

Visiting Wales' Historic Sites along The Wales Way

A helpful guide for planning routes to explore Welsh heritage





Where to visit...



Ffordd Cambria The Cambrian Way

- 1 Strata Florida Abbey
- 2 Blaenavon World Heritage Centre
- 3 Caerphilly Castle
- 4 Castell Coch
- 5 Raglan Castle
- 6 Tintern Abbey
- 7 Chepstow Castle

Ffordd yr Arfordir The Coastal Way

- 1 Criccieth Castle
- 2 Harlech Castle
- 3 Cilgerran Castle
- 4 St Davids Bishop's Palace

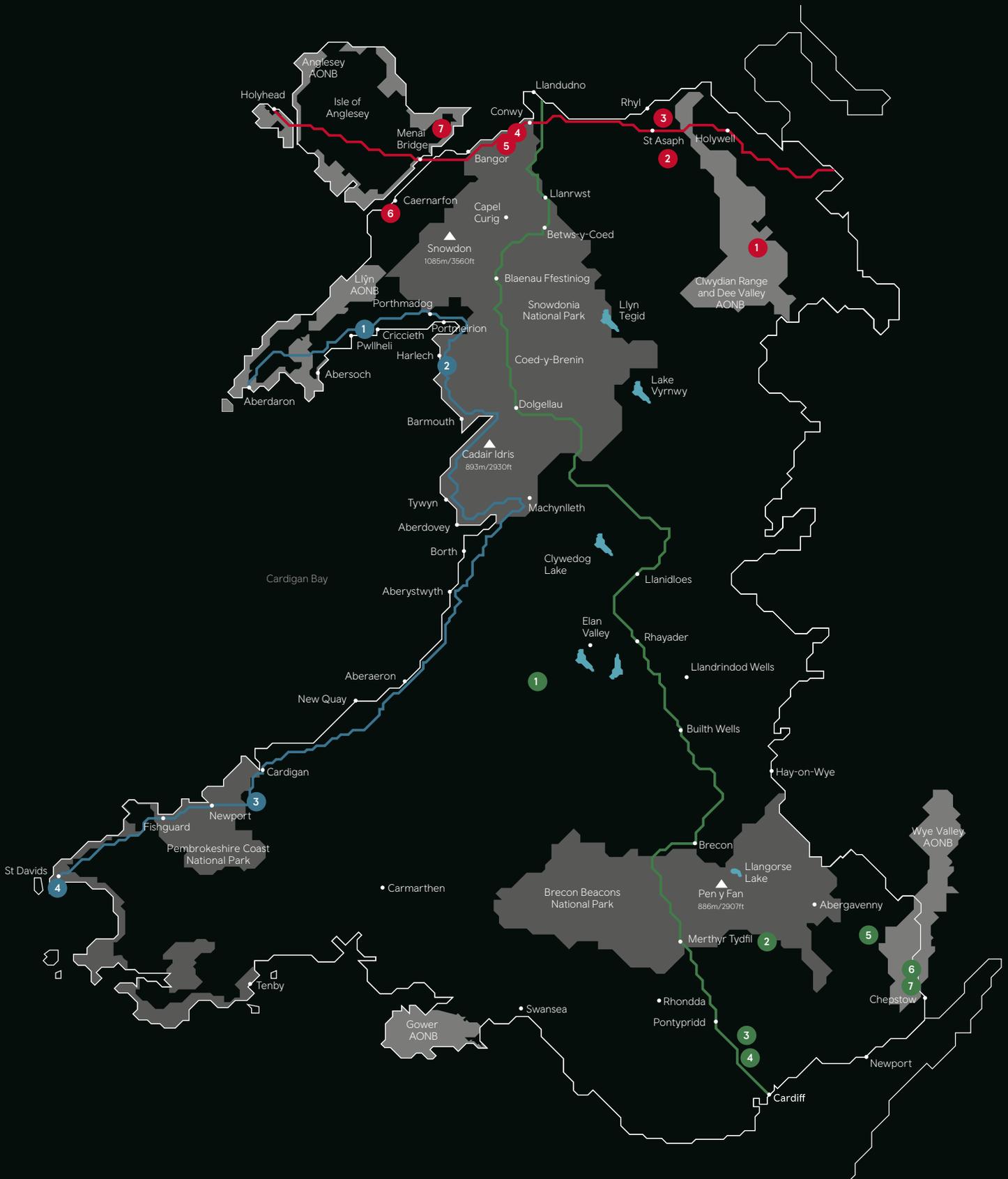
Ffordd y Gogledd The North Wales Way

- 1 Valle Crucis Abbey
- 2 Denbigh Castle and Town Walls
- 3 Rhuddlan Castle
- 4 Conwy Castle
- 5 Plas Mawr
- 6 Caernarfon Castle
- 7 Beaumaris Castle

