, serious threats to the welfare of the countryside remain.

Many issues are inextricably linked with agricultural practice. Wales has the highest density of sheep in the EU and overgrazing and soil erosion are serious problems. Runoff from pesticides, slurry and silage is destroying the water, and the dwindling numbers of full-time farmers means that the essence of Welsh rural life is threatened. The foot-and-mouth epidemic in 2001 was only one of a long string of crises to hit the rural economy.

Out of the burning pyres, however, came a greater understanding of the land. People saw for the first time that agriculture wasn't necessarily the biggest money-spinner in rural areas and that saving the brand image of Wales as a clean, green, rural idyll was just as important as the coveted EU farm aid.

The introduction of Tir Gofal, an agri-environment scheme that rewards farmers for what they do with their land as much as for what they produce, has created enormous demand since its establishment in 1999. Combined with expected Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reform to steer money away from unnecessary production and into alternative rural activities, it should mean a visible improvement in countryside protection and enhancement. The scheme pays farmers to farm in an environmentally sensitive way: managing wildlife habitats, increasing public access, reducing grazing levels and pesticide use and creating buffer zones along rivers to prevent leaching of fertilisers. It is a commendable start for sustainable development, with over 15% of the area of Wales now being managed under the scheme. Landscape changes are noticeable where the scheme is active, particularly where hedge-row management has been undertaken. In addition, access opportunities created by the scheme can be found alongside new access to the countryside on the Countryside Council for Wales website (www.ccw.gov.uk).

Other environmental issues affecting Wales include the continuing debate on waste management, landfill and incineration; increased road congestion and public transport issues; and biodiversity challenges and the monoculture ethic in forestry.

Industrial pollution continues to dog the countryside, and discharge from metal mines, abandoned coal pits and the increasing numbers of open-cut mines in South Wales are also a major concern. Tourism, too, is taking its toll. The growing tourist traffic in the national parks has led to serious footpath erosion, especially in the Brecon Beacons and Snowdonia (see the boxed text, p264).

Most campaigners agree that environmental issues need to be seen in a wider political context. There is a need for interdepartmental consultancy

For information on environmental issues contact Environment Agency Wales (www.environment-agency.wales.gov.uk), Friends of the Earth (www.foe.co.uk), or the Wildlife Trusts (www.wildlifetrusts.org).

For a look at green issues in Wales visit the Campaign for Rural Wales at www.cprw.org.uk.

For some of the best countryside activities visit Festival of the Countryside at www.foc.org.uk, which promotes sustainable, environmentally sensitive tourism in Wales.

ALTERNATIVE SOURCES OF ENERGY

Innocuous though they may seem, land-based wind turbines have become one of the most contentious and divisive issues in rural Wales.

Wales has been moving towards increased use of renewable energy for some years, but opposition to insensitively sited wind farms has been steadily mounting. Nobody disputes the need for sustainable energy and few object to community-based schemes that bring much-needed income to small towns and villages. However, the huge visual impact of commercial schemes on the landscape and their irregular output has brought both locals and campaigners out in droves. It's an emotive issue, though, pitting one environmental campaign group against another and raising serious questions about the planning process involved.

When a massive scheme in Cefn Croes, Ceredigion, was given approval by the Secretary of State in 2001, people were outraged: 1300 objections and a call for a public inquiry had been disregarded. The planning system came under fire and the National Assembly's very role was questioned. Meanwhile, the Assembly has set a target of achieving 20% of Welsh energy demands from renewable resources by 2010, and many say this is overambitious. Campaigners argue that the provision of renewable energy goes far beyond the theories of green policy and they fear the government's narrow political agenda in pushing their targets.

The focus has also turned to offshore wind farms and tidal power as viable alternatives. The battle continues with every new planning application, though, and many who never saw themselves as activists are now finding a voice and leading campaigns across the country.

The most recent controversy, meanwhile, surrounds plans to grow the fuel of the future in hydrogen farms in Wales. The Carmarthenshire Energy Agency is embarking on a joint project with Ireland to produce hydrogen from trees in a series of farms in West Wales. The Wales and Ireland Rural Hydrogen Energy Project aims to release hydrogen contained in fast-growing willow trees. Hydrogen promises limitless energy with no pollution, drinkable water being the only emission from its use. But the barrier to a hydrogen economy is production because an electrical charge is necessary to release hydrogen from water and most electricity is produced by fossil fuels.

Dr Richard Dinsdale, of the University of Glamorgan, who is involved in the project, said: 'The hydrogen farm concept was identified as part of the Objective One-funded "Hydrogen Wales" project and it provides an ideal route for the development of research performed in Wales into technologies which can provide social and economic benefit to rural areas.'

The hydrogen would power cars and other vehicles through the use of fuel cells. There are hydrogen fuel-cell motors already in operation in Canada, the USA and other countries, including, notably, England on London's RV1 bus route. These fuel cells are nothing new, however. They were first invented in 1839 by a Swansea lawyer, Sir William Robert Grove, who called his original device a 'gas battery'.

Could Wales be at the forefront of the hydrogen revolution? Only time will tell.

so that economic, social and environmental issues are addressed in a holistic manner providing true protection for one of Wales' greatest assets.

At the same time, progress is constantly being made. The Welsh Assembly's drive to reduce the amount of rubbish sent to landfill sites is proving successful with nearly a quarter of all Welsh municipal waste now recycled or composted. Across Wales the figure for the amount of waste recycled or composted has increased to 23%, up from 20% in 2005. In 1999 only 7% of rubbish was being recycled or composted.

It's a sign that Wales is taking seriously the commitment to sustainable development built into its constitution and looking to the future.

Outdoor Activities

Whether you're someone who wanders into outdoor shops to stroke shiny karabiners while muttering about needing to get into it all, or a weather-beaten veteran of craggy peaks and bitter winds, Wales has something to offer. From a host of multiactivity centres, where you can get a taste of adventure, to some of Britain's best walking (p62), climbing (opposite) and caving (opposite), as well as the world's best mountain biking (p61), Wales packs a lot into a small space. The landscape is stunning, access is easy and there's always a cosy pub with a warm fire nearby when you need to dry out.

This chapter will give you an overview of what's on offer; local trails, activity centres and facilities are identified in the regional chapters. Whatever you're planning to do, take a look at www.adventure.visitwales.com and order a free copy of the *Adventure Wales* brochure from the Welsh Tourist Bureau (WTB). It's packed with information from adventure junkies, and includes tips on how to get started, the best places to go and a directory of operators.

BEACHES

The 2006 *Good Beach Guide* commended beaches across Wales for their excellent water quality. The annual survey, published by the Marine Conservation Society (MCS), the UK charity dedicated to the protection of seas, shores and wildlife, found that the UK's beaches are now the cleanest since the guide was launched in 1987, with more than 500 of the 800 beaches tested across the UK recommended for bathing in the 2006 survey. The award is the UK's highest commendation for water quality standards. Of 120 MCS-recommended beaches across Wales, 19 were found on the Isle of Anglesey alone, with many accorded Blue Flag status, an international award for well-managed beaches with EC Guideline standard water quality.

According to the MCS, this year's increase in the number of recommended beaches is due to dry weather conditions in recent years, which have served to substantially reduce the amount of storm pollution entering the sea, hence improving bathing water quality; more information is available from www.goodbeachguide.co.uk.

One of the recommended beaches, Rhosneigr Beach on the Isle of Anglesey, is a mix of shingle and soft sand set in a sheltered bay and edged by sand dunes. The beach is particularly popular with sports enthusiasts; scuba diving, surfing, sea canoeing and windsurfing are among the most popular activities. Surfboards are available for hire at the beach, and there is zoning for water sports with a boat lane marked out.

Llandudno West Shore Beach (see p292), meanwhile, presents a quieter side to Llandudno than the popular North Shore Beach. The large expanse of shallow water makes it ideal for kite surfing, while the extensive sand revealed at low tide creates ideal conditions for kite buggying. For walkers, a coastal path leads along the nearby Great Orme headland.

In 2006 the Gower Peninsula celebrated its 50th anniversary as the first Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) to be designated in England and Wales. To mark the occasion, the National Trust (NT), which owns and manages three-quarters of the Gower Peninsula coastline, inaugurated five new walks along the coastal path: Penmaen Burrows (2.5 miles), Pennard Cliffs (3.5 miles), Bishopston Valley (3.5 miles), Whiteford Burrows (4 miles) and Rhossili Bay (5 miles).

For more information check the National Trust website at www.nationaltrust.org.uk/wales.

For hard-core climbers and wannabe adventurers, Paul Williams' *Rock Climbing in Snowdonia* offers plenty to aspire to.

For a wide-ranging site covering all major adventure sports and tailor-made packages for activity holidays, check out www.activity.visitwales.co.uk.

CAVING

If you fancy crawling through crevices, slithering down slopes and scrambling up rocks, Wales is riddled with magnificent cavernous limestone valleys. There are more than 1000 caves to explore, 300 of which were naturally formed.

The largest cave area is in a band stretching across South Wales from Crickhowell (p130) to Carreg Cennen Castle (p158), and other caves can be found on the Gower Peninsula, in Pembrokeshire and across North Wales. Top sites include Ogof Draenon, north of Blaenavon, which has more than 40 miles of passageways, and the UK's deepest cave, Ogof Ffynnon Ddu (p139). For beginners Porth-yr-Ogof (p138) in the Brecon Beacons National Park and Paviland Cave (p153) on the Gower Peninsula are also good spots to start.

