

# A walk through royal Aber

John G. Roberts, from the Snowdonia National Park Authority, leads us on a walk with *tywysog* and *taeog* (prince and serf) through thousands of years of history in Abergwyngregyn



*The village of Abergwyngregyn in the valley of the Rhaeadr-fawr with the Menai Strait and Anglesey beyond*

© John G. Roberts, Snowdonia National Park Authority

For many hurrying along the busy A55 between Conwy and Bangor, Abergwyngregyn is little more than a name on a briefly glimpsed road sign. Some know the small village, long known simply as Aber, as the starting point for pleasant walks to Aber Falls — one of Wales's most beautiful waterfalls — or the Coedydd Aber National Nature Reserve.

Fewer people are aware that Aber was an important *llys* (court) of the medieval princes of Gwynedd, one of the centres at which they regularly stayed as they moved around their lands. Traces of the presence of the *llys* can still be detected in the village and the surrounding landscape, alongside sites of

even greater antiquity. The Aber Heritage Valley Partnership and Snowdonia National Park Authority, with support from Cadw's Welsh Cultural Heritage Initiative, are working to open up this history to a wider audience with a programme that includes archaeological investigations and enhanced interpretation.

This circular walk to Aber Falls and back takes in a number of sites that, together, tell aspects of the story of Aber and its environs during the thirteenth century, when the great princes of Gwynedd, Llywelyn ab Iorwerth (d. 1240) and his grandson, Llywelyn ap Gruffudd (d. 1282), emerged as the dominant native rulers in Wales.

## Before you start

**Distance:** 4.7 miles (7.5km)

**Time:** 3 hours

**Map:** OS Explorer OL17 Snowdon

**Start/Parking:** Take exit 13 from the A55 to reach Abergwyngregyn. Free parking is available at the start of the walk (SH 656728).

**Terrain:** Quiet roads, tracks and paths. There are some moderate to steep climbs and descents, and the ground may be uneven or muddy depending upon conditions.

**Refreshment:** The Hen Felin café, in the village centre, is open 10.30am–4.30pm Monday to Sunday. Telephone: 01248 689454.

**Public Transportation:** Buses between Llanfairfechan and Bangor serve Abergwyngregyn. Call Traveline Cymru — 0871 2002233 — for information.

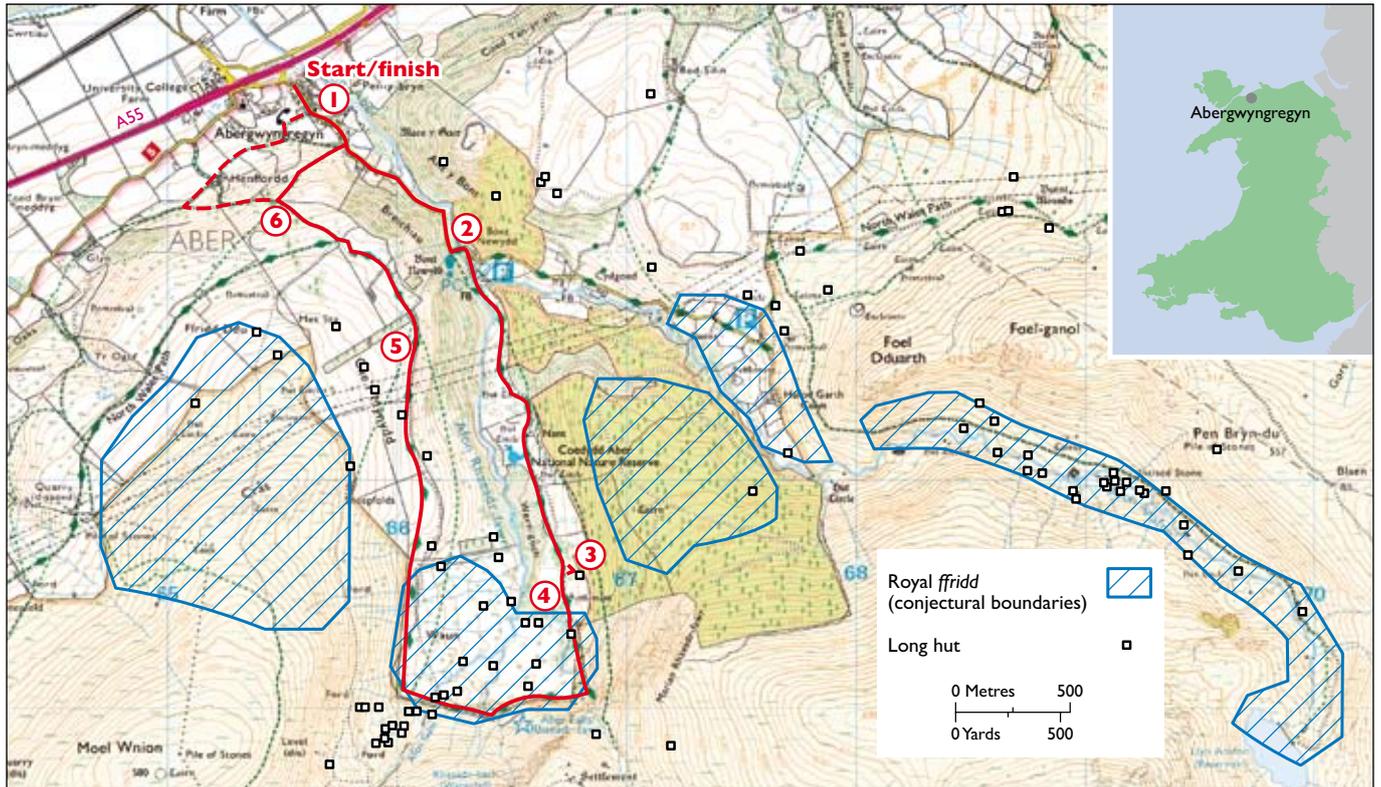
Conditions can change quickly in the uplands. Wear sturdy footwear. Take waterproofs, warm clothes, a compass, food and a drink.