Visit Cadw.gov.wales for more information.
For further information on The Wales Way visit thewalesway.com

The Wales Way is a family of three national routes that lead you along the coast, through castle country and across our mountainous heartland. They're crossed by loops and links so that you can create your own custom-built Welsh road trips.

We've got some of the best castles in the world in Wales and some of the most beautiful ones too. We have abbeys, churches and chapels and some of the most atmospheric ancient monuments that visitors have been seeking out for thousands of years. We have monuments that remind us of Wales's proud heritage as one of the first industrial nations in the world and sites that tell the stories of the medieval Welsh princes. We look forward to seeing you soon...



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The Cambrian Way



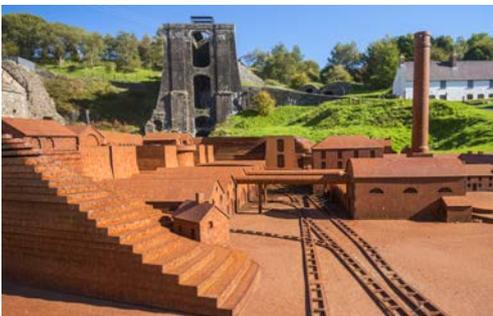
Caðw sites to visit

The Cambrian Way criss-crosses the spine of Wales for 185 miles / 300km from Llandudno in the north to Cardiff in the south. It winds through the Snowdonia and Brecon Beacons National Parks and the big green spaces of the Cambrian mountains in between.



Strata Florida Abbey

The abbey of Strata Florida – Latin for ‘Vale of Flowers’ – has stood on lush meadows beside the banks of the river Teifi since 1201. It was established by white-robed Cistercian monks as part of a movement that spread like a tidal wave across the whole of western Europe in the early Middle Ages. Soon it became the most famous church in Wales after St David’s – a place of pilgrimage and a linchpin of Welsh culture. You can still see some of the incredible decorated tiles that would have covered the floors of the church and the final resting place for generations of medieval Welsh princes. The great poet Dafydd ap Gwilym is said to be buried under a yew in the churchyard. No wonder it’s been called ‘the Westminster Abbey of Wales’.



Blaenavon World Heritage Centre

The landscape of Blaenavon is a World Heritage site, which formed part of the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution, where coal was dug and iron was formed. You can still see countless physical reminders and remains which allow you to trace the development of the Industrial Revolution. Blaenavon Ironworks including the original cast house, balance tower, tuck shop and cottages are still there today for you to explore and experience life in the 1800’s.



Caerphilly Castle

In 1268 de Clare constructed the biggest castle in Wales – second only to Windsor in the whole of Britain. Massive walls, towers and gatehouses were combined with sprawling water defenses to cover a total of 30 acres. On the death of Llywelyn this frontline fortress was transformed into a palatial home with a hunting park and northern lake. It passed into the hands of Edward II’s ruthless and greedy favourite Hugh Despenser, who revamped the great hall in ornate style. By then Caerphilly must have appeared like some mythical castle floating in an enchanted lake. An effect oddly enhanced by the Civil War gunpowder that left the south-east tower at a precarious angle. In fact Wales’s very own Leaning Tower – even wonkier than that of Pisa – is probably the castle’s best-loved feature.



Castell Coch

Castell Coch, or the 'Red Castle', rises up from the ancient beech woods of Fforest Fawr like a vision from a fairytale. The highly decorated interiors and rich furnishings of Castell Coch make it a dazzling masterpiece of the High Victorian era. Castell Coch has been a plaything of the rich and powerful for over 700 years. Having lavished huge sums on it neither Gilbert de Clare nor the Marquess of Bute spent much time here. It remains a magnificent vision of an imaginary medieval world – regularly voted by the public as their favorite building in Wales.



