

Bardsey Island Isle of 20,000 Saints



Various Authors

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Bardsey Pilgrims Church

BARDSEY ISLAND (WELSH: YNYS ENLLI), known as the legendary "Island of 20,000 Saints", is located 1.9 miles (3.1 km) off the Llŷn Peninsula in the Welsh county of Gwynedd. The Welsh name means "The Island in the Currents", while its English name refers to the "Island of the Bards", or possibly the Viking chieftain, "Barda". At 179 hectares (440 acres; 0.69 sq mi) in area it is the fourth largest offshore island in Wales, with a population of only 11.

The north east rises steeply from the sea to a height of 548 feet (167 m) at Mynydd Enlli, which is a Marilyn, while the western plain is low and relatively flat cultivated farmland. To the south the island narrows to an isthmus, connecting a peninsula on which the lighthouse stands. Since 1974 it has been included in the community of Aberdaron.

The island is claimed to be the burial site of Merlin. It has been an important religious site since the 6th century, when it is said that the Welsh kings of Llŷn and Saint Cadfan founded a monastery there. In medieval times it was a major centre of pilgrimage and, by 1212, belonged to the Augustinian Canons Regular. The monastery was dissolved and its buildings demolished by Henry VIII in 1537, but the island remains an attraction for pilgrims to this day, marking the end point of the North Wales Pilgrims Way.

Bardsey Island is famous today for its wildlife and rugged scenery. A bird observatory was established in 1953. It is a nesting place for Manx shearwaters and choughs, with rare plants, and habitats undisturbed by modern farming practices. The waters around the island attract dolphins and porpoises and grey seals. The island was inhabited in Neolithic times, and traces of hut circles remain. During the 5th century, the island became a refuge for persecuted Christians, and a small monastery existed. Around

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516, Saint Einion, king of Llyn, invited the Breton Saint Cadfan to move to the island from his first residence in Tywyn. Under Cadfan's guidance, St Mary's Abbey was built. For centuries, the island was important as "the holy place of burial for all the bravest and best in the land".

Bards called it "the land of indulgences, absolution and pardon, the road to Heaven, and the gate to Paradise", and in medieval times three pilgrimages to Bardsey were considered to be of equivalent benefit to the soul as one to Rome.

In 1188, the abbey was still a local institution but, by 1212, it belonged to the Canons Regular. Many people still walk the journey to Aberdaron and Uwchmynydd each year in the footsteps of the saints, although today only ruins of the old abbey's 13th century bell tower remain. A Celtic cross amidst the ruins commemorates the 20,000 saints reputed to be buried on the island.

Saint Einion is sometimes claimed to have joined the community on the island, although his relics are claimed by Llanengan on the mainland. Saint Deiniol, the Bishop of Bangor, was buried on the island in 584. Saint Dyfrig was also buried on Bardsey Island, although in 1120 his remains were transferred to Llandaff.



Ruins of St Mary's Abbey

The Dissolution of the Lesser Monasteries Act of 1536, on the orders of Henry VIII, resulted in St Mary's Abbey being dissolved and its buildings

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demolished in 1537. The choir stalls, two screens and the bells were transferred to Llanengan, where the parish church was then being built.



Bardsey Chapel in about 1885

For many years Bardsey Island formed part of the Newborough Estate, and between 1870 and 1875 the island's farms were rebuilt; a small limestone quarry was opened, and a lime kiln constructed. Carreg and Plas Bach are separate buildings, but the remaining eight were built as semi-detached houses, each pair with outbuildings set around a shared yard. The buildings are Grade II listed and, in 2008, Cadw approved a grant of £15,000 to cover the first phase of repairs. Only one of the original croglofft cottages, Carreg Bach, survives. Given the choice of a harbour or a new church, in 1875 the islanders asked the estate to provide a place of worship; a Methodist chapel was built.

The island had a population of 90 by 1841. It had increased to 132 in 1881; by 1961 it had fallen to seventeen. The island's small school, opened in a former chapel in 1919 and closed in 1953. In 2019 there was a long-term population of eleven, of whom four lived on the island during the winter.

The Bardsey Island Trust (Welsh: Ymddiriedolaeth Ynys Enlli) bought the island in 1979, after an appeal supported by the Church in Wales and many Welsh academics and public figures. The trust is financed through membership subscriptions, grants and donations, and is dedicated to protecting the wildlife, buildings and archaeological sites of the island; promoting its artistic and cultural life; and encouraging people to visit as a place of natural beauty and pilgrimage.

