

*A view over the ramparts of the hillfort of Penycloddiau with the
Vale of Clwyd and the distant summits of Snowdonia beyond*

© Mick Sharp Photography

Walking with heather and hillforts

Fiona Gale, Denbighshire's county archaeologist, leads a historic walk through the Clwydian Range





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The heather-clad defences of Moel Arthur hillfort with Penycloddiau in the distance

The summit of Penycloddiau, in the Clwydian Range of north Wales, offers a superb panorama. Stretching around you are the imposing ramparts of one of the largest Iron Age hillforts in Wales. To the west, the land falls steeply away to the fertile fields of the Vale of Clwyd, with Denbigh only 5 miles (3km) distant. In the opposite direction, lie Flintshire and the Dee Estuary. To the north-west, the hills tumble gently down towards Prestatyn and the Irish Sea beyond. To the south-east, the range rises to its highest point at Moel Famau (1,818 feet/554m) — crowned with the remains of the eighteenth-century Jubilee Tower — before dropping to the steep-sided ravine of Nant y Garth Pass, which divides the Clwydians from Llantysilio Mountain to the south.

Heather moorland cloaks the higher reaches and, in late summer, turns a resplendent purple. The moorland is an important habitat for a wide range of plant and animal species, including the endangered black grouse and hen harrier. Largely uninhabited and undisturbed for centuries by little more than grazing sheep, the high moorland also preserves significant archaeological sites, such as Bronze Age barrows and, most impressively, Iron Age hillforts.

The special character of this landscape was recognized in 1985 with the creation of the Clwydian Range Area of Outstanding Natural

Beauty and, since then, increasing numbers of people have come to enjoy the beauties of the mountain heaths of the Clwydians and Llantysilio Mountain. Whilst this is a matter for celebration, the influx of visitors has sometimes led to habitat damage and erosion to the moorland environment. Sheep can increase this damage, or, in some cases, cause their own.

The need to manage access and use of the heather-clad uplands in the two ranges, while promoting conservation and public enjoyment, led to the launch of the Heather and Hillforts Landscape Partnership Scheme in 2007. Whilst still being farmed and providing recreation for several million people who live within easy reach, the moorlands covered by the scheme include heather habitats of such value that some are protected within a Special Area of Conservation.

The scheme also embraces six nationally important Iron Age hillforts — Penycloddiau; Moel Arthur; Moel y Gaer, Llanbedr; Moel Fenlli; Moel y Gaer, Llantysilio; and Caer Drewyn — and archaeological work has been amongst the highlights of the many Heather and Hillforts projects carried out during the last three years.

Extensive erosion repairs have been undertaken at Moel Arthur and Moel Fenlli in the Clwydian Range, while work has been done on the route up to Caer Drewyn, at



© Richard Jones, Countryside Skills

The construction of the floating ramp to protect the slopes of Moel Fenlli

the south-western tip of Llantysilio Mountain near Corwen. Feet, both human and sheep, had taken their toll and, in places, paths were cutting down into archaeological remains. Innovative 'floating' ramps have now been installed, protecting the archaeology below, without going into the ground, and providing a safe surface for walking.

We have also carried out some excavations. At Penycloddiau hillfort, where a barrow was being worn away by walkers, excavations have made us ninety-five per cent sure that it dates to the Bronze Age. Any trace



An aerial view of the excavation of a section of the rampart of Moel y Gaer, Llanbedr

of a central burial had been comprehensively removed in the Victorian period. To protect what is left, it has been covered by a reconstruction of a barrow that we hope both protects and interprets the feature.

At Moel y Gaer, Llanbedr, students from Bangor University and Vienna worked with local volunteers under the direction of Professor Ray Karl to excavate a section through the hillfort ramparts where a large sheep scrape needed repair. The excavation identified that the rampart, when built, was stone fronted and radiocarbon dating showed that construction took place between 800 BC and 500 BC. There was also a deposit of highly burnt stone material within the rampart which may have been ritually deposited during construction.

At Moel y Gaer, Llantysilio, a geophysical survey had hinted at extensive remains of roundhouses, but in a location that was exposed to a very real threat of damage

Penycloddiau and Moel Arthur

To encourage *Heritage in Wales* readers to experience the Heather and Hillforts landscape for themselves, here is one of the walks available from the scheme's website: www.heatherandhillforts.co.uk. You will also find there other walks through the beautiful countryside around the hillforts

Penycloddiau is one of the sites covered by a Heather and Hillforts audio heritage guide, which you can receive on your mobile phone at the site (01745 222123 — cost of a local call), or download to your computer or .mp3 player from the Heather and Hillforts website.