There are several caving clubs across Wales; check out the **British Caving Association** (www.british-caving.org.uk), or www.caving.uk.com for listings. A full day's caving will cost about £65 per person for a group of six.

CLIMBING

The peaks of Snowdonia and sea cliffs of the Welsh coast are some of Britain's best climbing locations and have nurtured the talent of some of the world's finest mountaineers. With an abundance of climbing options in the area, both well-versed rock fanatics and complete beginners can satisfy their cravings to climb.

During the summer it can be hard to find a cliff without brightly clad climbers making an ascent, but spring and autumn are less crowded, and ice-climbing in Snowdonia is a popular pursuit in winter. Don't underestimate the power of the weather – check the forecast with the local tourist office or the **Met Office** (www.metoffice.com), and make sure you're fully equipped for emergencies.

You shouldn't attempt your first climb without some expert advice; there are centres all over Wales offering those crucial initial climbing lessons. Many centres offer climbing as part of a multiactivity course, or you can take specific lessons. Expect to pay around £200 for a two-day course to learn the basics. One of the best places to take a course is **Plas y Brenin** (National Mountain Centre; www.pyb.co.uk) in Capel Curig (p263).

Remember that climbing is a serious undertaking and always seek expert advice at the planning stage. Climbers should also check with the local tourist office, local climbing shops, climbers' cafés such as Pete's Eats (see p264) in Llanberis, and specialist climbing guidebooks.

For more information on climbing in Wales contact Plas y Brenin or the **British Mountaineering Council** (☎ 0870 0104878; www.thebmc.co.uk); for indoor climbing, check the website www.indoorclimbingwalls.co.uk.

CYCLING

Wales is a great place to get out on a bike; official cycle trails, bicycle-only routes and quiet back roads provide a wonderful perspective on the Welsh landscape, while some serious off-roading can be had on a bevy of world-class mountain-bike trails. You can hire bikes all over the place (see the regional chapters for details) and make up your own day trips, or you can bring your own pride and joy and ride across the country.

Bicycles can be ridden on any track identified as a bridleway on Ordnance Survey (OS) maps, but you generally can't cycle on public footpaths. The best roads for cyclists are the calm, unnumbered country roads and lanes between villages, which are quietest outside the traffic-choked months of July and August.

Martyn Farr's *Darkworld* is a lavishly illustrated account of the success and frustration of determined exploration in some of the most spectacular and colourful caves in the world under Llangattock Mountain in Crickhowell, Powys.

Sir Edmund Hillary and his team trained in Snowdonia before their successful assault on Everest.

Terry Marsh's comprehensive guide *The Mountains of Wales* is an essential book for avid walkers who are intent on scaling any of Wales' 600m-high peaks.

Information

Lonely Planet's *Cycling Britain* has details of the best bike routes, information on places to stay and eat, and a useful section on bicycle maintenance.

VisitWales publishes *Cycling Wales*, a free introduction to Wales' long-distance and regional routes (which cater for road rides, bicycle-only trails and mountain biking), with listings of tour organisers, cycle-hire outlets and useful regional publications. The WTB also produces a map pack that gives details of local routes that can be done over a short break (between three and seven days) at one of nine specially chosen cycle destinations. More information can be found at www.cycling.visitwales.com, or check the website www.cyclesmart.org.

The **Cyclists' Touring Club** (CTC; ☎ 0870 8730060; www.ctc.org.uk) offers comprehensive information (free to members) about cycling in the UK and overseas – including suggested routes, local contacts, organised cycling holidays, a bike-hire directory, and mail-order OS maps and books. Annual membership costs £34 per adult and £55 for a family. Some cycling organisations outside the UK have reciprocal membership arrangements with the CTC.

Cycling Routes

There are two main long-distance cycle routes in Wales, both part of the National Cycle Network (NCN). Their end points are on the rail network, so you can go out by bike and back by train, or vice versa. Sustrans (see below) publishes an array of maps and guides (prices from £5.99 per map) with information on services and accommodation for each route. See the shop section at www.sustrans.org.uk.

LÔN LAS CYMRU

The most difficult of the NCN challenge routes, **Lôn Las Cymru** (Greenways of Wales; the Welsh National Route; NCN Rtes 8 and 42) stretches about 254 miles through the heart of Wales. Starting from the Anglesey port of Holyhead it passes through the mainly Welsh-speaking northwest and mountainous Snowdonia before hitting the green hills and mountains of rural Mid-Wales, and then on into the former industrial Welsh Valleys and finally to Cardiff. From Brecon to Cardiff the route coincides with the Taff Trail, a combined walking and cycling route (see p124). An alternative braid of the route (NCN route 42) runs through Abergavenny to Chepstow.

LÔN GELTAIDD

A more leisurely route, **Lôn Geltaidd** (Celtic Trail; NCN Rtes 4 and 47) covers 220 miles from near Chepstow, via Newport and Swansea, to Fishguard on the north Pembrokeshire coast. Billed as a 'Journey of Discovery', the trail

Cycling Without Traffic: Wales, by John Price, details 30 easy and safe cycle routes. You'll find tips on what to see and where to go, as well as practical information on terrain, distance, public-transport access and parking.

According to Sustrans, the traffic-free North Wales Coastal Route is thought to be the best on the whole of the UK National Cycle Network (NCN).

SUSTRANS & THE NATIONAL CYCLE NETWORK

Sustrans is a sustainable transport charity encouraging people to walk, cycle and use public transport in order to reduce motor traffic and its adverse effects. Its brainchild, the National Cycle Network, now comprises 10,000 miles of track and is currently coordinated by more than 2000 volunteer rangers who donate their time to maintain routes in their communities.

When Sustrans announced its plans in 1978 it was barely taken seriously, but the growth in popularity of bicycles, coupled with near-terminal road congestion in the UK, has focused much attention on the idea of cycle paths. The incredible project now has the support of more than 450 local authorities and other organisations. The network now carries more than 230 million journeys each year.

For more information on cycling in Wales and the rest of the UK, interactive mapping and more than 400 maps and guides, visit www.sustrans.org.uk or call ☎ 0845 113 0065.

picks up the varied landscape, history and culture of South Wales. The route includes 13 miles of superb car-free cycling through the magnificent new Millennium Coastal Park, and a separate high-level mountain-bike section between Pontypridd and Neath.

The NCN also includes a number of high-quality routes without traffic that are ideal for cyclists of all abilities. The seaside promenade from Colwyn Bay to Prestatyn is thought to be the best of these in the whole of the UK. It's part of a longer route, the North Wales Coastal Route (NCN Rte 5).

For information on any cycling route, contact Sustrans (opposite).

Mountain Biking

Wales has become something of a mountain-biking mecca in recent years, offering some of the best purpose-built mountain-biking facilities in the world. A stunning all-weather single-track radiates from seven excellent mountain-biking centres, five of which have world-class ratings.

For more information, VisitWales produce the brochure *Mountain Bike Wales*, which has details of six mountain-biking routes across Wales; also check the website www.mbwales.com, a comprehensive site listing everything you need to know about trails, centres and conditions. See the regional chapters for details of local operators.

OS maps and specific mountain-bike guides are available for most areas but remember that many trails cross fragile upland environments and you should always keep an eye on your map and respect marked routes.

In North Wales head for some of the country's best purpose-built tracks at Coed y Brenin Forest Park (p245) and epic rides at Gwydyr Forest Park (p238) near Betws-y-Coed. Explore the wilds of Mid-Wales on some excellent networks by basing yourself at Machynlleth (p231) or Llanwrtyd Wells (p216), just two towns where mountain biking has almost become a way of life. Other good facilities in this area include wild Nant-y-Arian near Aberystwyth and the Hafren Forest near Llanidloes.

In South Wales, Afan Forest Park, east of Swansea, is also in the world-class rankings. Other good tracks can be found in the Brechfa Forest, northwest of Llandeilo, in Carmarthenshire, and there's a superb new specialist downhill course at Cwmcarn, northeast of Caerphilly (p105).

FISHING

There are some 240 rivers and streams in Wales for anglers to choose from. Catches include brown trout in spring (on the Rivers Usk and Teifi, as well as the Wye, Dee, Seiont and Taff); Wales' own shy sewin (sea trout) in spring and summer (on the Towy, Teifi, Rheidol, Dyfi, Mawddach and Conwy); salmon in autumn (on the Usk, Teifi and Conwy); and grayling in autumn and winter (on the Wye, Dee and upper Severn). You can also angle for sea fish, either from the rocks or from a chartered boat, in many spots along the coast.

Fishing is fairly tightly regulated in the UK and many prime stretches of river are privately owned, so fishing in Wales can be amazingly expensive. For practical information on getting a licence, and the best time of year to catch different kinds of fish, try the **Environment Agency** (www.environment-agency.gov.uk/fish).

For further information, VisitWales produces the brochure *Fishing Wales*, which has details of fishing clubs, tackle shops and places to fish; see also the website www.fishing.visitwales.com.

GOLF

In 2003 the International Association of Golfing Tour Operators awarded Wales its prized Undiscovered Golf Destination of the Year award. Wales hasn't looked back since. With more than 200 courses ranging from world-class

Wales' mountain-bike trails have been officially dubbed the best in the world by the International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA).

