

FOLLOW THE FOOTSTEPS

Heroes and Heroines of Wales Branwen ferch Llŷr



 Cadw



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

This is an old Welsh legend, passed down through the generations. It was written down in a collection of stories called the Four Branches of the Mabinogi. The stories are set in Wales, in a mythical medieval time. It was a time of monsters and magic, when Britain and Ireland were in conflict with each other. There are many different versions of this story - this is just one of them.

Branwen ferch Llŷr

Marriage brings tragedy not unity



Branwen ferch Llŷr was a beautiful young woman

When Branwen ferch Llŷr, sister of the king of Britain, married Matholwch, king of Ireland, it should have brought peace to the two warring countries. But Branwen's evil half-brother wasn't happy with the match. He set out to ruin the marriage, but ended up bringing death and destruction to his own family.

The beautiful Branwen had two brothers. One was Bendigeidfran, king of Britain, a giant with magical powers. The other was Manawydan, the king's trusted adviser. But she also had a half-brother, the cruel Efnisien.

The story begins one day when Bendigeidfran and Manawydan were sitting in Harlech, north Wales, looking out to sea. They saw a magnificent fleet of ships approaching. It was their enemy, Matholwch, king of Ireland. But a shield was held up high in the air, showing that the Irish came in peace.

Proposal brings promise of peace

Matholwch had come to ask Bendigeidfran for Branwen's hand in marriage. All of Branwen's family agreed, the wedding being seen as a way to bring peace between the two countries. The only person who hadn't given his approval was Efnisien, who was away.

The royal wedding took place at Aberffraw on Anglesey, but while the great celebrations were taking place, Efnisien returned. When he discovered what had happened, he was furious that he hadn't been consulted.



Matholwch's fleet of ships approached Harlech



A statue of Bendigeidfran stands outside Harlech Castle

Cruel act insults the Irish

Efnisien took out his anger on Matholwch's horses that were tethered outside, maiming them all with his sword.

When Matholwch found out, he was shocked and deeply insulted. To make amends, Bendigeidfran replaced the horses and also gave Matholwch a magic cauldron, said to have the power to bring the dead back to life. Pleased with the gift, Matholwch sailed back to Ireland with his lovely new bride.

Married life soon soured

The couple received a warm welcome in Ireland. Branwen, the new queen, was greatly admired by the Irish people. Within a year, Branwen gave birth to a son, named Gwern fab Matholwch. But their happiness was short lived.

The people of Ireland heard about the attack on Matholwch's horses back in Wales. They felt that their



Harlech Castle: built on the site of the legendary home of Bendigeidfran



king had been too ready to forgive, and demanded that Matholwch punish Branwen for her half-brother's crime. The king's wife was sent to live and work in the kitchen and was beaten daily by those who worked there.

Message wings its way to Britain

For three years Branwen was trapped, her family unaware of her punishment. But her chance for freedom came when she befriended a starling. She trained the bird to recognise her brother; then she tied a letter around its wing and sent it to Wales. The starling flew across the sea carrying the message to her brother at Caernarfon.

When Bendigeidfran read the letter, he swore vengeance. Together with his brothers, he assembled an army. His fleet set sail, while Bendigeidfran himself waded across the Irish Sea.

Branwen's heart is broken

Before going into battle, Bendigeidfran received a message from Matholwch. The Irish king promised he would give Ireland to Gwern, Branwen's beloved son – who was also Bendigeidfran's nephew. The peace offering could have worked - if it wasn't for Efnisien.

But Efnisien suspected that it was a trick. When Gwern came to greet his uncles, Efnisien threw the boy into the fire. In despair, Branwen tried to jump into the fire after her son, but was held back.

A terrible battle began. But the Irish had an advantage - they used the magic cauldron to revive their dead. Efnisien saw what was happening and, filled with remorse, he leapt into the cauldron and destroyed it, but lost his life in doing so.

A starling sent a message across the sea



Cauldrons often have magical properties in myths and legends



The Mabinogi is performed at Harlech Castle.

With victory, tragedy

The tide of the battle turned, and Bendigeidfran's men killed every one of the Irish soldiers. But Bendigeidfran himself was struck in his foot with a poisonous spear. Knowing that he was going to die, he ordered his remaining seven men to behead him and carry his head to the White Hill at the Tower of London. He instructed them to bury it facing France, so its magic would protect Britain from attack.

Horrified by her son's death and the tragedies caused by her marriage, Branwen died of grief. She was buried at Bedd Branwen in the heart of Anglesey.

Talking head

But that wasn't the end of the story. Manawydan and his men started the journey to London with Bendigeidfran's head. But the head began to talk to them. They paused to listen, firstly at Harlech, then on Grassholm, an island off the coast of Wales. As Bendigeidfran spoke, the men forgot all the horrors they'd seen. Time stood still. When they finally resumed their mission, almost 100 years had passed.

Follow the footsteps

You've read the tragic story of Branwen, now take yourself back to her magical, mythical world.



Harlech Castle

Harlech Castle

Harlech Castle stands on a spectacular location on a rocky crag, overlooking the sea and mountains of Snowdonia. It was built for King Edward I of England in the 1280s.

- Sit on the walls of the castle looking out to sea – imagine you are Bendigeidfran, king of Britain, seeing the Irish fleet approaching.
- Look around to the wild mountains and moors – a perfect setting for mystical stories. Could the head of the giant Bendigeidfran really have talked to his men and made them forget their sorrows?
- Discover battlements, turrets and gatehouses – and make up your own stories of events that might have happened there.



Caernarfon Castle

Caernarfon Castle

Mighty Caernarfon is possibly the most famous of Wales's castles. Huge and commanding, it was built by King Edward I of England in the 1280s.

Not only a military fortress, it was also a seat of government and royal palace.

- Picture Branwen's starling crossing the sea and approaching Caernarfon. Imagine Bendigeidfran's rage when he reads the letter from Branwen.
- Explore the walls and towers. Imagine how hard it would have been to invade this stronghold.
- Look out over the Menai Strait, a narrow stretch of water that divides mainland Wales from Anglesey.
- Discover the fascinating exhibitions which tell the story of Caernarfon.



The village of Aberffraw
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Visit Wales

Anglesey

Anglesey is a small island with rugged coastline, rocky coves and windswept moors. All around are fascinating traces of history. Its wild, romantic landscapes have inspired many Welsh myths and legends.

- Branwen was said to have been buried on the banks of the river Alaw, near the village of Llanddeusant, Anglesey. Find the cairn called Bedd Branwen, which is supposed to mark her grave.
- Visit the small village of Aberffraw, the setting for Branwen's wedding to Matholwch, and where Efnisien ruined everything by maiming the Irish horses.
- Find a good place for telling stories – like a rocky cove, a hollowed out tree, or a standing stone. Then share your favourite myths, or make up new magical tales.

Visit www.cadw.wales.gov.uk to explore the sites.