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When, in 2000, the trust advertised for a tenant for the 440 acres sheep farm on the island, they had 1,100 applications. The tenancy is now held by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds; and the land is managed to maintain the natural habitat. Oats, turnips and swedes are grown; goats, ducks, geese and chickens kept; and there is a mixed flock of sheep and Welsh Black cattle.

King of Enlli (Bardsey)



There have been many 'kings' of Enlli recorded in history, including John Williams II pictured here.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the population of the island was around 100, but in 1925 the 'King' of Enlli, Love Pritchard (the title was bestowed on successive community leaders by Lord Newborough), led most of the remaining inhabitants to the mainland to seek a less laborious way of life. Others began to settle there shortly afterwards, making a living mainly by farming and fishing.

In William Bingley's "North Wales" book, published in 1804 it is said that the unnamed king of Enlli was crowned around eight years earlier.

Curiosity induces many persons to visit this island almost every summer; but the grandest sight the present inhabitants ever witnessed, was a visit of the proprietor, Lord Newborough, about eight years ago, accompanied by Lady Newborough, and several persons of distinction, in the whole to the number of about forty.

This company embarked in fishing smaks from Porthor, near Carreg Hall, in the parish of Aberdaron. On their arrival in the island, marquees were immediately pitched. The whole company dined in the open air; and, at the conclusion of their repast, all the inhabitants were assembled. The ensuing scene reminded a gentleman of my acquaintance, who was present, of what he had read respecting the inhabitants of some of the South Sea Islands. They were drawn up in a circle, and the Lady Newborough adorned the heads of the females with caps and ribbons,

whilst Lord Newborough distributed hats among the men. The nominal king and queen of the island were distinguished from the rest by an additional ribbon.

Part of the day was occupied in strolling over the island, examining the creeks, and picking up shells; and the rest was spent in mirth and pleasantry. On the embarkation it was intended, being in the heat of summer, that the whole party should continue in the island till the next day. The ladies, however, in the evening suddenly changed their resolution, and judiciously ordered the boats to be got ready. The rest of the company followed so good an example, and the night was spent, under the hospitable roof of Mr. Thomas of Carreg, much more agreeably than could have been done in the island.' *'North Wales' Vol. I.* William Bingley (1804)

This king died in 1826. He was not named but we can be certain of the date as Lord Newborough II (Thomas John Wynn) received a letter on 3 July regarding the design of Enlli's lighthouse. The letter states that the King of Enlli had died. 'The poor old King of Bardsey is dead and buried on the island.'

There is no record of his grave in Enlli's graveyard. Within three weeks Lord Newborough had visited Enlli on a ship called 'Arvon'. He brought friends with him in other boats for the new king's coronation.

John Williams I

John Williams, Cristin Uchaf was crowned (King John Williams Ist) in August 1826 and the crown was used for the first time. We assume that Lord Newborough was responsible for the crown and that he brought it with him to the ceremony.

King Enlli's crown is now displayed in Bangor Museum, now known as Storiell, after spending many years in Liverpool's Maritime Museum. A detailed description of the 1826 coronation is given by John Jones FRGS

who visited Enlli to write his articles on the island for ‘Y Traethodydd’ in 1884.

John Williams, King of Enlli (1841-1926)

The King and queen (John Williams 1st) have been dead for a while their three children remain, possessing the regalia which consists of the crown and a snuff box. During the life of the present Lord Newborough’s uncle, John Williams, Cristin was formally crowned king of the entire island, and there was quite a fuss about the ceremony. The ceremony took place outdoors by the “Cafn”. The elected king was made to stand on a chair as the crown was placed on his head, and spectators all shouted ‘Hooray’ which ripped the sky. As many as a dozen yachts full of ladies and gentlemen floated nearby, all of which had come to the ceremony.

To celebrate the coronation cannons were fired continuously, fireworks were thrown from the yachts and money was distributed to the islanders. It was a joyous day on the island. The crown remains with the Cristin Uchaf family to this day, although there is no formal king or queen. The regalia remain there and displayed to visitors with joy and much pleasure.’

King John Williams 1st was born in 1799. He farmed Cristin Uchaf and was the Trinity House agent on the island. In 1833 he heroically sailed the barque ‘Lady Douglas’ to safety at St. Tudwal’s Islands. Despite his skills as a seaman John Williams drowned in the Swnt (Sound) on 14 April 1841. He was buried in Aberdaron cemetery. He reigned from 1826 to 1841.

