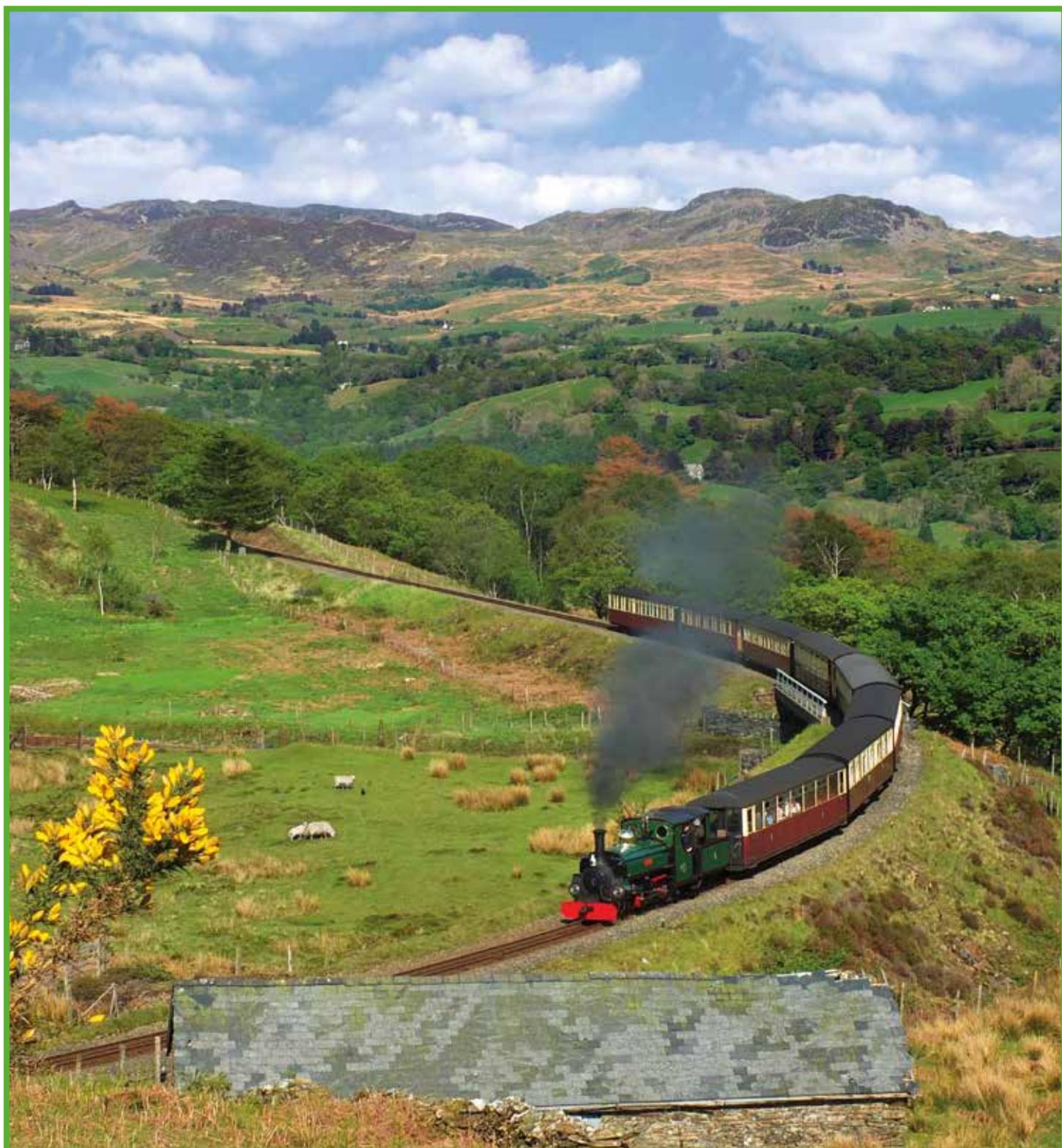


STEAMING THROUGH **Snowdonia** *IN THE TOP LEFT-HAND CORNER OF WALES*



Love Snowdonia ♥ Great Scenery ♥ Fresh Air ♥ Plan Your Trip

Croeso Welcome





Welcome to the new edition of 'Steaming Through Snowdonia', your comprehensive guide not just to our world-famous steam railways which run through the heart of the mountains, but also to all the other amazing experiences you can enjoy within the top left-hand corner of Wales.

Within the following pages you can read all about the oldest surviving railway company in the world, the Ffestiniog Railway, and its sister line, the Welsh Highland Railway, which together boast the longest narrow-gauge steam railway journey in Britain. Combined, the two lines which meet on the Welsh coast at Porthmadog, cover a distance of 40 miles, travelling from the atmospheric Victorian slate quarry town of Blaenau Ffestiniog, via Porthmadog and through the heart of the Snowdonia National Park to the magnificent 12th century World Heritage castle at Caernarfon.

This alone is enough to bring tens of thousands of people to the region every year. However, once here, visitors soon discover the steam railways are just one of many unique and exciting experiences to be found within the region.

Beautiful landscapes of mountains, lakes, forests, rivers and waterfalls are complemented by a stunning coastline comprised of sandy beaches, hidden rocky coves and soaring sea cliffs. Ancient castles, glorious gardens, spectacular wildlife, fascinating industrial heritage, fantasy villages and heart-pumping activities all add to the mix and, as you will see within the following pages of this magazine, much of it can be directly accessed from the Ffestiniog and Welsh Highland Railway's network of stations.

There is something for everyone within the top left-hand corner of Wales. Children, families, teenagers looking for kicks, hipsters on the hunt for cutting-edge culture, professionals taking time out from the fray and those enjoying life after retirement will all find what they are looking for in Snowdonia - and along the way they will also find a place where simple pleasures abound, where healthy fresh air is the norm and traffic jams are not.