Raglan Castle

We can thank Sir William ap Thomas, the 'blue knight of Gwent', for the moated Great Tower of 1435 that still dominates this mighty fortress-palace. His son Sir William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, created the gatehouse with its flared 'machicolations'. It was designed to impress as much as to intimidate. Despite a garrison of 800 men and one of the longest sieges of the Civil War, it fell to parliamentary forces and was deliberately destroyed. Among the looted treasures was a piece of Tudor wooden paneling, now proudly displayed in the visitor centre after being rescued from a cow shed in the 1950s.



Tintern Abbey

Founded in 1131 by Cistercian monks, who were happy to make do with timber buildings at first. A simple stone church and cloisters came later. In 1269 they began to build a new abbey church creating one of the masterpieces of British Gothic architecture. The great west front with its seven-lancet window and the soaring arches of the nave still take the breath away. So grateful were the monks to their powerful patron Roger Bigod that they were still handing out alms on his behalf in 1535. But by then King Henry VIII's English Reformation was well underway. Only a year later Tintern surrendered in the first round of the dissolution of the monasteries – and the great abbey began slowly to turn into a majestic ruin.



Chepstow Castle

There's no better place in Britain to see how castles gradually evolved to cope with ever more destructive weaponry – and the grandiose ambitions of their owners. For more than six centuries Chepstow was home to some of the wealthiest and most powerful men of the medieval and Tudor ages. Building started in 1067 by Earl William fitz Osbern, close friend of William the Conqueror, making it one of the first Norman strongholds in Wales. In turn William Marshal (Earl of Pembroke), Roger Bigod (Earl of Norfolk) and Charles Somerset (Earl of Worcester) all made their mark before the castle declined after the Civil War. Walk through three baileys to explore the oldest stone built Castle in Wales, take a look at the earliest known surviving Castle doors in Europe lasting 800 years.

The Coastal Way

Cadw sites to visit



The Coastal Way runs the entire length of Cardigan Bay with blues seas on one side and big mountains on the other. It's a 180-mile / 290km from Aberaeron to St David's and is dotted with harbour towns and majestic historic places to discover.



Criccieth Castle

Crowning its own rocky headland between two beaches it commands astonishing views over the town and across the wide sweep of Cardigan Bay. No wonder Turner felt moved to paint it. By then it was a picturesque ruin – destroyed by one of Wales's most powerful medieval princes, Owain Glyndwr. Still this craggy fortress wasn't enough to withstand the invasion of Edward I. The English king made a few improvements of his own, equipping the north tower with a stone-throwing machine to deter Welsh attacks. It was still in English hands in 1404 when the towers were burnt red by Owain Glyndwr. Without a garrison to protect it, the town became entirely Welsh once more.



Harlech Castle

Harlech Castle crowns a sheer rocky crag overlooking the dunes far below with the rugged peaks of Snowdonia rise as a backdrop – Being the most spectacular setting for any of Edward's I's Castles in North Wales. Harlech was completed from ground to battlements in just seven years under the guidance of gifted architect Master James of St George. Its classic 'walls within walls' design makes the most of daunting natural defences. Even when completely cut off by the rebellion of Madog ap Llewelyn the castle held out – thanks to the 'Way from the Sea'. This path of 108 steps rising steeply up the rock face allowed the besieged defenders to be fed and watered by ship. Harlech is easier to conquer today with an incredible 'floating' footbridge allows you to enter this great castle as Master James intended – for the first time in 600 years.



St David's Bishop's Palace

A 12th-century pope had decreed that two trips to St David's were equal to one to Rome – turning it into a centre of pilgrimage for the entire Western world. Thousands flocked to see the shrine of St David in the newly built cathedral. Between 1328 and 1347 Henry de Gower turned a building only fit for 'servants and animals' into an immense palace. It was here in the great hall that he dispensed justice, held feasts and welcomed distinguished pilgrims. The Reformation marked the beginning of the end. In fact William Barlow, first Protestant Bishop of St David's, may well have stripped the lead from the roofs himself to spark a slow decline. But even as a ruin this palace beside its glorious cathedral remains an awe-inspiring space.