Tackle the best mountain biking in Wales with the help of Pete Bursnall's pocket-sized *North Wales Mountain Bike Guide*.

championships links to hilly nine-hole courses, the country is now gearing up to take the golfing world's spotlight when it hosts the Ryder Cup, scheduled to be staged at the Celtic Manor Resort in September 2010.

For more information, VisitWales produces the brochure *Wales: Golf as It Should Be*; see also the website www.golfasitshouldbe.com for details of Welsh golf operators, course profiles and an index of courses.

Some of the best courses include Royal Porthcawl and Royal St David's, both of which appeal to the professional player. For a more laid-back round of 18 holes, try clifftop Cardigan, leafy Cradoc in the heart of the Brecon Beacons, or the windswept Nefyn and District course.

HORSE RIDING & PONY TREKKING

Wales is an ideal place to get out on a horse and enjoy the long sandy beaches, glorious rolling hills and lush forest. You don't need any riding experience, as riding schools cater to all levels of proficiency and they're littered all over the country. Some of the most beautiful riding is in the national parks, and Mid-Wales is also an excellent spot to see the world from horseback.

Rides generally cost about £15 per hour and if you're an experienced rider there are numerous equestrian centres with horses for hire. Some are mentioned in the regional chapters, and tourist offices have details of others.

WALKING

Wales' incredibly lush and varied landscape, replete with thousands of miles of walking trails, makes it a walker's paradise. Walks can be as relaxing or as vigorous as you wish, taking in canalside lanes, national-park scrambles or brisk sea-cliff strolls.

The most challenging walks are in the national parks of Snowdonia (p237) and the Brecon Beacons (p123). Snowdonia is Wales' biggest national park and is home to its highest mountain, along with a host of other impressive peaks and dramatic glaciated valleys. Base yourself at Betws-y-Coed (p260) and meander through the woodland or plan a full-on mountain adventure. In the Brecon Beacons you can scale craggy escarpments from the market town of Brecon (p133) or head for the western end of the park and walk for days without meeting another soul.

Outside of the national parks, secluded trails and long-distance paths crisscross the country (see opposite) and cover a range of territories. Any time of year is good for walking, though expect crowds in July and August, a good soaking of rain at any time and restrictively short days in winter.

The walks described in this chapter are more suited for long-distance walking; for details of shorter walks, see the destination chapters.

Rights of Access

Welsh weather is fickle and even on short walks you should arm yourself with good rain gear, warm clothing and proper footwear. For more serious hikes, check the weather forecast with the tourist office, take a map, compass, first-aid kit, food and water and make sure someone knows where you've gone and what time or day you'll be back.

Today there are 24,855 miles of public footpaths, bridleways and byways in Wales, many of them marked with yellow arrows or waymarks. From May 2005 the public's rights of access to countryside has included most open country, common land, public forests and other dedicated land across Wales. These areas cover 1737 sq miles – about one fifth of Wales, or five times the area of accessible land previously available. The new access was granted under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. For more information, and

A good website for horse riders is www.equestrianwales.org.uk.

For hiking information, check out www.ramblers.org.uk/wales.

On Foot in Snowdonia, by Bob Allen, is an indispensable guide to the best 100 walks in Snowdonia. There are excellent instructions, good maps, route ratings and some stunning photography.

details of how to adhere to the new Countryside Code (launched in 2004), contact the **Countryside Council for Wales** (☎ 0845 1306229; www.ccw.gov.uk).

Be aware that some of the rights of way cross private land owned by the Ministry of Defence (MoD); look out for red flags warning that access is denied because manoeuvres or firing are underway.

National parks and other protected areas are *not* open to unlimited access. The parks have been established to protect the country's finest landscapes, and their popularity with walkers means it's easy to damage the surrounding environment. Don't stray off the trails and always get permission from a landowner before pitching a tent.

Information

Lonely Planet's detailed guide *Walking in Britain* includes the three national trails in Wales, a dozen other long-distance paths and a wide selection of shorter walks and day-hikes.

The **Ordinance Survey** (OS; www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk) publishes several series of excellent, widely available maps covering all of Wales, and official guides for most trails are available from tourist offices, newsagents, bookshops and outdoor-equipment shops.

The free WTB publication *Walking Wales* has an introduction to the best long and short walks, and tourist offices have publications on local walks. For more information, check out www.walking.visitwales.com, which also lists private companies offering organised walking tours in Wales.

Trails

Serious walkers and anyone with a desire to see rural Wales should consider a multiday walk or two. Civilisation is never far away so it's easy to assemble a walk of your choice of duration that connects with public transport and that is punctuated by villages and hostels or bunkhouses. You can choose from 18 regional routes and three National Trails (see below).

For more information on the trails, check the website www.walking.adventurewales.com, or try www.ramblers.org.uk/wales, www.ldwa.org.uk or www.nationaltrail.co.uk. Many of the trails have their own websites.

NATIONAL TRAILS

The three national trails are open to walkers, cyclists and horse riders, and are waymarked with an acorn symbol.

Glyndŵr's Way (132 miles; www.nationaltrail.co.uk/glyndwrsway) This undulating route, zig-zagging from Knighton to Machynlleth and back to Welshpool, passes many sites connected with the rebellion led by Owain Glyndŵr in the early 15th century. The birdlife found along this trail is another highlight. Accommodation is scarce in some sections and the hilly terrain means the going can be slow. Machynlleth has the best transport connections and gives easy access to mine-scarred valleys. The trail between Dyfnant Forest to Vyrnwy Lake is recommended for shorter walks. See p207.

Offa's Dyke Path (177 miles; www.offas-dyke.co.uk) Following an 8th-century grand earthwork project this trail skirts the Wales–England border through an astonishing range of scenery and vegetation. The best-preserved sections of original dyke are near Montgomery and the Clwydian Ranges are stunning. This strenuous trail is best done south to north. Shorter walks include Chepstow to Monmouth, and through the Black Mountains to Hay-on-Wye. See p124.

Pembrokeshire Coast Path (186 miles; www.pembrokeshirecoast.org.uk, www.visitpembrokeshire.com/walking) Hugging the sea cliffs of the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park, this is one of the UK's most beautiful walking routes. It passes incredible coastal scenery, tiny fishing villages and secluded coves. South to north is the preferred direction, but continual steep ascents and descents make this walk more challenging than the mileage suggests. If you're short on time, stick to the northern half, from Sandy Haven or Marloes to Cardigan (particularly the section between Dale and Martin's Haven). See p197.

For action and adventure in Snowdonia, check out www.snowdonia-active.com. It contains news, information and a directory of operators.

For the lowdown on the best pitches for your tent, Jonathan Knight's *Cool Camping: Wales* is the definitive guide.

For a sense of the trail's rich heritage, David Hunter's *Walking Offa's Dyke Path – A Journey Through the Border Country of England and Wales* is an essential companion for long-distance walkers.

SAFETY GUIDELINES FOR WALKING

Before embarking on a walking trip, consider the following points to ensure a safe and enjoyable experience:

- Pay any fees and obtain any permits required by local authorities.
- Be sure you are healthy and feel comfortable walking for a sustained period.
- Obtain reliable information from park authorities about physical and environmental conditions along your intended route.
- Be aware of local laws, regulations and etiquette about wildlife and the environment.
- Walk only in regions and on trails within your realm of experience.
- Be aware that weather conditions and terrain vary significantly from one region, or even from one trail, to another. Seasonal changes can significantly alter any trail. These differences influence the way walkers dress and the equipment they carry.
- Before you set out, ask about the environmental characteristics that can affect your walk and how local, experienced walkers deal with these considerations.

RESPONSIBLE TREKKING

To help preserve the ecology and beauty of Wales, consider the following tips when trekking.

Rubbish

- Carry out all your rubbish. Don't overlook easily forgotten items, such as silver paper, orange peel, cigarette butts and plastic wrappers. Empty packaging should be stored in a rubbish bag. Make an effort to carry out rubbish left by others.
- Never bury your rubbish. Digging disturbs soil and ground cover and encourages erosion. Buried rubbish will likely be dug up by animals, who may be injured or poisoned by it. It may also take years to decompose.
- Reduce waste by taking minimal packaging and no more food than you will need. Take reusable containers or stuff sacks.
- Sanitary napkins, tampons, condoms and toilet paper should be carried out despite the inconvenience. They burn and decompose poorly.

Human Waste Disposal

- Contamination of water sources by human faeces can lead to the transmission of all sorts of nasties. Where there is a toilet, please use it. Where there is none, bury your waste. Dig a small hole 15cm deep and at least 100m from any watercourse. Cover the waste with soil and a rock. In snow, dig down to the soil.
- Ensure that these guidelines are applied to a portable toilet tent if one is being used by a large trekking party. Encourage all party members, including porters, to use the site.

Washing

- Don't use detergents or toothpaste in or near watercourses, even if they are biodegradable.
- For personal washing, use biodegradable soap and a water container (or even a lightweight, portable basin) at least 50m away from the watercourse. Disperse the waste water widely to allow the soil to filter it fully.

- Wash cooking utensils 50m from watercourses using a scourer, sand or snow instead of detergent.

