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

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.

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.

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 Cruel act insults the Irish
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
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.

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.