Cilgerran Castle

Cilgerran is one of the most spectacularly sited castles in Wales. Its two great round towers loom high above the deep gorge of the River Teifi and the fast-flowing stream of the Plysog. Probably first built as a 'ringwork' castle in 1108 by the Norman adventurer Gerald of Windsor, Cilgerran changed hands many times over the next century or more. It was only in 1223 when the dashing earl of Pembroke, William Marshal, built 'an ornate castle of mortar and stones' on top of the original site that Norman control stood firm. Despite the best efforts of Llywelyn ap Gruffudd and Owain Glyndwr, Cilgerran never again fell to the Welsh.

The North Wales Way



Cadw sites to visit

The North Wales Way follows an old trading route for 75 miles / 120km along our northern coast into Anglesey. It's the huge castles here that grab your attention: Beaumaris, Caernarfon, Harlech and the walled citadel of Conwy. This cluster of immense 13th century fortresses form a UNESCO World Heritage Site that shouldn't be missed on any trip to Wales.



Valle Crucis Abbey

Valle Crucis was truly Welsh from the moment it was founded in 1201 by Prince Madog ap Gruffydd and the 'white monks' of the Cistercian order. Its Latin name (Valley of the Cross) refers to the nearby ninth-century Pillar of Eliseg, erected for the glory of a Welsh chieftain and is one of our best-preserved and most atmospheric medieval abbeys to this day, despite the damage it suffered during the wars of the English King Edward I and the uprising of Owain Glyndwr. You'll believe it when you first glimpse the majestic west front of the abbey church. Elsewhere among the romantic ruins painted by Turner are the rib-vaulted chapter house and the only surviving monastic fishpond in Wales.



Denbigh Castle

Denbigh Castle is all about drama. Cross the drawbridge into the triple-towered gatehouse and you'll hear the portcullis thundering down, chains rattling and the din of horses and marching soldiers. Don't be too alarmed. It's all down to sensors and the wonders of modern technology. But it's a powerful reminder that this great fortress crowning a rocky outcrop above the Vale of Clwyd played a vital role in the wars that shaped Wales. Taken over in 1282 by Henry de Lacy, King Edward I changed the blue print of this Castle, building a huge stone fortress with extensive town walls on top of Dafydd's stronghold and inserted an ingenious 'sally port' – a secure secret doorway – so defenders could sneak out in an emergency.



Rhuddlan Castle

King Edward I liked his castles to be on the coast in case his ruthless campaign to subdue the Welsh ran into trouble, supplies could still get through by sea. At Rhuddlan, several miles inland, the plan was to use a river instead. Just one problem – the meandering Clwyd wasn't quite in the right place. So Edward conscripted hundreds of ditch-diggers to deepen and divert its course. More than seven centuries later Rhuddlan still looks like a castle that was worth moving a river for. Begun in 1277 it was the first of the revolutionary concentric, or 'walls within walls', castles designed by master architect James of St George.



Conwy Castle

Standing tall above the town for over 700 years, Conwy Castle's sheer battlements and soaring towers still pack a punch. Climb the spiral staircases of this World Heritage Site for superb long-range views of Snowdonia, the Conwy Estuary and North Wales coast, then take a walk along the top of the town walls stretching in an almost unbroken 0.8-mile/1.3km ring around Conwy's medieval heart.



Caernarfon Castle

Caernarfon Castle is recognised around the world as one of the greatest buildings of the Middle Ages built by Edward I on the bank of the River Seiont and is a World Heritage site along with Castles such as Conwy, Beaumaris and Harlech. This gigantic building project took 47 years and cost a staggering £25,000. Its immense curtain walls and daunting King's Gate were designed to withstand assault. But the polygonal towers, eagle statues and multi-coloured masonry sent a more subtle message.

Caernarfon is a castle of dreams. A legend brought to life. Even after 700 years it still stirs the imagination like no other Welsh castle.



Beaumaris Castle

Beaumaris on the island of Anglesey is famous as the greatest castle never built. It was the last of the royal strongholds created by Edward I in Wales – and perhaps his masterpiece with immense size and near-perfect symmetry. Lack of money and trouble brewing in Scotland meant building work had petered out by the 1320s. The south gatehouse and the six great towers in the inner ward never reached their intended height. Still it takes its rightful place on the global stage as part of the Castles and Town Walls of Edward I World Heritage Site.

Because this castle is special – both for the scale of its ambition and beauty of its proportions. Gloriously incomplete Beaumaris is perhaps the supreme achievement of the greatest military architect of the age.

Contact us at Caðw to help arrange
your trip to our magnificent sites.

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