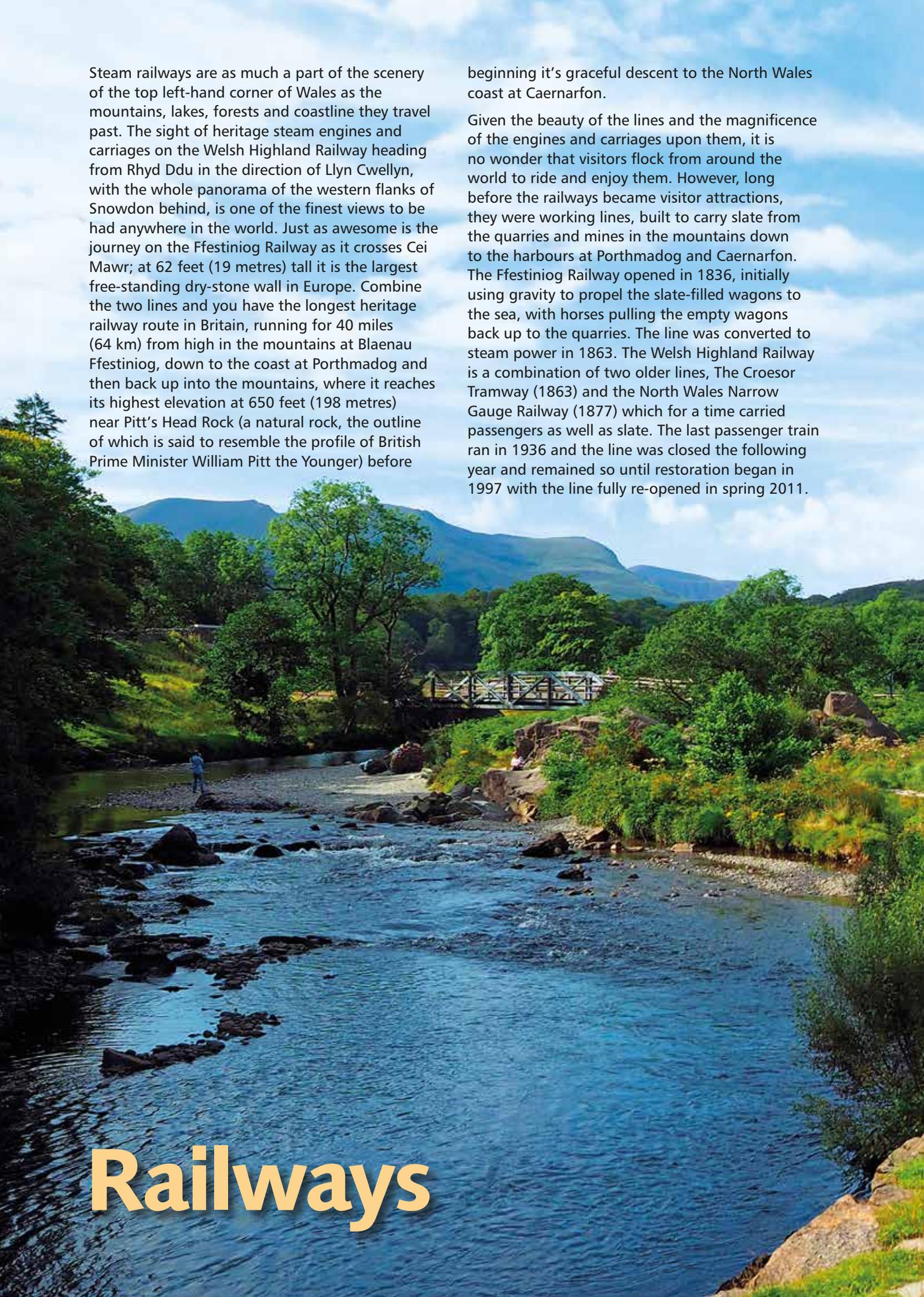
Inspired? Then browse the following pages for even more inspiration...

Steam railways are as much a part of the scenery of the top left-hand corner of Wales as the mountains, lakes, forests and coastline they travel past. The sight of heritage steam engines and carriages on the Welsh Highland Railway heading from Rhyd Ddu in the direction of Llyn Cwellyn, with the whole panorama of the western flanks of Snowdon behind, is one of the finest views to be had anywhere in the world. Just as awesome is the journey on the Ffestiniog Railway as it crosses Cei Mawr; at 62 feet (19 metres) tall it is the largest free-standing dry-stone wall in Europe. Combine the two lines and you have the longest heritage railway route in Britain, running for 40 miles (64 km) from high in the mountains at Blaenau Ffestiniog, down to the coast at Porthmadog and then back up into the mountains, where it reaches its highest elevation at 650 feet (198 metres) near Pitt's Head Rock (a natural rock, the outline of which is said to resemble the profile of British Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger) before

beginning its graceful descent to the North Wales coast at Caernarfon.

Given the beauty of the lines and the magnificence of the engines and carriages upon them, it is no wonder that visitors flock from around the world to ride and enjoy them. However, long before the railways became visitor attractions, they were working lines, built to carry slate from the quarries and mines in the mountains down to the harbours at Porthmadog and Caernarfon. The Ffestiniog Railway opened in 1836, initially using gravity to propel the slate-filled wagons to the sea, with horses pulling the empty wagons back up to the quarries. The line was converted to steam power in 1863. The Welsh Highland Railway is a combination of two older lines, The Croesor Tramway (1863) and the North Wales Narrow Gauge Railway (1877) which for a time carried passengers as well as slate. The last passenger train ran in 1936 and the line was closed the following year and remained so until restoration began in 1997 with the line fully re-opened in spring 2011.

Railways





Both the Ffestiniog and Welsh Highland Railway can be accessed from Porthmadog Harbour Station. For information on other stations and train timetables visit www.festrail.co.uk, email enquiries@ffwhr.com or telephone 01766 516024.





We are proud that all our new carriages are built in our workshops at Boston Lodge by our own craftsmen. We are even able to take on young local apprentices to ensure these skills are passed on for the next generation. We were delighted that the quality of our craftsmanship was endorsed when first class Pullman observation carriage, 'Glaslyn', was officially named by Her Majesty The Queen.

Welcome Aboard





Our trains may be small but our welcome is huge! From the friendly chap in the car park who helps you find a space and who can give you some tips on which stations to visit, to the driver giving the engine a polish while he waits for departure time, everyone is here to help you enjoy your trip. Many of our staff are actually volunteers, giving their time to make sure the railways are a great place to visit. They love their railway and they want you to love it too.

We are constantly investing in our carriages - after all, that is where you will spend most of your visit so your comfort is important. In 2016, we launched a whole new train with a beautiful observation saloon, kitchen, toilet and some modern standard class saloons with double glazing, heating and extra leg room. Three more new carriages have been added to the fleet in 2017 with more on the way. Once on board, our stewards are there to look after your needs

with an at your seat refreshment service on both railways and freshly prepared hot and cold food on the longer Welsh Highland Railway. Imagine yourself sitting back in your seat with a freshly prepared snack and a glass of local beer or a soft drink whilst gazing out at the stunning scenery passing your window - what a way to travel!

To make the most of your visit, it is a good idea to allow a whole day, especially for the Welsh Highland; this will give you time to explore as well as travel. There are, however, a myriad of shorter journeys, one way trips and circular tours using other forms of transport so we hope you will find a journey to suit you. There is a lot more information on our website www.festrail.co.uk. You can book many of our tickets and other services online.

We look forward to seeing you



Two popular routes up Snowdon begin from Welsh Highland Railway stations – the Rhyd Ddu Path and the Snowdon Ranger Path. Both routes approach the mountain from the west and offer superb views of coastline as well as mountains. By studying the railway timetable it is possible to use the train to reach the beginning of one path, climb to the summit and then descend the other path, where you can take the train back to your original starting point.

Mountains



The Snowdonia National Park covers 823 square miles (2,130 km²) and is one of the most mountainous regions of the British Isles. Within its boundary there are 15 mountains over 3,000 feet (914 metres) in height and a further 130 that are over 2,000 feet (609 metres). The tallest of them all is Snowdon, which at 3,560 feet (1,085 metres) is the tallest mountain in both Wales and England. The Welsh name for Snowdon is Yr Wyddfa, which translates as 'the tumulus', 'the barrow' or even 'the tomb'. All three names are said to refer to a legend which states the mountain is the final resting place of a giant killed by King Arthur (see page 31). On occasions, the name 'Eryri' is used for the mountain, although strictly speaking this is the generic Welsh name for the region of Snowdonia. Eryri translates as 'the land of eagles'; however, recent evidence suggests it may derive from the Latin 'oriri' which simply means a 'rising' or 'highlands'.

Each year around 360,000 people climb to the summit of Snowdon making it one of the most climbed mountains in the world. There are seven main routes to the summit ranging from the relatively 'easy walking' Llanberis Path (9 miles, 14.6 km) to the difficult Crib Goch route (7 miles, 11.2 km) which requires some scrambling and a very good head for heights.