There is no mobile phone signal for much of the route.

Don't forget to follow the Countryside Code:

[www.countrysidecodewales.org.uk](http://www.countrysidecodewales.org.uk)

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The route of the walk and sites and features mentioned in the article

**Stop 1 — The mottlellys**

Cross the road from the parking area and call in at the small visitor centre before continuing up the narrow alley to the right into the village. Keep straight ahead along a lane, and after about 110 yards (100m), opposite a small chapel, look between the houses on your left for a large earth mound.

This is thought to be a motte, the base of a timber castle. It is probably Norman although native mottes are known. The Normans built mottes at centres of native power in Gwynedd; there were campaigns in this area in the 1080s and 1090s.

Carry on for another 110 yards (100m) and stop before a house (originally a chapel), as the road curves along the border of a field just visible through the hedge to the left.

The pattern of road and field here may preserve part of the outline of a bailey, a fortified compound commonly adjoining a motte.

Excavation in the field in 1993 revealed the stone foundations of a hall that had later been altered into a winged building. Pottery and a brooch dated the structure to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and it may have been part of the *llys*. After the

Edwardian conquest, royal accounts record building work on the hall and chamber at Aber, and the discovered alterations may reflect that work.

However, the location of Aber's *llys* is subject to debate. Local tradition and some later authors and documents link it to Pen y Bryn, a grand house and tower overlooking the village. New excavations taking place in the area near the motte may shed further light on elements of medieval Aber.

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The mound, thought to be a castle motte (Stop 1), stands to the left of this view of the 2010 excavations in Aberystwyth



The foundations of the hall revealed during the 1993 excavations

### Stop 2 — Bont Newydd

Continue along the road to Bont Newydd, an eighteenth-century bridge, 0.62 miles (1 km) south-east of the village.

An Iron Age hillfort, Maes y Gaer, is perched above you to the north and an ancient route from the Conwy Valley over the mountains came down to Bont Newydd, and continued across the tidal sands and the Menai Strait to Llanfaes in Anglesey. This crossing was busy until the building of Telford's Menai Bridge in the early nineteenth century. The positions of the hillfort, motte and *llys* might all be partly explained by Aber's strategic position.



*Bont Newydd (Stop 2)*

### Stop 3 — Lynchets and long huts

Cross the bridge and immediately turn right. After a bend in 220 yards (200m), go straight on over a footbridge and through a footpath gate to join the North Wales Path and enter Coedydd Aber National Nature Reserve, noted for its woodlands and lichens.

There are many Iron Age and medieval houses and relict fields in this valley, indicating a mix of woods and open ground in the past.

Continue up the path for 0.62 miles (1 km), past Nant Cottage, then through two sets of iron gates. About 220 yards (200m) after the second gate, a group of 5 parallel terraced

strips of land, each about 3 feet (1 m) high and 13 feet (4m) wide, rise up the hillside to the east. You will need to look carefully to find these, especially when the bracken is high.