A detailed report in the ‘Caernarvon Herald’ describes the tragic events of April 1841.

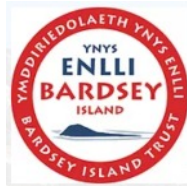
Having some business to transact at Pwllheli, John Williams, ‘Master of the Bardsey Light Tender’ and ‘King of Bardsey,’ instructed his servant that morning between five and six o’clock to get a small boat ready, with a sprit sail, for the purpose of crossing to Aberdaron. But after the two men had gone some distance John Williams landed the servant on the island, saying that he could manage the boat very well alone. The servant

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went home but he glanced back and saw that the boat had capsized. John Williams struggling in the water. The servant dashed to get help and another boat was launched immediately and manned. The ebb tide had already drawn John Williams a long way out to sea, his only support being two small oars, which he had managed to get under his arms.

When taken into the rescue boat he was said to have been much exhausted. He spoke but a few words and expired. He was about 42 years of age and his wife had given birth to a child the Sunday evening prior to this accident which made her a widow.'

The newborn baby was too young to succeed his father and it is likely that Enlli remained without a king until the end of 19th Century.



The Pretenders

Despite this, there is reference to the Rev. Robert Williams being the monarch. He was born in Y Gegin Fawr, in 1796 but lived on the island from 1824 until his death in 1875. He was buried in the cemetery.

In his diary, the Revd. William T Jones, a Missionary/Minister on Enlli from 1875 said that his predecessor Robert Williams was King of Enlli as well as a Calvinist Minister and farmer of Hen Dŷ and that his wife Sian was queen. He was highly respected and was called Esgob Enlli (Bishop of Enlli), and referred to himself as king. Whilst preaching on temperance in Betws Y Coed he told the congregation.

'Roedd yn uchel iawn ei barch fe'i gelwid yn Esgob Enlli ac yntau mae'n debyg yn honi iddo'i hun fod yn frenin. Tra'r ddirwest ym Metws y Coed rhoddodd ar ddeall i'r gynulleidfa mai ef oedd y Brenin ac ymhellach,

“On the land where I live there is a King and queen who have signed the pledge and both are keen abstainers.”



John Williams II

King John Williams II wearing his crown in 1899

John Williams from the Cristin family became king at the end of the 19th century. It is said that he reigned for a short period, possibly until 1918, and that he then emigrated to the mainland. Drink took its toll on him – spirits that came ashore following shipwrecks in the First World War. It is said that a cairn of empty beer casks was built on the mainland to attract John Williams. He unwillingly crossed the Swnt to the Promised Land and was soon taken to the workhouse in Pwllheli where he died.

M Dinorben Griffith visited John Williams II’s home in 1898 and provided the Wide World Magazine with an article (December 1899) together with a picture of his living room. But this is a photograph of the living room in Carreg Bach. John Williams lived in Cristin.

‘The Bardsey of today is as unique as it was in the past. It has only seventy-two inhabitants thirty-six men and thirty six females. They are ruled by a "King," who is crowned on his election, and who, like his

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subjects, earns his bread by the sweat of his brow. The present Ruler succeeded his father, King John Williams the First, who was unfortunately drowned whilst crossing over alone to the mainland. With great difficulty we induced his present Majesty to sit for his portrait; it was the first and only one ever taken of him. He permitted the crown to be placed on his head for the occasion, but no persuasion even on the part of his wife could make him put on his regal Sunday suit. The crown is of home manufacture, and is neither very valuable nor very beautiful, and the King, with a sigh of intense relief, as soon as the sitting was over, exchanged his cumbrous emblem of sovereignty for an old hat.'

This is how the picture of John Williams II was taken, and it featured on a popular postcard.

Love Pritchard



The last king of Enlli was born at Tÿ Pellaf and was not of the Cristin lineage. Love Pritchard was born in 1842 .That is how Syr Mortimer Wheeler met him in one of Aberdaron's taverns when he visited Llÿn in 1922 but there was not much conversation.

'Against the bar was leaning an old salt, with a mahogany face framed in whiskers. Then to our 'good morning' he vouchsafed a grunt. Then, after a long lapse, he spoke slowly in a rather gruff Caernarvonshire singsong – 'Where did we come from?' I rashly ventured 'Cardiff.' The fog thickened during another long pause, and then from the whiskers came the terse sentiment. 'All sorts comes from Cardiff' followed by a skilful expectoration towards the door. Shortly afterwards our pirate, without

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further speech, left the bar and made his way down to the shore where a boy was preparing to hoist the sail in a twenty foot boat. The postman leaned over the bar: 'That was the new King of Bardsey,' he said, 'he does not much like foreigners.' So much we had inferred, but the prospects of our forthcoming visit to the island kingdom were none the happier for our new knowledge.