Connoisseurs of mountain walking in North Wales will tell you there are many other mountains in the region that are more enjoyable to climb and less busy and that may be true; however, there are few people who can resist the opportunity to climb one of the world's most iconic mountains and marvel at its stunning views which, on a clear day, can stretch as far as the Wicklow Mountains of Ireland.

Lakes



From Rhyd Ddu station on the Welsh Highland Railway, you simply cross the road to reach an accessible path along the shores of Llyn y Gader. Looking back towards the station, across the lake gives stunning views of the summit of Snowdon. This is start of the Lôn Gwyrfa Trail which will take you all the way to Beddgelert.

Where you find mountains you normally find lakes and that is certainly the case in North Wales and particularly within the Snowdonia National Park where there are over 100 lakes or llynnoedd (llyn is the Welsh for lake) greater than one acre (0.4 hectares) in size - this is arguably more than within the Lake District National Park.

The majority of lakes are natural lakes formed as a result of glaciation and these include the largest, Llyn Tegid (Bala Lake) which has a surface area of 1,196 acres (484 hectares) or 678 full size football pitches. Of a similar size is Llyn Trawsfynydd, a man-made lake originally constructed in the 1920s to supply water to a local hydroelectric power scheme at Maentwrog. Other lakes are reservoirs, using the natural geography to store water off the surrounding hills and supply it to many towns and cities.

There is much discussion as to which of Snowdonia's lakes are the most beautiful; to some extent 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder' and each lake can look dramatically different in varying weather conditions and seasons. However, most agree it is on calm, blue sky days when the lakes mirror the surrounding hills, mountains and forests which have the best aesthetic appeal, and these would include large lakes such as Llyn Gwynant and Llyn Dinas in the Nant Gwynant valley to the east of Beddgelert, Llyn Ogwen near Bethesda and Llyn Cwellyn on the western side of the National Park. In this instance though size is not everything and smaller llynnoedd, such as Llyn Mair near Tan y Bwlch, Llyn y Gader near Rhyd Ddu and Llyn Glaslyn immediately below the summit cairn of Snowdon are equally as beautiful and atmospheric.



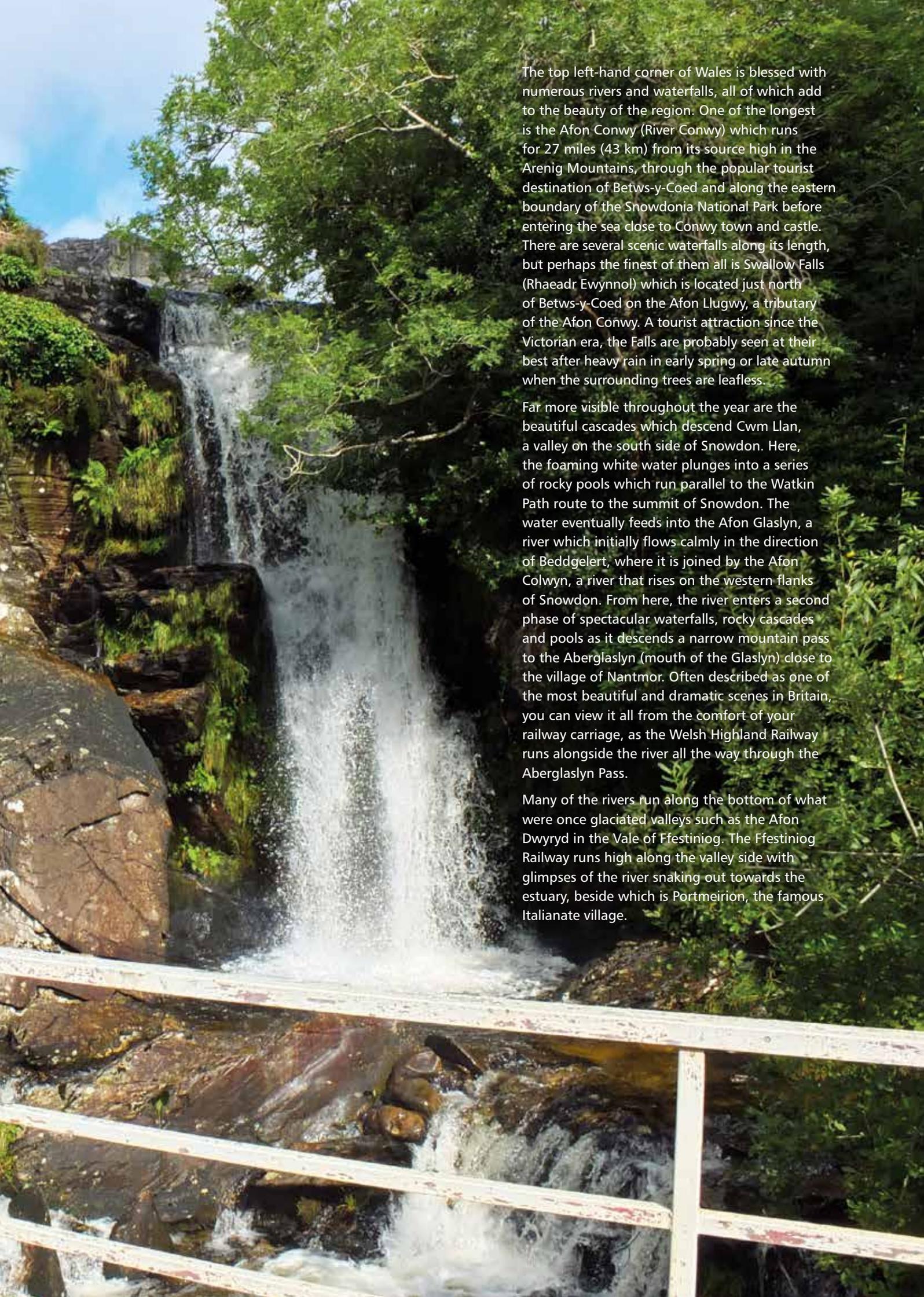
Rivers & Waterfalls



Both Nantmor and Beddgelert stations on the Welsh Highland Railway provide easy access to The Fisherman's Path, a two mile (3.2 km) walk which follows the river and waterfalls through the Aberglaslyn Pass. It is possible to disembark at one station, walk the pass and then continue your railway journey from the other station.

The Ffestiniog Railway runs through the forests high above the Afon Dwyryd. There are great walks to be had in this valley with some fantastic views out towards the coast. As it approaches Blaenau Ffestiniog, waterfalls abound, tumbling down the steep hillside. The train passes over the foot of one such waterfall as it crosses the river before entering Tanygrisiau station.





The top left-hand corner of Wales is blessed with numerous rivers and waterfalls, all of which add to the beauty of the region. One of the longest is the Afon Conwy (River Conwy) which runs for 27 miles (43 km) from its source high in the Arenig Mountains, through the popular tourist destination of Betws-y-Coed and along the eastern boundary of the Snowdonia National Park before entering the sea close to Conwy town and castle. There are several scenic waterfalls along its length, but perhaps the finest of them all is Swallow Falls (Rhaeadr Ewynnol) which is located just north of Betws-y-Coed on the Afon Llugwy, a tributary of the Afon Conwy. A tourist attraction since the Victorian era, the Falls are probably seen at their best after heavy rain in early spring or late autumn when the surrounding trees are leafless.