These are 'lynchets', formed by sustained ploughing across the slope over time. They are probably medieval; even in this upland landscape there were pockets of cultivated land.

If the bracken is not too high, you may wish to leave the path to climb to the top of the second of these lynchets. Near the forestry fence, is an oval stone sheepfold, which at some time during the nineteenth

century was built amongst the foundations of a cluster of eight 'long huts' — rectangular buildings marked by low earth and stone banks that are common in the landscape around Aber.

This group was excavated in 1961. Most of the structures date from the eighteenth to early nineteenth century and probably represent a dairy. However, the top pair (a dwelling and a barn) are older, cut into and perpendicular to the slope of the hill and now partly overlain by the sheepfold. Pottery dated them to the thirteenth century.



*The banks in this photograph are lynchets (Stop 3) formed by sustained ploughing*



*Two of the buildings in this long hut cluster (Stop 3) have been dated to the thirteenth century*

## Aber in historical sources

Aber was a favourite *llys* of Gwynedd's princes, and historical sources indicate that a number of important events occurred there. Llywelyn ab Iorwerth's wife, Joan (*Siwan* in Welsh), died at Aber in 1237, as did his son and successor, Dafydd, nine years later. Eleanor, wife of Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, may also have died there in June 1282 giving birth to their daughter, Gwenllïan.

John Pecham, archbishop of Canterbury, almost certainly made his way to Aber in November 1282 to propose onerous

peace terms to Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, in a fruitless attempt to avert the looming war with Edward I.

Other records give us rare glimpses of everyday activity and of people at the other end of the social scale. Many people's dues (payments) to the prince were made in kind. After Edward I's conquest of north Wales, royal surveyors recorded these dues to work out the equivalent cash values for future taxation. Linking the records to archaeological sites and places sheds light on how land and society were organized under the rule of the princes.

#### Stop 4 — Kiln/roundhouse

If you have visited the long huts, return to the main path. Continue for 165 yards (150m).

To the right (west) of the path is the site of an Iron Age roundhouse upon which a grain-drying kiln was constructed in the Middle Ages. The long history of the site was revealed in archaeological excavations undertaken between 2005 and 2010 by members of the local community and students.

The kiln, which may be contemporary with the medieval long huts, provides further evidence for arable farming in the vicinity. The archaeologists discovered that wheat, barley and especially oats were dried in the kiln. Oats and barley were staple cereals in the medieval diet, but were also widely used as fodder crops for cattle. Here at Aber, as elsewhere in Gwynedd, cattle rearing was of central importance to the economy of the princes' upland estates in the thirteenth century. It is likely that much of the oats and barley grown here and dried in the kiln was destined to feed cattle rather than people.



*The landscape of Cae'r Mynydd (Stop 5) — Mountain Field — preserves traces of Iron Age fields and settlements as well as medieval ploughing and long huts*

#### Stop 5 — Cae'r Mynydd: pasture and upland cultivation

Follow the path to the spectacular Aber Falls. Cross the river on the footbridge below the falls and continue west around the head of the valley on the North Wales Path. After 0.62 miles (1 km) the path turns northwards, becoming a farm track as it climbs. Follow the track until you reach overhead power cables and then continue for about 220 yards (200m) to reach a good vantage point high up on the valley side.

This area is called Cae'r Mynydd, 'Mountain Field'. On the slopes above the track and stretching to the north and west before you is a rich multi-period landscape. Iron Age settlement enclosures and roundhouses with associated fields are overlain by medieval ploughing and long huts. In aerial photographs,

banks, ridges and terraces formed by long cultivation of cereal crops can be easily discerned, but they are difficult to see on the ground. These uplands are above the limit of cultivation today. Even in the thirteenth-century, when the climate is thought to have been more favourable, only hardy species like barley, rye and oats would have grown here.

The records show that the *taeogion* (serfs) of Aber owed large quantities of barley and oats to the prince, and no doubt much of the grain harvested from Cae'r Mynydd went to feed the herds of cattle kept on the royal *ffriddoedd* — pastures — in the neighbourhood. Although Aber is near the coast, it is a predominantly upland parish where grazing land is a key resource. The map shows that there were at least five royal *ffriddoedd* here in the thirteenth century.