Before you start

Distance: 7 miles (11.2km)

Time: 4 1/2 hours

Map: OS Explorer 265
Clwydian Range

Start/Parking: Llangwyfan car park (SJ 139668), 1.2 miles (2km) north-east of Llangwyfan off the minor road to Nannerch

Terrain: Heather moorland with steep ascents

Refreshment: The Kimmel Arms, Waen (01824 790 291); The White Horse, Llandymog (01824 790582)

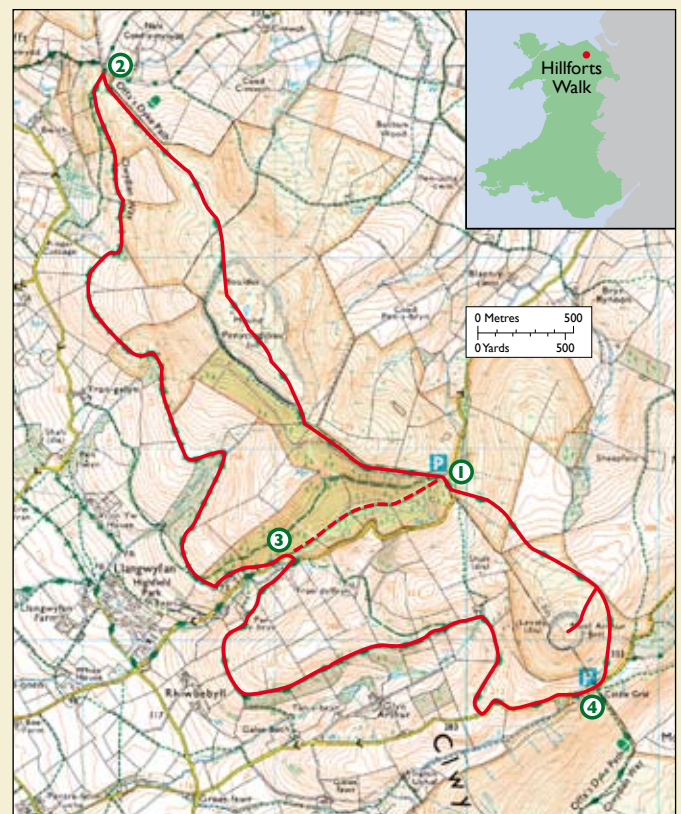
Conditions can change quickly in the uplands. Wear sturdy footwear. Take waterproofs, warm clothes, a compass, food and a drink.

Always follow the Countryside Code: www.countrysidecode.wales.org.uk

The Walk

1. At the corner of Llangwyfan car park follow the signs for the Offa's Dyke Path. Take the right-hand forest track for a few yards/metres and then bear right onto a narrow path along the forest

edge, following Offa's Dyke Path (ODP), signed with a white acorn. Continue up this path until you reach a stile on the right. Cross onto the open moorland and continue to follow ODP over Penycloddiau hillfort. From the summit follow the stone path northwards



The route of the walk

(towards mast), crossing a stile and continuing to follow ODP for about 2/3 of a mile (1km).

2. At a pass crossed by unsurfaced green lanes, turn sharp left onto a track leaving ODP and ignoring the stile/gate to the right. Go through a gate and, at a track junction,

continue ahead. Follow this clear track for about 1 1/2 miles (2.5km), going through six gates, before reaching a road. Turn left onto it.

3. For a shorter route: Go 100 yards (100m) up the road, then turn left onto a forest track beside a yellow and black

from illegal off-road vehicles. The Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust and local volunteers conducted a small excavation and the remains of two roundhouses were found. Whilst we still await radiocarbon dates for these, the results highlight the site's importance and the need to protect it and a campaign has taken place to lessen illegal off-road use.

Archaeology is not the only aim of the scheme. Returning the heather habitat to a healthy condition is vitally important. The agri-environment scheme, Tir Gofal, gives graziers on the important upland landscapes of Moel Famau and Moel y Parc an incentive to maintain them. The moorlands of Llantysilio Mountain have been designated a Special Area of Conservation under the European Union's Habitat Directive and funding has been arranged for their management.

Other highlights relate to people. Parties of school children were taken back in time



© Denbighshire Countryside Services/Heather and Hillforts

Schoolchildren meet a figure from Penycloddiau's Iron Age past

barrier. Follow this track uphill back to Llangwyfan car park.

Follow the road around to the right for about 150 yards (150m) and, just after crossing a stream, turn right onto a track marked with a horse rider sign. Go through a gate and follow the path behind a partly built house. Continue on the path, which contours around the hillside for about 1 1/4 miles (2km), going through four gates. After the fourth, follow the path as it bears right, keeping the fence on the right. Go through another gate then follow the clear path along the hillside until you reach a final gate onto the road. Turn left and walk up the road to the small car park below Moel Arthur.