Far more visible throughout the year are the beautiful cascades which descend Cwm Llan, a valley on the south side of Snowdon. Here, the foaming white water plunges into a series of rocky pools which run parallel to the Watkin Path route to the summit of Snowdon. The water eventually feeds into the Afon Glaslyn, a river which initially flows calmly in the direction of Beddgelert, where it is joined by the Afon Colwyn, a river that rises on the western flanks of Snowdon. From here, the river enters a second phase of spectacular waterfalls, rocky cascades and pools as it descends a narrow mountain pass to the Aberglaslyn (mouth of the Glaslyn) close to the village of Nantmor. Often described as one of the most beautiful and dramatic scenes in Britain, you can view it all from the comfort of your railway carriage, as the Welsh Highland Railway runs alongside the river all the way through the Aberglaslyn Pass.

Many of the rivers run along the bottom of what were once glaciated valleys such as the Afon Dwyryd in the Vale of Ffestiniog. The Ffestiniog Railway runs high along the valley side with glimpses of the river snaking out towards the estuary, beside which is Portmeirion, the famous Italianate village.

Coastal Path



Sections of the 'All Wales Coastal Footpath' can be easily accessed from Dinas and Caernarfon stations on the Welsh Highland Railway and Porthmadog Harbour Station where Ffestiniog Railway and Welsh Highland Railways meet. The Welsh Highland line runs 'coast to coast' from Porthmadog to Caernarfon and takes in the glorious scenery of the Snowdonia National Park along the way. A circular section of the coastal footpath also runs inland alongside the Afon Dwyrdd to its bridge-crossing by the delightful village of Maentwrog. Access to this route can be achieved by disembarking the Ffestiniog Railway at Penrhyndeudraeth or Tan y Bwlch station.

May 2012 saw the official opening of the 'All Wales Coastal Footpath'; a long-distance trail which follows, or runs close to, the coastline of Wales. Its total length is 870 miles (1,400 km) and it runs from Chepstow in the south to the mouth of the River Dee near Queensferry in the north and it is the first coastal path in the world to trace a country's entire coastline.

Over 350 miles of the route follow the coastline of the top left-hand corner of Wales, including a 120 mile (193 km) stretch around Anglesey (Ynys Môn) and 91 miles (146 km) around the Llyn Peninsula. This latter route runs from Porthmadog to Caernarfon and takes in the most north-westerly tip of Wales overlooking Bardsey Island (Ynys Enlli). In places, the path follows the ancient pilgrimage route to Bardsey, which is reputed to be the burial place for 20,000 saints. Bardsey

became an important religious site when Saint Cadfan built a monastery there in 516, although by then the island was already being used as a refuge for persecuted Christians.

The coastal scenery around the Llyn Peninsula with its hidden rocky coves, soaring sea cliffs and stunning views is undoubtedly some of the finest in Britain, as well as being a haven for wildlife. bottlenose dolphins, porpoises and grey seals are regularly sighted in the coastal waters of the Irish Sea and red-billed choughs, Manx shearwaters and puffins all nest in the region. From the highest cliffs of the Llyn Peninsula on a clear day it is possible to see the coastline of Ireland running south from Dublin.





Beaches

One of the surprises for many people when they arrive in the top left-hand corner of Wales for the first time is the abundance of lovely beaches. Some liken them to the beaches of Cornwall but with one major difference, North West Wales beaches rarely, if ever, get overcrowded. The peace and tranquillity is beguiling, as is the cleanliness; around the coast there are no fewer than 20 Blue Flag beaches, compared with just seven in Cornwall.

Anglesey and the Llyn Peninsula alone boast over 100 stunning beaches and that is without including those east of the Menai Strait and south of Porthmadog. In truth, it is difficult to pick out the very best of all North West Wales' beaches, but some worthy of highlighting are Porth Neigwl (Hell's Mouth), a four-mile-long dog-friendly beach with good waves, making it popular with surfers; Aberdaron with its delightful village and St Hywyn's Church clustered along

the shoreline; Porth Oer (Whistling Sands) which gets its name from the distinctive 'squeaking' sound the sand particles make as you walk upon them; Porth Dinllaen, probably best known for Ty Coch, the pub on the beach frequented by actress Demi Moore in the film 'Half Light'; Dinas Dinlle, just south of Caernarfon, which has unrivalled views of Anglesey and Holyhead Mountain; the Anglesey beaches of Treath Cymyran, White Beach, Newborough and the National Trust's Porth Dafarch; Harlech Beach, accessed through the internationally famous Royal St David's golf course and backed by sand dunes designated as a National Nature Reserve (NNR) and a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI); and finally Black Rock Sands, a two and a half mile (4 km) stretch of golden sand near Porthmadog.



It is just a 15 minute stroll from Porthmadog Harbour Station to the attractive little port and sandy coves of Borth y Gest. From here, footpaths lead through the dunes to the delightful beaches of Morfa Bychan, Samson Bay and Black Rock Sands. From Caernarfon station, there are walks along the foreshore of the Menai Strait and access to the 'All Wales Coastal Footpath'. It is an easy 40 minute walk from Dinas station to the Blue Flag Beach at Dinas Dinlle...

A well-marked trail through the woodlands to Plas Tan y Bwlch starts from Tan y Bwlch station on the Ffestiniog Railway. A trail guide is available free of charge from the station café and the walk normally takes less than one hour.

A four mile (6.5 km) wonderful forest walk through Beddgelert Forest can be accessed from both Beddgelert and Rhyd Ddu stations on the Welsh Highland Railway. Walk in either direction and then take the train back to your original starting point.



Forests

Along with mountains and lakes, forests are one of the most dominant and beautiful landscape features of the top left-hand corner of Wales. They clothe and soften the more rugged aspects of the region, provide shelter for buildings and grazing land, offer a variety of important habitats for animals, birds, ferns, mosses and lichens and give a constant reminder of the ever-changing seasons. Approximately 89,000 acres (36,000 hectares) of the Snowdonia National Park are covered by trees, which represents around 17% of the total ground area within the park. This is a mixture of native Welsh woodland (predominantly deciduous trees such as oak, ash, birch and rowan) and exotic forests (predominantly evergreen trees such as spruce, pine, fir and deciduous larch).

Some of the finest 'low-level' walking in North West Wales is within these forests and woodlands. There are literally hundreds of miles of well-signed paths and trails, including those within Natural Resources Wales (Forestry Commission) forests such as Coed y Brenin near Dolgellau, Gwydir Forest near Betws-y-Coed and Beddgelert Forest.

Of particular note is Coed Craig Glanconwy Forest close to Betws-y-Coed, which is now home to the tallest trees in Britain and northern Europe, including a Douglas Fir which is currently 223 feet (68 metres) tall. The woodlands surrounding the Snowdonia National Park Centre at Plas Tan y Bwlch are also well worth a visit as they contain not only 'champion trees' (biggest of their kind in Britain), but some of the earliest introductions of exotic trees into Britain.



Wildlife



There is no shortage of wildlife within the top left-hand corner of Wales and particularly within the 823 square miles (2,130 km²) of the Snowdonia National Park. Otters now thrive in rivers such as the Glaslyn which flows south from Snowdon to the coast at Porthmadog, polecat numbers are on the increase and a population boom of 'wild' mountain goats, means they are regularly seen grazing on the lower slopes of the Nant Gwynant

valley and in the Beddgelert area. Although the goats have existed in North Wales since the end of the last Ice Age 10,000 years ago, they are officially not 'wild' but 'feral' as they were domesticated about 8,000 BC by nomadic tribes living within the area.