The seasonal movement of stock and people from lowlands to uplands was a traditional, although varied, feature of life in upland Wales. The high ground of the Cameddau, lying south of Aber, was probably used in this way in the thirteenth century, with dairying for butter and cheese. This pattern of grazing led to the establishment of *hafotai*, seasonal homesteads, which are such a familiar feature in Welsh upland landscapes.

The royal *ffriddoedd* were, however, farmed more intensively and may have been occupied and grazed year round to maximize the prince's income from cattle rearing. The *ffriddoedd* were in valleys or on sheltered hillsides and would have been farmed by the *taeogion*. The long huts at Cae'r Mynydd, clustered between *ffriddoedd* and open mountain, may be the dwellings of people who integrated the more intensive

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*The roundhouse site during excavation*

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*The Iron Age roundhouse that became the site of a grain-drying kiln in the Middle Ages (Stop 4)*

## Llys and maerdref

Thirteenth-century Gwynedd was divided into 22 districts known as commotes, each administered from a *llys*. The *llys* was a complex of buildings that might include a hall or halls, a kitchen, stables and other domestic structures. The prince and his entourage moved between these commotal centres, governing, dispensing justice and entertaining nobles and clergy.

The *llys* was the heart of the *maerdref*, a special royal township with its associated

lands. The *maerdref* was populated by *taeogion* or serfs — bond (unfree) tenants who couldn't marry, move or inherit and bequeath land without the prince's permission.

There were thirty-five bond households in Aber in the late thirteenth century. The *taeogion* not only toiled to sustain themselves, but each household was obliged to work about sixty days a year for the prince without payment. Their tasks ranged from farming royal arable and pastureland to cutting peat and gathering firewood. The *taeogion* also had to maintain a servant at the *llys* all year round.

In addition to their labour



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A Welsh prince in an illustration from a mid-thirteenth-century copy of the law book of Hywel Dda

services, the *taeogion* had to pay regular dues to the prince, often in kind. For instance, once during each season of the year, the Aber *taeogion* provided a day's subsistence for about 100 members of the royal entourage and their horses. Produce supplied to the princely court included honey, butter, flour, meat, poultry and eggs.

Customary dues elsewhere in Gwynedd show that the court could be enormous. The *maerdref* of Nefyn on Llyn provided for 500 people at an annual hunt, while comparable figures for some of the Anglesey *maerdrefi* reached over 1,000.

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The upland pasturelands of Cae'r Mynydd with the spectacular Aber Falls in the distance

management of the royal pasturelands with seasonal grazing. The pair of excavated medieval buildings in the valley (Stop 3) may have been associated with the exploitation of the *ffriddoedd*.

### Stop 6 — Ffridd Ddu

Continue along the track for about 0.3 miles (0.5km) until you reach a gate and a Y-junction shortly after two sharp bends.

The land between the village and the coast is the richest in the area, and wheat, the most valuable grain, was grown here. The fields were organized in strips, with those allocated to the *taeogion* lying alongside the prince's strips. As part of the labour service owed to the prince, the *taeogion* would have tended his strips as well as their own. The name of the farm in front of you (with the patterned experimental plantings of Bangor University who own it) is Henfaes, 'Old Field', a place name relict of the old arable lands.

Standing here, you can easily imagine the line of the old route to Anglesey across the tidal sands. In November 1282 an English force camped in Llanfaes and, acting without orders from Edward I, launched a pre-emptive attack across the Menai Strait — perhaps at this crossing. It was a disaster for the English, many of whom drowned. Yet, within weeks, Llywelyn ap Gruffudd had been slain.

Before the thirteenth century had closed, the population of Llanfaes had been evicted and the community supplanted by Beaumaris and its castle. These changes are symbolic of the wider impact of the Edwardian conquest on the structures of native Welsh governance.

In Aber, despite the building work at the *llys* in the early 1300s, the princes' complex

fell into disrepair. It was totally ruinous by the sixteenth century, possibly well before. The customary dues and obligations of the *taeogion*, who had maintained the *llys* for the princes of Gwynedd, were converted to taxes and rents to the English Crown.

### The end of the walk

Continue northwards along the track for 380 yards (350m) until you reach a crossing with another path (marked by a small wooden signpost). Go right down a steep, but direct, route back to the village or go straight ahead for a gentler, but longer, descent (marked with a dashed line on the map). Both paths come out on the road that runs through the village. Turn left on the road to return to the parking area. ☒

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The rich fields on the land between the village and the coast (Stop 6). Henfaes, 'Old Field', is the farm in the foreground. (The steep route back to the village begins to the right of the small signpost)