4. From the car park turn left to rejoin ODP, signed Coed Llangwyfan. Continue on ODP around the base of Moel Arthur hillfort. (Detour left at the stone waymarker to climb up to the hillfort). Continue on ODP across the moorland. Cross a stile into fields and walk downhill, still following ODP. Cross another stile and continue down towards the road. Cross the stile then turn right along the road and left back into Llangwyfan car park.

Penycloddiau

This massive hillfort encloses the entire southern part of the summit ridge and is almost 1/2 mile (800m) long. Where the ground falls away steeply, there is only a single line of ramparts, but on gentler approaches the defences are



strengthened with further lines. The fort had two entrances — one at the south and the other midway along the eastern side — both flanked by in-turned banks that allowed defenders to overlook anyone approaching the fort's gates.

Archaeological surveys of the hillfort in 2004 and 2008 have identified more than forty-three possible house platforms. Imagine the fort in the late Iron Age filled with circular thatched roundhouses and protected with imposing timber defences atop the ramparts.

Recent excavations on the mound at the highest point within the fort strongly supports its identification as a Bronze Age barrow.

An aerial view of Penycloddiau from the south-east

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Moel Arthur

Moel Arthur only covers 4 1/2 acres (1.8ha), but is an impressive sight with its ramparts entirely encircling the top of the steep-sided, conical hill. The more gradual approach from the north is defended by massive twin ramparts with the original in-turned entrance to the fort at their eastern end.

Signs of house platforms were reported after heather burning in 1938, but an archaeological survey in 2006 only detected slight indications. However in 1849, W. Wynne Foulkes investigated two areas of the fort, revealing some drystone walls and artefacts that he summarized as 'coarse red Roman pottery, and flint arrowheads and corroded iron'. If he was

correct, it may point to occupation after the Iron Age.

Moel Arthur has also provided evidence of Bronze Age activity. The walker's cairn near the centre of the fort may rest on a barrow. In 1962 a hoard of three copper axes from the Bronze Age were revealed after heavy rainfall.



Moel Arthur from the south-east

© Mick Sharp Photography

as they climbed Penycloddiau, meeting archaeologists, a Victorian gamekeeper, medieval knights and an Iron Age guard. This led to the development of education resource chests for use by teachers in the classroom and on site.

Many walks and talks have been given, leading to the production of audio trails for Penycloddiau and Caer Drewyn, as well as for the slopes of Moel Famau. You can listen on site on your mobile phone or by download to your computer or .mp3 player. A Bluetooth audio trail will soon be launched on local bus services, allowing people to hear about the area as they travel through it.

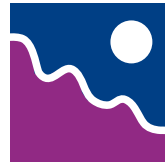
There are also 'Iron Age' car parks where the architecture of the parking bays and other features aim to mimic the stone and earth building techniques used at the hillforts.

This effort has been supported with a website — www.heatherandhillforts.co.uk — and a presence on both Facebook and Twitter. But don't take our word for it, come and see for yourself. ☒

Funding and organization

The Heather and Hillforts Landscape Partnership Scheme is largely funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, but significant amounts from other partners including Flintshire County Council, Denbighshire County Council, Countryside Council for Wales (CCW), Cadw and European funds bring the total to £2.2 million. A Partnership Board oversees the work, including local landowners, politicians and representatives from Cadw, CCW, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales, Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales and other relevant bodies.

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The aims of Heather and Hillforts have remained constant since the scheme's beginning. They include:

- conserving heritage through sustainable agriculture;
- reconnecting people with the uplands and increasing their enjoyment of them; and
- increasing understanding of the hillforts and moorland as a foundation for management, restoration and interpretation.

© Denbighshire County Council. Illustration by Tim Morgan



An artist's impression of the hillfort of Caer Drewyn in the Iron Age

The hillforts

The Iron Age hillforts of the Clwydian Range and Llantysilio Mountain were probably all built around 2,500 years ago possibly by the Deceangli tribe, who controlled north-east Wales. They vary in size from massive Penycloddiau, which covers around 50 acres (20ha), to the more modest Moel y Gaer, Llantysilio, of roughly 3 acres (1ha).

All the forts are encircled by strong ramparts (with multiple lines of defences often protecting more vulnerable areas) and have powerful in-turned gateways. Platforms for Iron Age roundhouses have been identified at all six, with as many as sixty-one possible platforms recorded in a

recent archaeological survey of Moel Fenli.

There is still some debate amongst archaeologists about the functions of hillforts in Iron Age society. The presence of house platforms, granaries and other domestic structures indicates that they were settlements as well as strongholds, but they may have been occupied only seasonally or primarily as marketplaces or ritual centres for local populations. Whatever their functions, the scale of the hillforts testifies to the enormous communal effort required to build them.

Occasional discoveries of Roman artefacts, including some 1,500 coins at Moel Fenli in 1816, suggest that the hillforts may still have been occupied after the arrival of the Romans.

The Heather and Hillforts project area