On the Isle of Anglesey (Ynys Môn), the number of red squirrels have increased dramatically over the past twenty years: in 1997 there were just 40; today there are over 500 and a small number have made it back onto the mainland and are living in woodland close to the Menai Strait. Good places to spot red squirrels are in the grounds of the National Trust property at Plas Newydd, Plas Cadnant Hidden Garden and Newborough Forest.

Perhaps the most exciting wildlife story in recent years has been the return of breeding ospreys to several locations within the region including the Dyfi valley near Machynlleth and the Glaslyn valley near Porthmadog, where osprey chicks have been successfully raised every year since 2005. Visitor centres are now open at both sites and nest webcams beam footage of the osprey's progress to hundreds of followers around the world.



The Bywyd Gwylt Glaslyn Wildlife visitor centre is located next to Pont Croesor station on the Welsh Highland Railway and is open during the day throughout the breeding season from April until September. Walks from Beddgelert station on the Welsh Highland Railway lead into Nant Gwynant, where mountain goats are often seen.

The diversity of the Glaslyn estuary beside the Ffestiniog Railway at Porthmadog offers an excellent place for birdwatchers with a wide variety of waders and wildfowl. The Porthmadog station signalman has the best view from his box of any in the country and can spot Little Egret fishing from his door!



Our Railway Events

Cwrrw ar y Cledrau – Rail Ale Festival – Mid May

This event is now in its thirteenth year and is a lively weekend combining steam trains with real ales and ciders, food and live music. It is a popular date with locals and visitors alike. Many of the beers are from local microbreweries including the renowned Purple Moose Brewery right in the heart of Porthmadog.

Victorian Weekend – October

This is just a good excuse to get out all the kit! The Ffestiniog Railway is often described as 'History on the Move'. Many of the locomotives are from the Victorian era while some of our older carriages and wagons have been lovingly restored. What better way to show them off than an event dedicated to that wonderful era. And it is not just about trains – watch the Victorian ladies promenade along the platform, the cloth capped railwaymen riding the gravity trains and visit the stalls of the Victorian market. Porthmadog itself is a Victorian town and its history is closely interwoven with that of the Ffestiniog Railway and several towns join in with this event giving it a festival feel.

Summer of Fun – Summer School Holidays

Footplate rides, children's entertainers and evenings of 'Food on the Move' - in the 'Summer of Fun' events add that little bit extra to your visit, often at no extra expense! There is a comprehensive programme throughout the school holidays.

Summer evening music specials are always great fun. Regular group 'Dr Jazz' return each year with their fun evenings of foot tapping jazz at Tan y Bwlch station. They are joined this August by rock 'n' roll group, The Del Sharrons, who round off this series of music trains. Come and enjoy the music and tasty barbeque, let your hair down and dance out under the stars. These are semi-outdoor events so don't forget your broolly!

Halloween Trains – October

Dare you take the ghostly train ride into the woods? Don your ghoulish costumes and join the witches and spooks for an evening of scary fun, a fiendish feast and scary surprises.

Santa Specials – December

Santa trains run on both railways during December, and what better time to travel with the splendid crisp scenery, presents from Santa for the kids and a glass of sherry for the grown ups.

There is more information about all of our events on our website, www.festrail.co.uk, or why not follow us on Facebook for all the up-to-date news?

Away Events

Our 'Away' events are for a very different audience as we introduce ourselves, the railways and the wonderful area in which we live to people in different parts of the country. You may well have been given this magazine at such an event.

These events are very much about teamwork; local volunteers will come and talk to you about their favourite little railways, drivers entertain with short trips or footplate rides, while others will have organised the track, polished the carriages and ensured that everything is there to give a good show. We often share our efforts with others, such as sister members of the Great Little Trains of Wales or other local attractions such as Portmeirion and Llechwedd Slate Caverns.

... and the most frequently asked question – "How did you get it here?" Well, we couldn't do these trips without the support and care of our hauliers, The Milner family from Stoke-on-Trent. They treat our little trains with the greatest of care and never blink when we suggest they take their lorry into Kings Cross station at midnight or into the middle of an indoor caravan show in Manchester. Then comes the 'Wallace and Gromit' style shifting into position – you just wouldn't believe it! If this has left you intrigued, have a look at this:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=oFypvj1GQGE.

There are lots more videos for you to watch from our in-house cameraman. Enjoy!

It is no secret that North West Wales contains some of the most beautiful scenery within the British Isles. The region has long been admired and visited for its rugged mountains, waterfalls, tranquil lakes, forests, seaside resorts, miles of glorious sandy beaches, secluded rocky coves, magnificent castles, historic mansions, heritage steam railways, slate caverns and even gold mines.

However, the gardens of Snowdonia and North Wales are not so well known and yet within the region there is a stunning collection of world class gardens to be discovered; gardens which thrive because their westerly location allows them to benefit from the warmth and moisture of the Gulf Stream. Hard frosts are rare and droughts seldom long, particularly in the coastal regions, making it an ideal place to grow plants collected from every corner of the world.

Some of the finest gardens within the region include Bodnant Gardens, a National Trust garden which has superb collections of rhododendrons, camellias and magnolias and extensive views to the mountains of Snowdonia from the west-facing terraces; Plas Cadnant, a beautiful ten acre (four hectare) private garden (now open to the public) situated close to the Menai Strait on Anglesey and lovingly restored over the past 21 years by its owner Anthony Tavernor; and Plas Brondanw, the ancestral home of Portmeirion architect Sir Clough Williams-Ellis, which is surrounded by a unique and very beautiful 'garden of rooms', with each room given a different theme and bordered by yew hedging and flamboyant topiary, which also frame the sublime views of the surrounding mountains. In late May and early June each year, the gardens of the region come together to stage a North Wales Festival of Gardens, www.gardenstovisit.net