Fires & Low-Impact Cooking

- Don't depend on open fires for cooking. The cutting of wood for fires in popular trekking areas can cause rapid deforestation. Cook on a lightweight kerosene, alcohol or Shellite (white gas) stove and avoid those powered by disposable butane gas canisters.
- If you are trekking with a guide and porters, supply stoves for the whole team. In alpine areas, ensure that all members are outfitted with enough clothing so that fires are not a necessity for warmth.
- If you patronise local accommodation, select those places that do not use wood fires to heat water or cook food.
- Fires may be acceptable below the tree line in areas that get very few visitors. If you light a fire, use an existing fireplace. Don't surround fires with rocks. Use only dead, fallen wood. Remember the adage 'the bigger the fool, the bigger the fire'. Use minimal wood, just what you need for cooking. In huts, leave wood for the next person.
- Ensure that you fully extinguish a fire after use. Spread the embers and flood them with water.

Erosion

- Hillsides and mountain slopes, especially at high altitudes, are prone to erosion. Stick to existing trails and avoid short cuts.
- If a well-used trail passes through a mud patch, walk through the mud so as not to increase the size of the patch.
- Avoid removing the plant life that keeps topsoils in place.

Wildlife Conservation

- Do not engage in or encourage hunting. It is illegal in all parks and reserves.
- Don't buy items made from endangered species.
- Don't attempt to exterminate animals in huts. In wild places, they are likely to be protected native animals.
- Discourage the presence of wildlife by not leaving food scraps behind you. Place gear out of reach and tie packs to rafters or trees.
- Do not feed the wildlife as this can lead to animals becoming dependent on hand-outs, to unbalanced populations and to diseases.

Camping & Walking on Private Property

- Always seek permission to camp from landowners.
- Public access to private property without permission is acceptable where public land is otherwise inaccessible, so long as safety and conservation regulations are observed.

ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANISATIONS

For further information, contact the **Forestry Commission Wales** (% 0845 604 0845; www.forestry.gov.uk/wales), or check the website www.snowdonia-society.org.uk.

LIFE ON THE EDGE

If you fancy some rock climbing with the sea snapping at your heels, head for the Pembrokeshire coast, where the high-adrenaline sport of coasteering was born. Equipped with wetsuit, flotation jacket and helmet, you make your way along the wave-thrashed coastal cliffs by a combination of climbing, traversing, scrambling, cliff jumping and swimming.

Routes are graded so you can choose the level of difficulty, but you must be reasonably fit and a confident swimmer. By any standard it's a demanding and fairly risky activity, so don't just head out there on your own; join a group with a qualified leader who has a good knowledge of the coastline, water and weather conditions, and then you will see why the sport has taken the world by storm.

Two reliable centres offering coasteering adventures either as single activities or as part of residential, multiactivity programmes are **Twr-y-Felin** (TYF; ☎ 01437-721611; www.tyf.com) at St David's and **Preseli Venture** (☎ 01348-837709; www.preseliventure.com), which is near the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park and also near Fishguard.

REGIONAL ROUTES

There are 18 regional routes, the pick of which are as follows.

Cambrian Way (274 miles; www.cambrianway.co.uk) From Conwy to Cardiff through much of Wales' highest, wildest and most gorgeous countryside, the Cambrian Way is the longest, least used and most rugged of the regional routes. Remote and isolated in places, and covering demanding terrain, this trail is only for the experienced, dedicated walker. Several hotels and walking outfits along the route have banded together to offer accommodation and walking holidays on sections of the route. See p207.

Dyfi Valley Way (108 miles) From Aberdovey to Llyn Tegid (Bala Lake) and back along the other side of the valley to Borth, north of Aberystwyth. See p235.

Taff Trail (55 miles; www.tafftrail.org.uk) From Cardiff up the Taff Valley and across the Brecon Beacons National Park to Brecon. There's an easy canal walk around Brecon. Highlights include the ascent of Taipalan and the viaduct at Cefn Coed. See p124.

Usk Valley Walk (50 miles) From Newport and the Severn Estuary up the Usk Valley to Abergavenny and Brecon. For a shorter walk, try Abergavenny to Brecon. See p110.

Wye Valley Walk (136 miles; www.wyevallywalk.co.uk) From Chepstow up the valley of the River Wye via Builth Wells to the Mid-Wales market town of Rhayader. See p111.

COASTAL PATHS

The coastal paths of Wales are growing, and join together to form 605 miles of coastal walking.

Carmarthen Bay Coastal & Estuaries Way (55 miles) Armoth to Gower.

Ceredigion Coastal Path (70 miles) Ynyslas to Cardigan.

Edge of Wales Walk (47 miles) Caernarfon to Bardsey Island.

Glamorgan Heritage Coast Path (14 miles) Newton Burrows to Gileston.

Isle of Anglesey Coastal Path (125 miles) Isle of Anglesey circular route.

Llŷn Coastal Path (95 miles) Caernarfon to Porthmadog.

North Wales Path (60 miles) Prestatyn to Bangor.

Pembrokeshire Coastal Path National Trail (186 miles) Poppit Sands to Amroth.

Walking Festivals

Newport Bay Spring Walking Festival (☎ 01239-820627) 29 April to 1 May

Llanelli Festival of Walks (☎ 01554-776606) 26 May to 29 May

Conwy Walking Week (☎ 01492-575290) 19 July to 26 July

Barmouth Walking Festival (☎ 01341-280787) September

Llandrindod Wells Weekend Walking Festival (☎ 01579-822600) 8 September to 10 September

Cardigan Festival of Walking (☎ 01239-615554) 6 October to 8 October

Tackle Wales' toughest long-distance path with the help of AJ Drake's *Cambrian Way: A Mountain Connoisseur's Walk*.

Wales has 750 miles of coast, 605 of them walkable on long-distance trails.

The Pembrokeshire Coastal Path, a Practical Guide for Walkers, by Dennis Kelsall, is an essential handbook containing practical details for long-distance routes and day trails as well as pointing out interesting features along the way.

WATER SPORTS

Whether you want to tour along glassy inland lakes and rivers, surf or paddle on sheltered bays, or take a thrilling ride down a white-water river, you'll find somewhere in Wales just waiting to be discovered. For information on Wales' beaches, see p58.

Most paddle sports are easy to pick up, and centres across the country have lessons for beginners and improvers alike, many of which can be combined with weekend breaks. For more information about water sports, check the website www.adventure.visitwales.com.

Some bigger activity centres for various water sports:

Plas Menai (National Water Sports Centre; ☎ 01248-670964; www.plasmenai.co.uk)

Plas y Brenin (National Mountain Centre; ☎ 01690-720214; www.pyb.co.uk)

Preseli Venture (☎ 01348-837709; www.preseliventure.com)

Tyr-y-Felin (TYF; ☎ 01437-721611; www.tyf.com)

West Wales Wind, Surf & Sailing (☎ 01646-636642; www.surfdale.co.uk)

Coasteering originated in Pembrokeshire in the 1980s.

Canoeing & Sea Kayaking

For flat-water enthusiasts looking to explore hidden coves, discover sea caves and paddle around towering cliffs, the coasts of Pembrokeshire, the Llŷn and Anglesey have stunning scenery as well as internationally renowned sea-bird colonies near the islands of Ramsey (p188), Skomer (p183) and Bardsey (p272).

Inland waterways worth exploring include Llyn Tegid (Bala Lake; p245) and Llyn Gwynant in North Wales; Llangorse Lake (p137) in the Brecon Beacons; the Brecon Canal (p128); slow-moving rivers such as the Teifi near Cardigan (p209); the Wye in East Wales and the Dee in North Wales.

For the more adventurous, the Pembrokeshire coast is one of the UK's finest sea-kayaking areas and is Britain's only coastal national park; powerful tidal currents create huge standing waves between the coast and offshore islands. Freshwater West and Newgale are the best places to head for. Other popular spots around Wales include Rhossili (p154) and Llangennith (p154) in the Gower; Caswell Bay near the Mumbles (p146); Hell's Mouth (p270) on the Llŷn; and Rhosneigr, Holy Island (p282) and the Menai Straits in Anglesey (p285). A half-day introductory course costs about £40.

Most Welsh inland waterways are privately owned, but the **Welsh Canoeing Association** (WCA; www.welsh-canoeing.org.uk) has negotiated agreements to allow use by canoeists on designated sections of certain rivers at certain times of the year and under certain flow conditions. Check the website for regulations, and never assume that permission to launch on one section of a river entitles you to pass through downstream sections.

Diving

Steep underwater cliffs, stunning submarine scenery and a surprising array of sea life make Wales an excellent place for some subaquatic action. Indeed, people have been diving in Wales since the 1970s, but in the last few years it has become more accessible as a sport. Pembrokeshire probably has the best diving in the country and its offshore reefs, such as the Smalls, where grey seals spend summer, offer fantastic deep diving. Closer to shore, Ramsey Sound, Skokholm Island (p183) and Skomer Island Marine Nature Reserve are well worth checking out. In North Wales head for Bardsey Island (p272), the Skerries just north of Holyhead, or the Menai Straits.

Be aware that many of Wales' best dive sites have raging tidal currents that can be dangerous to dive. Current-swept sites should be dived in areas of water without current, and even experienced divers should seek local advice before taking the plunge.

Skomer Island Marine Nature Reserve is one of only three marine nature reserves in the UK.

KITE SURFING & LAND YACHTING

Been there, done that? Looking for a new high? Kite surfing and land yachting are some of the fastest-growing sports in Wales and should be on every adrenaline junkie's must-do list.

Kite surfing takes the best of board sports and combines it with incredible airborne action. Aficionados of surfing, skateboarding and snowboarding will recognise the moves, but you'd be advised to take some lessons before hitting the water. Rhosneigr in Anglesey is the best place to try it but Pembrokeshire and the Gower Peninsula are also popular.