Eventually our launch arrived. In mid channel we found the Royal Barge becalmed and adrift. I stopped the launch and offered a tow, which was grudgingly accepted. The gesture was not infructuous. When we landed, we were graciously beckoned by His Majesty to the hospitality of his cottage, and when we left the island that evening three lively lobsters of the most vivid ultramarine hue were put on board by Royal Command. During a long and difficult journey back to Caernarvon through the rainy darkness, the lobsters and I conducted an unceasing battle on the back seat of a lampless car. The lobster is a cunning and unprincipled fighter ...' 'Still Digging' (Sir Mortimer Wheeler) (1955)

According to Wheeler, Love Pritchard had been promoted king in 1918. But it is said that he had taken over the role in 1911, probably due to John Williams II's condition.

Love Pritchard offered his services in the First World War but was rejected because of his age. This refusal did not please him, and it maybe explains why some people said jokingly that Enlli remained neutral during the war and that it allegedly supported Kaiser Wilhelm II.

A photograph features Love Pritchard with one of his boats in Porth Solfach wearing his crown in the company of Captain Jarret, one of the lighthouse keepers, and another of him in his working clothes wearing his crown. Like many of the islanders Love Pritchard left for the mainland in the 1920's.

A year before his death in 1926 he visited the National Eisteddfod in Pwllheli and was welcomed by the crowds as one of the 'Cymry Tramor' a Welshman visiting from another land.

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He was buried in Aberdaron cemetery close to the beach.

In 'Y Dinesydd' (June 1931) there is an article about the last king of Enlli written by Gwylfa, the editor.

'Indeed, it would be difficult to find anyone more skilful at catching shellfish than the folk of Enlli. This is what the old Love Pritchard was doing up to the end of his life catching lobsters. Even on his deathbed he called to his sister "Put the lobster pot down, will you." The old fisherman's mind was now revisiting his 'cynefin' (haunt) his favourite pastime...??? After the old king died his sister said:" The last thing he did you see was catch lobsters.

He knew where to get them, and he was telling me where to put the pot down, poor Love, "the last of the kings."

This is how his island career came to an end. He was of the same blood as Madryn family Sir Love Jones Parry and his line. The same name runs in the lineage "Love". The king was honest and harmless. He would sometimes drink when visiting Aberdaron, but if his antics were reported, "I only had four small glasses, Mr Ifas." Then he would detail where he'd enjoyed each one of the four glasses, with the innocence of a child. There was no nonsense about the old islander.'

Bardsey Island Trust

In 1978 a campaign was launched to buy Bardsey from the Hon. Michael Pearson (Lord Cowdray). The campaign was led by dedicated Bardsey enthusiasts from all over the UK and supported by many Welsh academics and public figures, as well as the church in Wales. The island was bought in 1979. To learn more about the work of the Bardsey Island Trust





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Mae Ynys Eidd bron i ddey flitr y tu hwnt i ben draw Llyn. Mae yno bron 450 o acer ac anhewddod o ryw ddeuddeg i bymtheg o dal. Arferai' ynys fod yn gynfhan twysig i beirnisron ac yn safle mynachlog dwy gpdol y Oesoedd Canol. Ychydig o'r fymachlog cydal i'r wlad hebba adedion y llyn. Rhwng 1870 a 1875 fe atgwydd y ffermydd se-maent yn enghreifftiau diddorol o gynllunio amaethyddol. Cynllunwyd y goleudy gan Joseph Nelson a chwalhawyd ei godd yn 1821.

The island of Bardsey, or Ynys Eidd, lies nearly two miles off the extreme west end of Llyn. The total area is nearly 450 acres with a settlement of twelve to fifteen houses. The island was an important place of pilgrimage and monastic settlement throughout the middle ages. Apart from a ruined tower, little remains visible of the monastery. Between 1870 and 1875 the farms were rebuilt and are interesting examples of agricultural planning. The prominent lighthouse designed by Joseph Nelson was completed in 1821.



Aerial View of Bardsey Island



View From Bardsey Island



St. Mary's Abbey Bardsley



Bardsey Island



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