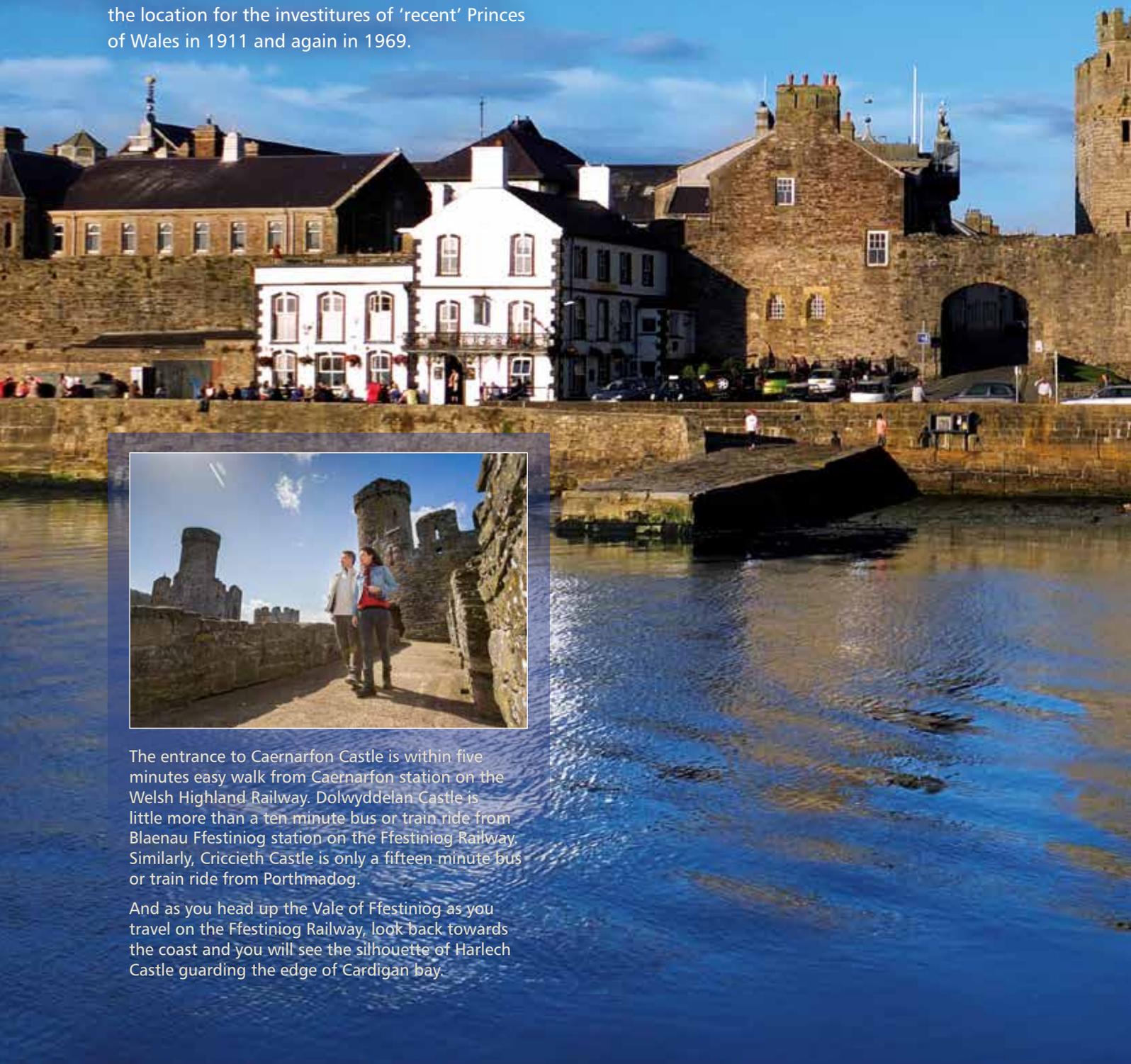


The gardens of Plas Brondanw (www.plasbrondanw.com) are situated on the outskirts of Garreg, Llanfrothen, which is a 30 minute easy walk from Pont Croesor station on the Welsh Highland Railway. The gardens of Plas Tan y Bwlch (www.plastanybwlch.com) can be accessed from both Tan y Bwlch and Plas Halt stations on the Ffestiniog Railway. The railways themselves are justifiably proud of their floral displays, especially the long flowerbed at Minffordd Station which is lovingly maintained by our volunteers and is an attraction in its own right.

Gardens

There are over 20 castles in the top left-hand corner of Wales, some almost as intact as the day they were built, others gloriously romantic ruins hinting at past glory. Interestingly, despite being well and truly in Wales, they are not all 'Welsh' castles; a good number were built for the English King Edward I as part of his 'Iron Ring' of fortresses, constructed in the late 13th century to subdue the Welsh and reduce the risk of rebellion against English control. These castles include Conwy, Caernarfon, Beaumaris and Harlech. Each of these castles is strategically sited close to the sea which enhances defence, provides a way of escape and also a route for incoming supplies when under siege. Perhaps the mightiest of all of Edward I's castles is Caernarfon. Now a World Heritage site visited by thousands of people every year, it was the location for the investitures of 'recent' Princes of Wales in 1911 and again in 1969.

True Welsh castles tend to date from an earlier age and have associations with the original Welsh princes, such as Criccieth Castle, which stands so magnificently upon an imposing rocky prominence above the coastal town of the same name, with far-reaching views across Tremadog Bay. It was built in the early part of the 13th century for Llywelyn ap Iorwerth (Llewelyn the Great), who resisted English domination of Wales for over 40 years. Other castles built by the original Welsh princes include Dolbardarn Castle which is located by Llyn Pardarn near Llanberis and Dolwyddelan Castle which lies to the north east of Blaenau Ffestiniog and is said to have been built close to an earlier castle which was the birthplace of Llywelyn ap Iorwerth.



The entrance to Caernarfon Castle is within five minutes easy walk from Caernarfon station on the Welsh Highland Railway. Dolwyddelan Castle is little more than a ten minute bus or train ride from Blaenau Ffestiniog station on the Ffestiniog Railway. Similarly, Criccieth Castle is only a fifteen minute bus or train ride from Porthmadog.

And as you head up the Vale of Ffestiniog as you travel on the Ffestiniog Railway, look back towards the coast and you will see the silhouette of Harlech Castle guarding the edge of Cardigan bay.



Castles



The carriage Lloyd George travelled in is still owned by the Ffestiniog Railway and is in good working order. The Double Fairlie locomotive, 'David Lloyd George', was named in his honour.

A short train, bus or car ride from Porthmadog Harbour Station will take you to the seaside town of Criccieth and from there on to the village of Llanystumdwy, where there is the Lloyd George Museum. The final resting place and memorial to Lloyd George is close to the museum and situated alongside the River Dwyfor, where riverside paths follow one of Lloyd George's favourite walks.

The history of the Welsh language spans more than 1,500 years and has its roots in the Celtic language spoken during the Iron Age by Ancient Britons. Unlike many ancient languages which have all but died out, Welsh is still in common usage today and within the county of Gwynedd it is the first language for 66% of the resident population. It is a unique and beautifully descriptive language and stands at the very heart of much of the cultural activities of the region, including literature, music, song, dance, theatre and art. Perhaps the greatest celebration of Welsh culture and language today is the National Eisteddfod of Wales, an annual event held every August in a different location and attracting more than 160,000 visitors each year from all over the world. The Urdd National Eisteddfod is one of Europe's largest youth cultural festivals – every local school competes and it is very much part of the curriculum.

The Eisteddfod is both a celebration and an encouragement for people to use and indeed learn Welsh. On the north coast of the Llyn Peninsula, within what was the old granite-mining community of Nant Gwrtheyrn, the Welsh Language and Heritage Centre offers residential courses

throughout the year for adults who want to learn Welsh as a second language. There is also a visitor centre and café for those who simply want to visit Nant Gwrtheyrn to find out more about the history of the area, enjoy the peaceful surroundings and soak up the sense of place.

Perhaps one of the greatest advocates and supporters of Welsh language and culture was British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George (1863-1945). To this day, he is the only Prime Minister to have been Welsh and to have spoken English as a second language. He is widely considered to have been one of the top three Prime Ministers of the 20th century and is credited with laying the foundations for the modern welfare state by supporting the introduction of state pensions and introducing state financial support for the sick and the infirm, national insurance and unemployment insurance. Lloyd George lived much of his early life in Llanystumdwy and his later life in Criccieth. Before becoming a politician, he trained and practised as a solicitor, working out of offices in Porthmadog and Blaenau Ffestiniog and regularly using the Ffestiniog Railway to get to his place of work.