For further information contact the **British Kite Surfing Association** (www.kitesurfing.org), or check out recommended operators at www.adventure.visitwales.com. A two-day course typically costs about £175.

With speeds of up to 75mph, land yachting is incredibly exhilarating and also really easy to pick up. The giant sandy beach at Cefn Sidan, Pembrey Country Park, which has an 8-mile stretch of sand that is more than 3-miles wide, is an ideal spot to try out these wheeled demons. Other good spots include Pendine Sands in Carmarthenshire, Newgale in Pembrokeshire, Criccieth (p267) on the Llŷn and Rhosneigr in Anglesey. For more information, contact the **British Federation of Sand and Land Yacht Clubs** (www.bfslyc.org.uk), or try www.britishlandsailing.co.uk.

In the 1920s Sir Malcolm Campbell broke all land-speed records when he drove *Bluebird*, a turbo-powered car, on Pendine's vast beach at more than 170mph.

There are plenty of dive shops and schools in Pembrokeshire and Anglesey; check out www.adventure.visitwales.com for a list of schools and operators. At PADI centres, a Try-dive course will cost about £55 and a one-day diver course to learn the basics will cost about £150.

Surfing

Surrounded by sea on three sides, Wales is an ideal location for those wanting to learn to surf, and for more experienced wave riders there's plenty of more earnest action. The tidal range is immense – 4.5m to more than 7m – so you can find completely different sets of breaks at low and high tides.

September to April is peak wave-riding time and although some of the most popular beaches do get crowded, with a bit of effort there should be no problem finding your own space. Thanks to the North Atlantic Drift, sea temperatures are often warmer than they seem, but you'll need a wetsuit in any season (and possibly boots, hood and gloves in winter).

WHERE TO GO

The real home of Welsh surfing is the Gower Peninsula. There's a wide choice of breaks in a small area and plenty of *après-surf* activity. Caswell Bay, the Mumbles (p145), Langland Bay, Oxwich Bay and Llangennith (p154) are all good choices.

In Pembrokeshire the best breaks are at Tenby South Beach, Manorbier (p169), Freshwater West and West Dale Bay. Along St Bride's Bay (p182) try Broad Haven South and Newgale – a beautiful long beach that's rarely crowded. St David's immense Whitesands Bay (p189) is good for beginners, but very popular and often disappointingly busy. Along Cardigan Bay, Harbour Trap in Aberystwyth is worth a dip.

The best the Llŷn has to offer is the popular 4-mile stretch of bay at Porth Neigwl (Hell's Mouth) near Abersoch (p270); other possibilities are at Aberdaron (p271) and Porthor (Whistling Sands; p271). On Anglesey's southwest coast you may find modest breaks at Cable Bay and Rhosneigr.

COURSES

The best possible introduction to surfing is to take a few lessons; within a few days you'll be catching waves and getting a decent ride. Most surf

beaches have surf schools; some good spots for learners include Llangennith, Whitesands and Hell's Mouth.

For more information on surf schools and gear hire, see the regional chapters or try www.adventure.visitwales.com for a list of WTB-approved operators. The **Welsh Surfing Federation Surf School** (www.wsfurfschool.co.uk) is another good bet.

White-Water Rafting

Despite Wales' substantial rainfall and mountainous terrain, the opportunities for white-water rafting are somewhat limited. Swallow and Conwy Falls near Betws-y-Coed (p260) are popular spots, as is the River Conwy, which caters to all levels and glides through the spectacular scenery of Snowdonia. The River Dee between Corwen and Llangollen and the River Usk have some Grade 2 to 4 rapids (Grade 1 is gently flowing water and Grade 6 is unrunnable). The dam-released River Trewern near Bala (p246), one of the few Welsh rivers with big and fairly predictable summertime white water, has Grade 3 to 4 rapids.

For more information, contact the **National White-Water Centre** (www.welsh-canoeing.org.uk) or check the websites www.adventure.visitwales.com or www.ukrafting.co.uk.

Windsurfing

There's great potential for windsurfing all around Wales' coast and on many inland lakes, too. Most of the beaches listed under Surfing (opposite) are also suitable for windsurfing and have gear hire and lessons available. New board designs are more stable than in the past, making it much easier to learn; after a couple of hours you should have no problem staying upright and getting a feel for the wind.

The Gower Peninsula around Port Eynon (p153) and Llangennith (p154) are great spots with a variety of conditions and various wind directions, while Oxwich Bay has flatter water for learners. In Pembrokeshire, Freshwater West and Newgale are the hot spots; while in North Wales, Rhosneigr in Anglesey, and Hell's Mouth on the Llŷn (p270) are good places to head. Inland lakes, such as Llyn Tegid (p245) in Snowdonia, are also worth checking out.

The majority of windsurfing centres are open from April to October, but avoid midsummer to beat the hordes; a two-day course to get up and running generally costs around £130. For more information, contact the **UK Windsurfing Association** (www.ukwindsurfing.com), or check out the website www.forces-of-nature.co.uk.

Delight in the thrills of North Wales with Terry Story's guide to the area's best water-sports places: *Snowdonia White Water Sea and Surf*.

Two excellent sources of surfing information are www.coldswell.com and www.a1surf.com. Both feature weather reports, beach guides, reviews and links to other sites.

Food & Drink

Traditionally, Welsh food was based on what could be grown locally and cheaply. This meant that oats, root vegetables, dairy products, honey and meat featured highly in most recipes. Food was functional and needed to satisfy the needs of manual labourers – hearty and wholesome but not quite *haute cuisine*.

These days, something of a minirevolution is happening in Welsh dining, and restaurateurs, hotel managers and even farmers have discovered the value of promoting quality Welsh food. Organic cheeses, succulent meats, vegetables pulled fresh from the ground and fantastic fish are all making their way onto menus across the country.

This isn't to say that everywhere you go in Wales you can expect gastronomic delights, but with a little effort you can find the gems and get a taste of Wales at its very best. Look out for the dragon and daffodil logos of the True Taste scheme, which encourages excellence in food production.

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

Traditional Welsh dishes include the hearty *cawl*, a classic one-pot meal of bacon, lamb, cabbage, swede and potato. It's one of those warm, cosy dishes that you long for when you're walking in the hills. Another traditional favourite is Welsh rarebit, a kind of sophisticated cheese on toast generously drizzled with a secret ingredient tasting suspiciously like beer.

The most famous of Welsh specialities is laver bread, which is not bread at all but boiled seaweed mixed with oatmeal and served with bacon and toast for breakfast.

Succulent upland lamb and beef are known well beyond Wales. Lamb in particular is a national speciality, although the traditional meat – bacon – remains a firm favourite.

The Very Best Flavours of Wales is a celebration of the best of Welsh cooking with cordon bleu chef Gilli Davies.

Check out the website www.walesthetruetaste.com for a taste of Welsh cuisine.

THE RISE OF WELSH HAUTE CUISINE *Colin Pressdee*

Great progress has been made in all areas of the food industry in Wales. In the last decade there has been a huge increase in the number of local farmers markets and food festivals. These have made the public aware that good produce has to be paid for, and while it is more expensive than supermarkets, the quality is far higher. Examples of outstanding farm shops and farmers markets are the Rhug Organic Estate, Corwen; Haverfordwest Farmers Market and Cardiff Riverside Market. Outstanding produce shops include Edwards of Conwy, Langfords of Welshpool and Blas ar Fwyd of Llanwrst.

At the same time there has been a huge increase in the number of restaurants in Wales that make a point of sourcing and using food from local suppliers. There are now many seriously good country-house hotels with fine-dining experiences – examples include Fairyhill in the Gower Peninsula, Plas Bodegroes in Pwllheli, Ye Olde Bulls Head Inn in Beaumaris, and Ynyshir Hall in Eglwysfach, near Machynlleth.

The biggest improvement has been the rise of the gastropub, both in towns and rural locations. The White Horse at Hendrewydd, the Wynnstay in Machynlleth, the Fox Hunter in Nant y Derry, the Welcome to Town in Gower and the Hardwich Abergavenny, are some of the many who now take pride in the Welsh food experience.

Chefs in Wales have embraced country produce, taking traditional food and showing how it can be presented in modern gastronomy. Foods such as Welsh lamb, Welsh Black beef, sewin (wild sea trout), Penclawdd cockles, Conwy mussels, laver bread and farmhouse cheeses have their place in every kitchen of the increasing number of good eating places in Wales.

Colin Pressdee is the author of Food Wales.

Seafood is a speciality around the coast: herring and mackerel are the traditional catch, although salmon or sewin (wild sea trout) are also popular. Oysters were harvested in the Gower as a cash crop rather than a food source, so it is cockles that usually make it to the kitchen table.

Welsh cheese is also a speciality, the best known variety being Caerphilly, a crumbly, salty cheese once popular with miners. There's little cheese being made in Caerphilly these days, but cheese-making in general is undergoing a revival. Cheese-freaks should comb the delis for Caws Cenarth, Celtic Blue, Llanboidy, Nantybwla, Pantysgawn or Teifi.

The sweet-toothed should look out for Welsh cakes: fruity little griddle scones or *bara brith*, a spicy fruit loaf made with tea and marmalade. Moist fruit cakes such as *teisen lapare* also delicious, even more so with an infusion of spicy goodness as is the case in *teisen carawe* (caraway cake) and *teisen sinamon* (cinnamon cake).

DRINKS

The pub in Wales is part of the social fabric of the country and most pubs serve an impressive range of beers: ales, lagers, stouts and porters. Beers are usually served at room temperature, which can be a shock if you've been raised on ice-cold lager, but it does bring out the subtle flavours of beer hand-pumped from the cask.

Beers are usually served in pints (570mL) and half-pints (285mL). In southern Wales order a pint of Brains, which is brewed in Cardiff and claimed by locals to be one of the best drops in the UK. Also worth quaffing is Double Dragon Premium, a fragrant Felinfol bitter. Look out for local ales at brewpubs, which usually stock the best offerings from the regional microbreweries. The Great Welsh Beer and Cider Festival (www.gwbctf.org.uk), held in Cardiff in November, is also a great place to taste the best home-grown brews.

Wales has also begun to produce its own whisky again (see the boxed text, below), plus there's wine from Pembrokeshire vineyards and gin and vodka from the Brecon Beacons.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

There's never been a better time to eat out in Wales, but it's still possible to drive into any town and stumble upon nothing more wholesome than the local greasy spoon. Put in a little effort, though, and you'll find those elusive hideouts of good food.

Pub grub is convenient and affordable, but not always impressive. Much pub food has improved in recent years, though, and you can get a perfectly

THE NATIONAL SPIRIT

Whisky was once produced throughout Wales, but the temperance movement killed off production of the devil's drink and the last distillery closed in the 1890s.

A hundred years later the process of putting Welsh whisky back on the map got off to a bad start when a dodgy distillery was revealed as nothing more than a blending and bottling plant. The Scotch Whisky Association was none too pleased and had it shut down.

In September 2000 a new distillery in the picturesque village of Penderyn, 10 miles west of Merthyr Tydfil, made history when it distilled the first Welsh whisky in over a century. On 1 March 2004, the first release of the delicate Penderyn Single Malt Whisky took place. Main stores have been left to age and develop more complex flavours but connoisseurs are queuing up to sample the limited edition.

For more information visit www.welsh-whisky.co.uk.

For a comprehensive look at Welsh food, from recipes and producers to awards and food fairs, try www.foodwales.com.

The leek and daffodil are the symbols of Wales.

The Campaign for Real Ale (Camra) champions the cause of traditional ales. Visit www.camra.org.uk.

WALES' TOP EATERIES

Armless Dragon, Cardiff Seriously fresh international fare with an innovative Welsh twist; see p96.

Bear Hotel, Crickhowell Award-winning flavours at every price level at this old-time coaching inn; see p130.

Carlton House, Llanwrtyd Wells Dine in theatrical surroundings with personal attention from the Michelin-star chef; see p217.

Drawing Room, Builth Wells Excellent foodie retreat somewhat spoiled by the frosty welcome; see p219.

Felin Fach Griffin, Brecon Big flavours and stylish presentation at this gorgeous gastropub; see p137.

Foxhunter, near Abergavenny Bold and brilliant modern classics in contemporary country surroundings; see p130.

Plas Bodegroes, Pwllheli Romantic Michelin-star retreat in the wilds of Wales serving exquisite modern classics; see p270.

reasonable lunch or dinner at a surprisingly good price. Most pubs serve food between noon and 2pm, and 5pm and 9pm.

An increasing number of places are championing local produce and bringing the concept of the gastropub to Wales. The trend for talented chefs to abandon their urban stomping grounds, wind down a peg or two and get closer to their ingredients is making waves in rural Wales, and could turn your quick pit-stop lunch into a long, lingering affair.

In larger towns and cities you'll find switched-on bistros and restaurants serving up anything from decent to inspired food. An extension of the restaurant business is the restaurant-with-rooms idea, where fine dining and a cosy bed are generally only a staircase apart. Most of these places combine gourmet food with a small number of lovingly decorated rooms – so you can linger as long as you like over that final brandy.

For most restaurants you'll need to book ahead, particularly at the weekend, and a 10% to 15% tip is expected on top of the bill. In smaller towns, the only food available on Sunday may be the popular, pricey roast served at pubs and hotel restaurants.

Café society is blooming all over Wales, though its standards vary from twee tea-and-bun fests to hip hang-outs for the young and underemployed. Most serve up cheap breakfast fry-ups and a varied menu of snacks and sandwiches, though more enlightened establishments will stretch to something more imaginative. Wholefood cafés have sprouted all over Mid-Wales and West Wales, where alternative lifestyles have ordered in the tofu and set up shop.

When it comes to drinking in Wales, the local pub is about the only place to go. You can buy alcohol at most supermarkets and at off-licences (liquor stores), but you'll miss out on a great part of Welsh culture if you never make it through the swinging doors and onto the sticky carpet of the local. Welsh pubs vary enormously, from cosy watering holes with big fires and an inviting atmosphere to tough inner-city bars where solo women travellers may feel decidedly ill at ease. Chain bars, with little character, have spread into Welsh towns; it's well worth seeking out the older and more atmospheric places to get a real sense of local culture. Evidence so far suggests that the relaxation of the drinking laws has not significantly increased Welsh consumption of alcohol.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Happily, vegetarianism has taken off in a big way in Wales; practically every eating place, including pubs, has at least one token vegetarian dish, though don't expect it to always be inspired. Things are decidedly easier in larger towns as well as in Mid-Wales and West Wales, where alternative lifestyles have blossomed. Many cafés in these areas are strictly vegetarian and even vegans should be able to find a decent meal. In addition to the listings throughout this book, check out www.happycow.net for some more suggestions.

TV chef Ena Thomas is something of a legend in Wales and has published a range of Welsh cookbooks. Try *Four Seasons with Ena* for some seasonally inspired dishes.

Vegetarians should head straight for the famous Glamorgan sausage, made from a heady mixture of cheese, breadcrumbs, herbs and chopped leek.

EATING WITH KIDS

If you're travelling with children, eating out and satisfying all those cravings for crisps and sweets can start to cost the earth after a few days. Picnic lunches can help keep costs down and every town has a supermarket or open-air market to stock up on supplies.

Pub food is generally the cheapest bet for a hot lunch or dinner and most pubs are licensed and willing to have children on the premises until about 7pm. Practically all pubs serving food have a children's menu and many also have beer gardens with climbing frames to keep the little ones entertained. Most restaurants are also child-friendly and have highchairs and half portions available; generally the more expensive and exclusive the restaurant, the more intolerant the staff can be, so ask when you make a booking.

For more information on travelling with children, see p332.

COOKING COURSES

Try your hand at making your own Welsh supper at the following venues: **Abergavenny Food Festival** (www.abergavennyfoodfestival.co.uk) Lessons from master chefs at this September festival of food; see p128.

Elan Valley Hotel (www.fungiforays.co.uk) Two-day breaks for fungi freaks on a quest for mushroom heaven; see p226.

Drovers Rest (www.food-food-food.co.uk/courses.htm) Private and group classes in the UK's smallest town; see p217.

Dryad Bushcraft (www.dryadbushcraft.co.uk) Outdoor survival and bushcraft cookery for the more adventurous; navigate to the wilderness gourmet course through 'courses' on the website.

Porth Farm Cookery School; Caersws, Montgomeryshire (☎ 01686-688171; www.mont-hols.co.uk/members/18/) Top tips from a cordon bleu chef in a specially designed demonstration kitchen at the heart of a 15th-century country house.

**EAT YOUR WORDS
Out to Eat**

Table for ... please.

Bwrdd i ... os gwelwch yn dda.

boordh ee ... os gwe-lookh uhn dhah

Can I see the menu, please?

Ga i weld y fwydlen, os gwelwch yn dda?

gah ee weld uh voo-eed-len, os gwe-lookh uhn dhah

The bill, please.

Y bil, os gwelwch yn dda.

uh bil, os gwe-lookh uhn dhah

In the Pub

I'd like a (half) pint of ...

Ga i (hanner o) beint o ...

gah ee (han-er oh) baynt oh ...

bitter

chwerw

khwe-roo

cider

seidr

say-duhr

lager

lager

lah-guhr

orange juice

sudd oren

seedh o-ren

water

dŵr

door

Cheers!

lechyd Da!

ye-khid dah

Traditional Dishes

bara brith

ba-ra breeth

A rich, fruit tea-loaf.

bara lawr

ba-ra lowr

Laver seaweed boiled and mixed with oatmeal and traditionally served with bacon for breakfast.

cawl

kowl

A broth of meat and vegetables.

The Welsh Table by Christine Smeeth is a delightful combination of simple traditional Welsh dishes, kitchen anecdotes and words of wisdom.

First Catch your Peacock, by Bobby Freeman, is the classic guide to Welsh food and an entertaining read, combining authentic and proven recipes with cultural and social history.

<i>caws caerffili</i>	kows kair- <i>fi</i> -li	Caerphilly cheese, a crumbly salty cheese that used to be popular with miners.
<i>ffagots a phys</i>	<i>fa</i> -gots a fees	Seasoned balls of chopped pork and liver in gravy served with peas.
<i>lobsgows</i>	<i>lobs</i> -gows	A Northwalian version of cawl.
<i>pice ar y maen</i>	<i>pi</i> -ke ahr uh main	(lit: cakes on the griddle stone) Small, fruited sconelike griddle cakes, also known as Welsh cakes.