Welsh Language & Culture



Llechwedd Slate Caverns which run quarry tours both above and below ground, are just over one mile (1.6 km) from Blaenau Ffestiniog station on the Ffestiniog Railway. From Tanygrisiau station, also on the Ffestiniog Railway, fascinating walks lead through the ruined slate workings and dwellings of Cwmorthin, a derelict quarrying hamlet up in the mountains. From Beddgelert station on the Welsh Highland Railway, a flat level path of 40 minutes duration leads to the Sygun Copper Mine, which runs underground visitor tours. Paths from Tan y Bwlch station on the Ffestiniog Railway lead to Plas Tan y Bwlch, the Victorian mansion and home of slate mine owners, the Oakeley family.

On special occasions, it is possible to watch a reconstruction of a gravity train with original wagons, which have been carefully restored by our volunteers.

Slate

A photograph showing three men sitting on a wooden structure, possibly a railway wagon or a platform, overlooking a slate quarry. The man on the left is wearing a dark jacket and a cap, the man in the middle is wearing a white shirt and dark overalls, and the man on the right is wearing a dark jacket and a cap. The background shows a steep, rocky slope with green vegetation and a clear blue sky.

Nowhere in Britain does the geology of an area play such an important part in the landscapes of today than in this part of Wales. In particular, the geology of Snowdonia is both complex and varied, with rocky outcrops (and indeed whole mountains) collectively representing all geological periods from the Precambrian era 600 million years ago to the Jurassic period 150 million years ago. 450 million years ago, Snowdon was an active volcano, twice the height it is today and with a crater that stretched as far as Moel Hebog, a mountain now two miles to the west of the summit of Snowdon. Glaciation from successive Ice Ages since has carved and eroded the outlines of the mountains and the shapes of the valleys which are so familiar to us today.

It is past volcanic activity that produced the majority of the region's mineral wealth, which has been mined and quarried by humans for at least two thousand years. The Romans mined here for lead, silver, copper and gold and seams of all four still exist beneath our feet, but it is the mining and quarrying of slate that has had the biggest effect on both the landscape and the people who live here. Extracted from the ground and turned into roofing slates which were then exported around the world, slate brought prosperity and jobs to the area and was the catalyst for the building of the Ffestiniog Railway as a means of transporting slate from the mountain quarries to the ships waiting at port. In the 1890s, 17,000 men were directly employed in the industry, producing over

half a million tonnes of roofing slates out of more than 200 quarries and mines. The three biggest producers were the Penrhyn Quarry near Bethesda, Dinorwic Quarry near Llanberis and the Oakeley Quarry near Blaenau Ffestiniog.

The slate around Blaenau Ffestiniog was of particularly high quality and in big demand. The Ffestiniog Railway provided the ideal way to transport large quantities from the quarries down to the harbour at Porthmadog. Initially built as a gravity line, trains of wagons packed with cut slates, rolled down the line, often at great speed, with just the skill of the brakemen keeping them under control. The roaring sound of the train and the haunting wail of the head brakeman's horn would have echoed round the valley. It was the continuing demand for more and more slate that brought about the introduction of tiny steam locomotives in the 1860s, soon to be followed by the larger and powerful 'Double Fairlie' locomotives for which the railway is so famous.

Blaenau Ffestiniog is known as 'The Town That Roofed The World' and now the slate industry of North Wales is currently bidding for World Heritage status. This exciting initiative will certainly put the area on the map.

Legends



From Beddgelert station on the Welsh Highland Railway there are several paths which lead into the Nant Gwynant valley, including one which goes from the National Trust's Craflwyn Hall to the top of Dinas Emrys. Riverside walks from Beddgelert station also lead to Gelert's Grave where another famous legend has it that the faithful hound of Prince Llewellyn is buried.

Two of the railway's locomotives, 'Merddin Emrys' and 'Taliesin', are named after characters from 'The Mabinogion'.



Given the dramatic mountain, lake and coastal landscapes found in North Wales, the ancient Celtic origins of its people and their long history of subjection, uprising and conflict, it is hardly surprising that so many myths and legends abound. Myths are just that ... mythical, but legends ... well legends are based on long-held traditional beliefs, sometimes not fully authenticated, but nonetheless regarded by many as emerging from historical fact.

Perhaps the greatest legend of them all surrounds the figure of King Arthur. Long before Arthur, his court of knights, Camelot and Merlin entered the realms of 'history' through Geoffrey of Monmouth's chronicle entitled 'The History of the Kings of Britain' in 1136; a fearsome warrior called Arthur is recorded in several Welsh annals as leading the British fight against the invading Germanic Anglo-Saxons in the fifth century. Welsh references to Arthur are numerous, including within 'The Mabinogion', a renowned collection of some of the earliest Welsh literature.

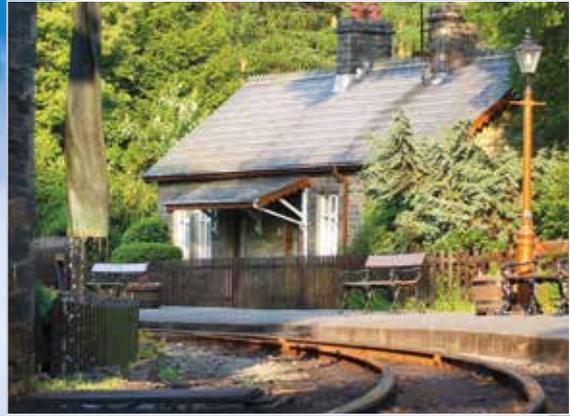
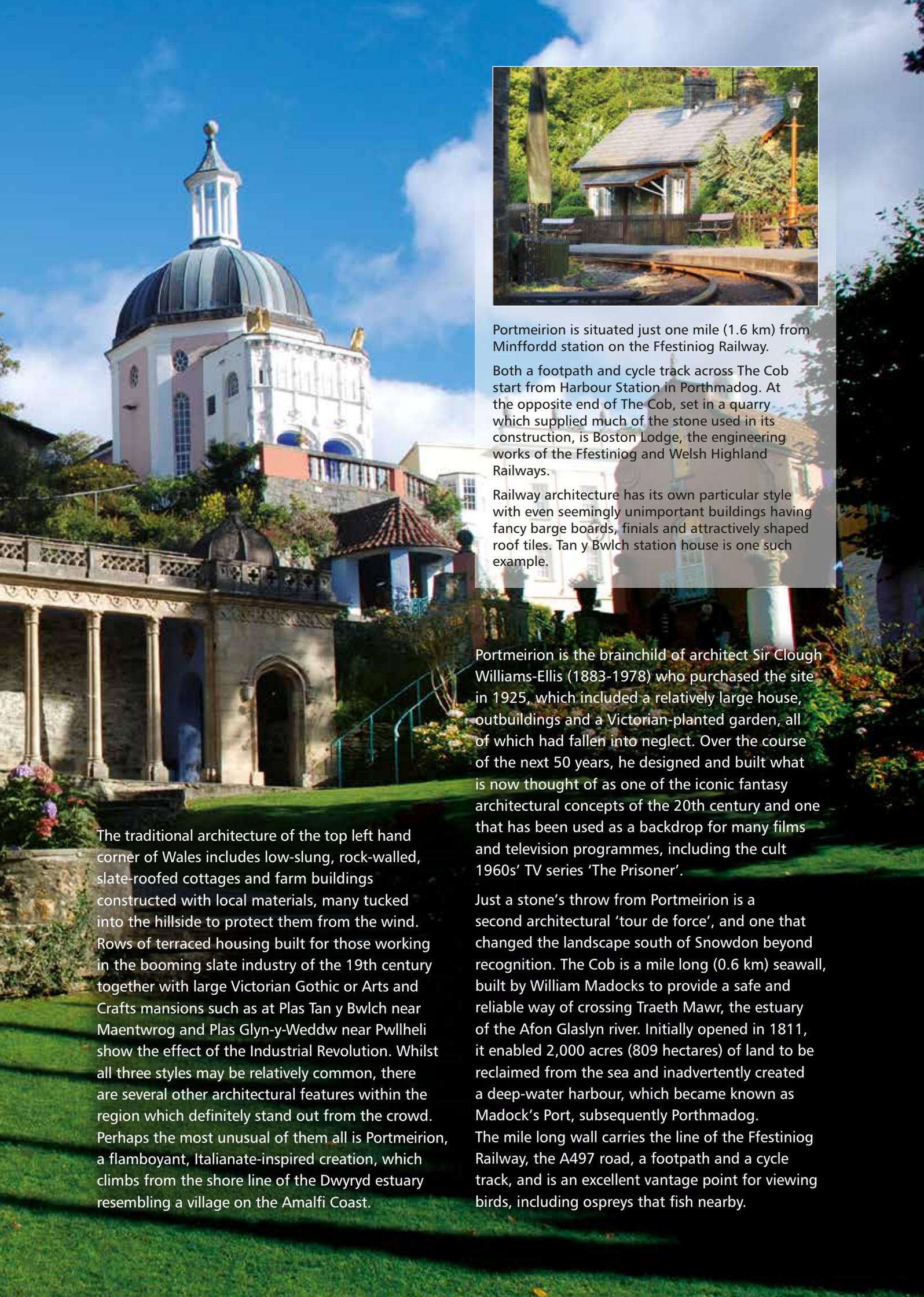
Numerous too are the locations associated with him. Close to the Watkin Path on Snowdon is Bwlch y Saethau (the Pass of Arrows) where Arthur was killed by arrows fired by followers of his treacherous son Mordred; far below the pass is Llyn Llydaw, the lake where it is said Sir Bedivere threw Excalibur after Arthur's death. On the treacherous east-facing slope of Y Lliwedd is a cave believed by some to be the resting place of Arthur's knights and Dinas Emrys, an ancient hill fort which lies in the Nant Gwynant valley just outside Beddgelert, has associations with Merlin and warring dragons.