Myths & Legends

Wales is littered with the stuff of legend: the grand peaks and wild passes; the caves, cairns and *cromlechs* (burial chambers); the *menhirs* (standing stones), ruined fortresses and ancient abbeys. The mysterious power of these landmarks couldn't help but be intensified in a nation of small, close-knit communities, dependent on the skills of generations of storytellers, musicians and poets to enrich their lives. Even today these centuries-old traditions are a source of pride and enthusiasm in *eisteddfodau* (gatherings; see the boxed text, p47) – the modern-day celebration of Welsh literature and culture.

It's not just the landscape, however, that makes people tell tales; Wales' rich and dramatic history has itself inspired stories of giants, saints and fairies, King Arthur and the devil, mythological beasts and supernatural events. From the time of the Celts and their druid priests, through Roman occupation and Saxon struggles to the arrival of Christianity during the 5th and 6th centuries, there was always ample fodder for a god-fearing, death-fearing audience that had been invaded, suppressed and occasionally treated to moments of glorious victory.

Professional storytellers held a lofty but precarious position and were responsible for boosting the morale and massaging the self-esteem of their noble patrons. Choosing the right theme for the master's mood was always an issue, but the favourite tales recounted battles against evil, adventures of heroic leaders and tales of magic, mystery and enchantment – all of them full of fairies and ghosts. By the 9th century, a collection of tales featuring everything from mysterious lakes and stones to the heroic King Arthur had appeared in *Historia Brittonum* written by Nennius, thought to have been a monk from Bangor.

Few of these stories, however, were ever written down by the Welsh in their own language, so most have either been dressed up almost unrecognisably in the clothes of other cultures or have been lost. Only a handful of fantastic tales derived from myths of the Celtic gods have survived, in two remarkable 14th-century compendia called *The White Book of Rhydderch* and *The Red Book of Hergest*. By the 15th century, with the addition of specifically Welsh heroes to the cast of characters (Llewelyn the Great, his grandson Llywelyn ap Gruffydd, Owain Glyndŵr and others – all seen as leading the resistance against the English conqueror), the source material was richer than ever.

The stories were later translated into English as the *Mabinogion* (Tales of a Hero's Youth) and today they provide us with the best insight into Welsh mythology and the magical, sometimes terrifying, pagan Celtic world.

STONES, LAKES & HOLY WELLS

Some of the most enchanting Welsh myths step straight from the world of fairy tales, featuring locations that seem strange and mysterious even today.

Llyn y Fan Fach, a small alpine lake of dark waters in the Black Mountain area of eastern Carmarthenshire, is the setting for the best known of Wales' many Lady-of-the-Lake stories. The tale is of a farmer's son who falls in love with a fairy-woman from the lake, and is permitted to marry her on the condition that he does not strike her three times in anger. For more on this legend, see the boxed text, p159.

These mythical maidens that appeared from lakes are only one of the strange mysteries associated with water in Wales. Another association is with many of Wales' prehistoric *menhirs*. These megaliths – said to have been thrown into their positions by giants, saints, King Arthur or Merlin – often have the added mystery of allegedly wandering off for a drink at certain times.

Read about the history of Welsh gods and goddesses and their fantastic tales at www.realmagick.com/articles/33/2033.html.

The town of Beddgelert (the Grave of Gelert) is said by some to be named after a legendary dog that saved Prince Llywelyn's baby from a wolf.

The *Mabinogion*, by Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones, is a contemporary translation of Wales' Celtic tales and ancient myths. Visit www.gouk.about.com/cs/mythslegend1/ for useful links.

Samson's Stone (near Kenfig, South Wales) goes down to the River Sker on Christmas morning; the immense Fish Stone (near Crickhowell in southern Powys) pops into the River Usk for a Midsummer Eve's swim; and the four standing stones at Old Radnor (east of Llandrindod Wells in southern Powys) sip from Hindwell Pool when the village church bells ring at night.

The Welsh Gwyllgi (Dog of Darkness) is a terrifying apparition of a huge hound that's said to wander lonely roads by night.

Strange markings on many of these stones, and on equally ancient burial chambers, are taken to be fingermarks of the devil or King Arthur when they threw the stones. Perhaps the burial chamber with the spookiest association is at St Lythan's (5 miles to the southwest of Cardiff), set in the so-called Accused Field (where nothing will grow) and whose capstone is said to spin around three times each Midsummer's Eve.

The many ancient burial mounds scattered throughout Wales have their own legends: some as the graves of giants, or of Roman soldiers, as with the Twyn Tudor mound on Mynydd Islwyn in South Wales; and some that have been deposited by the devil. Treasure seekers and others with the nerve to poke around on these mounds have often met with misfortune or disaster (see the boxed text, p79). There is even a nugget of truth in some of the stories. For years the so-called Mound of the Goblins (Tomen yr Ellyllon, near Mold in North Wales) was said to be haunted by a horseman in gold armour. When it was excavated in 1833 a man's skeleton was found, wrapped in a gold cape some 3500 years old.

A good many other Welsh legends – notably those about floods and submerged cities – are probably based on fact. The most famous of these concerns Cardigan Bay, said to have once been dry land, a fertile region called Cantref Gwaelod (The Lowland Hundred). The legend recounts how Seithenyn, keeper of the dikes that held the sea at bay, got drunk one night and forgot to shut the sluice gates, and the land, together with 16 cities, was inundated. You can supposedly still hear the tolling of sunken church bells in the area today. A similar legend, complete with church bells, is also told about Llangorse Lake (p137), near Brecon.

The Coblynau were good-humoured mine spirits who helped the miners by knocking in places with rich mineral or metal lodes.

The arrival of Christianity in Wales gave a new slant to many ancient stories: markings on stones previously attributed to a giant or Arthur's horse became the footprints of saints, and mysterious mounds miraculously rose from the ground to form pulpits for preachers. Most commonly, wells once worshipped in pagan rites, and supposedly guarded by dragons or huge eels, acquired associations with Christian saints and amazing curative powers.

The best known is St Winifred's Well, around which the town of Holywell in North Wales has flourished. In the 7th century, Winifred, niece of St Beuno, rejected a wily young chieftain called Caradoc, who promptly expressed his displeasure by decapitating her. A spring – with healing powers, of course –

THE RED DRAGON

One of the first mythical beasts in British heraldry, the red dragon is a powerful symbol in ancient legends. Nobody really knows when it first appeared in Britain, but it was apparently used on the banners of British soldiers on their way to Rome in the 4th century, and was then adopted by Welsh kings in the 5th century to demonstrate their authority after the Roman withdrawal.

At any rate the Anglo-Saxon King, Harold, and Cadwaladr, 7th-century king of Gwynedd, liked it so much they made it their standard in battle, forever associating the symbol with Wales. In the 14th century Welsh archers had the red dragon as their emblem and Owain Glyndŵr used it as a standard in his revolt against the English Crown. A century later, quarter-Welsh Henry Tudor (later King Henry VII) made the dragon part of the Welsh flag, though it was only in 1959 that Queen Elizabeth II commanded that the red dragon, on a green and white field, be recognised as the official flag of Wales.

MAPPING THE FAIRIES

When geographer Brian John decided a few years ago that he would map the distribution of fairies (well, fairy tales, actually) in Pembrokeshire, he was not sure what to expect. This was in the context of the Pembrokeshire Folk-Tale Project, which in 1991–96 led to the collection of over 500 folk tales from the county, and the publication of four volumes giving the tales and their sources. The tales were grouped as follows: tales of the saints; heroic deeds; strange happenings; fairy tales; witchcraft and magic; signs, omens and portents; ghostly tales; and folk heroes. He noticed that certain types of tales were concentrated in certain areas. When he came to map the fairy tales he observed that they were far more frequent in the northeast of the county than in other districts; and this might well be expected, for according to tradition Gwlad y Tylwyth Teg (Fairyland) is located out in Cardigan Bay, beneath the waves and on invisible green islands. Contrary to the Victorian stereotype, the fairies are not particularly small, and neither do they have gossamer wings, but they are more virtuous than human beings, and have a preference for red and green clothing. If you deal honestly with them, or do them some special service, you may be invited to pay them a visit in order to sample the delights of their peaceful and comfortable kingdom.

For details of the folk-tale collection, see www.books-wales.co.uk.

Brian John is the author of the Angel Mountain Saga (www.angel-mountain.info).

appeared where her head hit the ground. Meanwhile, Caradoc's descendants were cursed by St Beuno to bark like dogs unless they humbly immersed themselves in the spring's waters. Luckily for Winifred, St Beuno managed to join her head back to her body with a prayer, and she later became an abbess.

One of the favourite folk stories, and one that still resounds around the hills and farmlands of North Wales even today, revolves around the legend of Teggie, Wales' answer to the Loch Ness monster. For more on this legend see the boxed text, p246).

Maen Chwyfan, an early medieval stone cross in Flintshire, protected the treasure supposedly buried beneath it by zapping any gold diggers with lightning.

ARTH FAWR THE BEAR

King Arthur has inspired more legends, folk tales and curiosities, and given his name to more features of the landscape in Wales, than any other historical figure. His story is so interwoven with myth and mystery, folklore and fiction that his true identity remains unknown. Was he a giant of superhuman strength or a dwarf king who rode a goat instead of a horse? Was he a Celtic god associated with the constellation Ursa Major, the Great Bear (Arth Fawr in Welsh)? Or, as most historians suspect, was he a 5th- or 6th-century cavalry leader who led the early Britons against the Saxon invaders, his story increasingly romanticised as time went on?

One of the earliest, most tantalising descriptions about such a hero appears in the *Historia Brittonum*. By the 9th century Arthur's fame as a fighter against the Saxons had reached every corner of the British Isles. Legends cropped up from Cornwall to Scotland, associating him with local caves, ancient megaliths (named Arthur's Chair, Arthur's Table and Arthur's Quoit), mountains (battle scenes and treasure-troves) and lakes (the magical source of his great sword).

Prose romances and epic poems soon transformed Arthur into a heroic king of marvels and magic deeds, at the head of a phalanx of other famous heroes and aided by the wise magician Myrddin (Merlin; see p78). Arthur is also present in the 12th-century *Llyfr Du Caerfyrddin* (The Black Book of Carmarthen), the oldest surviving Welsh manuscript.

In the centuries that followed, other writers – most recently and perhaps most famously the Victorian poet Alfred Lord Tennyson – climbed on the bandwagon, weaving in love stories, Christian symbolism and medieval pageantry to create the romance that surrounds Arthur today.

The Adventures of King Arthur in Snowdonia and Anglesey, by John Morris and Gareth Roberts, brings the legends of King Arthur to life through a host of real-life characters and their unique Welsh perspectives.

Tintagel in Cornwall has the strongest claim to being Arthur's birthplace, Cadbury Castle in Somerset contends it's the site of Camelot (his court), and Glastonbury Abbey his burial place; however, the Welsh – especially those living in southern Wales – make many fervent claims of their own. The 12th-century historian-novelist Geoffrey of Monmouth asserted that a grassy mound at Caerleon (p108), near Newport in Gwent, was the site of Arthur's first court, describing it as populated with hundreds of scholars, astrologers and philosophers as well as many fine knights and ladies. And why not? Caerleon had already been favoured by the Romans, serving as headquarters of the elite, 6000-strong Second Augustan Legion. The remains of its fine amphitheatre are still visible today (doing double duty in the mind's eye as Arthur's great Round Table).

Camlan, the site of Arthur's final battle (curiously well pinpointed at around AD 542), may have been in Cornwall, Somerset or Cumberland, but Wales has at least two candidates: Camlan Hill in Cwm Cerist in North Wales and Maes Camlan in Mid-Wales. As for Avalon (Avalach in Welsh) – the blessed 'island of apples' where the dying Arthur was taken by Merlin – could it not be Wales' saintly Bardsey Island, which is just off the tip of the Llŷn Peninsula?

Many other places in Wales have used natural features or curiosities to suit the Arthurian legends, notably the Preseli Hills of northern Pembrokeshire – the source of the bluestone megaliths that form the inner circle of Stonehenge in England and the site of many Neolithic monuments bearing Arthur's name. The Gower Peninsula's scattered megaliths have been drafted in, notably a massive burial chamber on Cefn Bryn near Reynoldston (p155), whose 25-tonne capstone is well known as Arthur's Stone. Castell Dinas Brân at Llangollen (p299) is said to hide the Holy Grail – the vessel used by Christ at the Last Supper and imbued with supernatural qualities – which Arthur and his knights sought obsessively in later stories.

More intriguingly, some places have directly inspired Welsh versions of the hero's exploits. The Pembrokeshire coast is where, according to the 10th-century story *Culhwch and Olwen*, Arthur and his knights started the hunt for a ferocious magic boar. On Mt Snowdon, Arthur slew Rita Gawr, a giant notorious for killing kings and making coats of their beards. Snowdon also provides an alternative version of the king's death and burial, following a fierce battle at Bwlch-y-Saethau (Pass of the Arrows), after which his knights took refuge in a nearby cave called Ogof Lanciau Eryri (Cave of the Lads of Eryri). Of course, other Welsh caves, including Craig-y-Ddinas in South Wales, also lay claim to this role.

Ultimately, in most stories, Arthur and his followers end up in a cave – not dead, perish the thought, but in a kind of mythical cold storage – asleep until the Once and Future King is again called upon to defend Britain.

MERLIN THE MAGICIAN

The story of this great Welsh wizard is probably modelled on a 6th-century holy man named Myrddin Emrys (or Ambrosius). Carmarthen (whose Welsh name, Caerfyrddin, means Merlin's City) lays claim to his birth, thought to have been during the time of Vortigern, a legendary leader of the Roman British against the Saxons.

It's said that Myrddin's mother was a strict Christian and his father an evil man of magical powers. Myrddin inherited the wizardry minus the wickedness and became famous for his prophecies. By the 10th century these prophecies were common currency across Western Europe and gave hope to many Welsh princes in their struggles with the Anglo-Normans. One of the most potent of these early rallying prophecies concerns two dragons, one red and one white, revealed by Myrddin to be lurking in a cave on Dinas

Emrys, Snowdonia, a place where Vortigern had tried unsuccessfully to build a tower. The dragons started fighting, Myrddin explaining to the king that the struggle symbolised the fight between Britons (or the Welsh) and Saxons. Naturally the red dragon, symbolising Wales, won (and Myrddin kept Dinas Emrys as the site for his own fortress).

In his book, Geoffrey of Monmouth changed Myrddin's name to Merlin and presented him as the wise wizard and advisor to Arthur's father, King Uther Pendragon. One of his seminal acts was to disguise Uther one night as Duke Gorlois, to enable Uther to spend the night with the duke's wife, Ygern, who duly conceived Arthur. It was Merlin, too, who planted the prediction that Uther Pendragon's true heir would draw a sword from a stone, and who advised Uther to establish a fellowship of knights (and who actually made the Round Table at which those knights would eventually sit). These stories would become essential ingredients in the highly romanticised Arthurian legend that developed in the following centuries, most notably in the hands of the French poet Chrétien de Troyes in the 12th century, and in the English-language *Morte d'Arthur*, written by Sir Thomas Malory in the 15th century.

As Arthur's own counsellor, Merlin continued to be the pivot around which all revolved. It was through Merlin, of course, that Arthur obtained his miraculous sword, Excalibur, from a Lady of the Lake (one of many lakes to claim this role is the lily pond at Bosherton, in south Pembrokeshire). It was Merlin who predicted Arthur's demise, and it was thanks to Merlin that his remaining knights afterwards found safety on the Scilly Isles.

Merlin himself appears to have come to an ignominious end, trapped by that same Lady of the Lake in a cave on Bryn Myrddin (Merlin's Hill) just east of Carmarthen, where groans and the clanking of iron chains are still part of local lore. Other versions sustain the hopes of believers by insisting that Merlin is not dead but held in a trance in Brittany (where many Britons found refuge from the Saxons in the 5th century) or in a glass house on Bardsey Island, where he guards the Thirteen Treasures of Britain

Trace the true location of Arthur's kingdom right into the heart of Wales with the help of *The Keys to Avalon*, by Scott Blake and Scott Lloyd.

For a tailored tour of Pembrokeshire, taking in legendary Stone Age and Celtic sites, visit www.celticwestwales.com.

Read more about Welsh myths and legends, from women of Arthurian mythology to Merlin, the red dragon and where to find the Holy Grail in Wales at www.welshdragon.net/resources/myths/index.shtml.

Find out about contemporary Welsh fairy witchcraft at www.tylwythteg.com/welsh1.html.

DEATH & DISASTER

Scoff if you like, but don't say we didn't warn you. Here are a few myths to ignore at your peril.

Cader Idris, Snowdonia

Inhabited by a mythical giant, the 893m summit of this peak in southern Snowdonia is known as the Chair of Idris. Spend a night here and you'll wake up either blind, mad or a poet.

Llyn Irddyn, North Wales

Keep a blade of grass in your pocket as you walk around this lake or the malicious fairies will come and get you.

Maen Du'r-arddu, Snowdonia

A couple who sleep by this boulder in Snowdonia will find by morning that one has become a poet and the other has gone mad.

Tinkinswood, near St Nicholas, Cardiff

Dance around this Neolithic burial chamber on a Sunday and you'll end up like the group of women who once did: they were turned into the stones that now surround the chamber.

Twmbarlwm Hill, near Risca, Gwent

Don't meddle with this mound (said to have been the site of a druid court of justice) or you'll be attacked by a swarm of bees (which is what happened in 1984 to a group of workmen trying to restore the mound).

Twyn Tudor, Mynydd Islwyn, South Wales

If you dig into this mysterious mound for treasure you'll provoke a terrific thunderstorm.

GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH

Geoffrey of Monmouth, the Benedictine monk whose colourful *Historia Regum Britanniae* (The History of the Kings of Britain) became a 12th-century bestseller, changed Myrddin's name to Merlin (supposedly to spare his Norman French readers from any indelicate association between 'Myrddin' and *merde*), and shamelessly embellished the old stories.

(including a magical cloak, a cauldron, a robe, a ring and a chessboard with pieces that play by themselves).

Tales like this still have a grip on the Welsh imagination. The stump of a 17th-century oak tree, nicknamed 'Merlin's Tree', once stood inconveniently in Carmarthen's Priory St. One of Merlin's well-documented prophecies was that 'When Myrddin's tree shall tumble down/Then shall fall Carmarthen town'.

The tree died of old age and was removed in 1978, but Carmarthen is still there, although some years after the tree died, the River Tywi burst its banks and flooded the town. Pieces of the tree are still kept under glass at Carmarthen's civic centre.

Get the lowdown on
Welsh deities at www.timelessmyths.com/celtic/welsh.html.

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