No wonder that the latest 'blockbuster movie' about 'King Arthur' and starring Jude Law was filmed in this majestic part of Snowdonia!

The Welsh are great storytellers, and 'The Mabinogion' is full of wonderful tales, many of which have references to places you might visit in North Wales.



Architecture



Portmeirion is situated just one mile (1.6 km) from Minffordd station on the Ffestiniog Railway.

Both a footpath and cycle track across The Cob start from Harbour Station in Porthmadog. At the opposite end of The Cob, set in a quarry which supplied much of the stone used in its construction, is Boston Lodge, the engineering works of the Ffestiniog and Welsh Highland Railways.

Railway architecture has its own particular style with even seemingly unimportant buildings having fancy barge boards, finials and attractively shaped roof tiles. Tan y Bwlch station house is one such example.

Portmeirion is the brainchild of architect Sir Clough Williams-Ellis (1883-1978) who purchased the site in 1925, which included a relatively large house, outbuildings and a Victorian-planted garden, all of which had fallen into neglect. Over the course of the next 50 years, he designed and built what is now thought of as one of the iconic fantasy architectural concepts of the 20th century and one that has been used as a backdrop for many films and television programmes, including the cult 1960s' TV series 'The Prisoner'.

Just a stone's throw from Portmeirion is a second architectural 'tour de force', and one that changed the landscape south of Snowdon beyond recognition. The Cob is a mile long (0.6 km) seawall, built by William Madocks to provide a safe and reliable way of crossing Traeth Mawr, the estuary of the Afon Glaslyn river. Initially opened in 1811, it enabled 2,000 acres (809 hectares) of land to be reclaimed from the sea and inadvertently created a deep-water harbour, which became known as Madock's Port, subsequently Porthmadog. The mile long wall carries the line of the Ffestiniog Railway, the A497 road, a footpath and a cycle track, and is an excellent vantage point for viewing birds, including ospreys that fish nearby.

The traditional architecture of the top left hand corner of Wales includes low-slung, rock-walled, slate-roofed cottages and farm buildings constructed with local materials, many tucked into the hillside to protect them from the wind. Rows of terraced housing built for those working in the booming slate industry of the 19th century together with large Victorian Gothic or Arts and Crafts mansions such as at Plas Tan y Bwlch near Maentwrog and Plas Glyn-y-Weddw near Pwllheli show the effect of the Industrial Revolution. Whilst all three styles may be relatively common, there are several other architectural features within the region which definitely stand out from the crowd. Perhaps the most unusual of them all is Portmeirion, a flamboyant, Italianate-inspired creation, which climbs from the shore line of the Dwyryd estuary resembling a village on the Amalfi Coast.



'Zip World' at Llechwedd is just over one mile (1.6 km) from Blaenau Ffestiniog station on the Ffestiniog Railway, www.zipworld.co.uk

The slate workings of Cwmorthin are within easy walking distance of Tanygrisiau station, also on the Ffestiniog Railway. For 'extreme caving', 'Go Below' with their trained guides is great, www.go-below.co.uk

Traditional activities such as hill walking and mountaineering have set hearts pumping in visitors to the top left-hand corner of Wales for nigh on 200 years, but more recently the region has seen a whole new range of activities emerging that offer the opportunity for thrills and 'adrenaline-rushes' of a completely different kind. Zip wires, high ropes, gigantic trampolines, toboggans and inland surfing are perhaps the most extreme examples of this new wave of tourist attractions and although not for all, they are very popular and introduce a whole new generation of visitors to the area. For many, it is a gateway to a landscape they have never experienced before and some then go on to explore, discover and enjoy other aspects of Snowdonia and North Wales. Not only that, these new visitor attractions breathe new life into old industrial sites that may have been ignored and forgotten for decades; it is recycling on a grand scale! Even the most ardent thrill-seeker cannot help but gaze in awe at mountains of waste slate and wonder about the industry and the workers that created them.

'The Slate Caverns' at Llechwedd near Blaenau Ffestiniog have become a mecca for those wanting to take part in these adrenaline activities.

'Zip World' have no less than three different options here – 'Zip World Titan' above ground and 'Bounce Below' and 'The Cavern' experience underground, including hurtling on zip wires through illuminated caverns deep inside the mountains, as well as three giant trampolines suspended in a cavern twice the size of St Paul's Cathedral! Meanwhile, on the same site, Antur Stiniog operate a world class downhill biking centre with five different routes from the top of the quarries. The views are amazing, as is the course! The world's largest slate quarry, Penrhyn Slate Quarry near Bethesda in the Nant Ffrancon valley, is now home to 'Zip World Velocity', the fastest zip line in the world and the longest in Europe; it is 1706 yards (1560 metres) long, drops 718 feet (219 metres) in height from start to finish and those taking part reach speeds of up to 102 miles (165 km) per hour!

Another thrilling activity is 'extreme caving'. Similar to potholing, it is organised by 'Go Below' and enters the subterranean world of Cwmorthin slate quarry near Tanygrisiau. A little further afield near Dolgarrog in the Conwy Valley, you will find 'Surf Snowdonia', a brand new inland surfing lake with artificial waves that guarantee the surf is up whenever you arrive.



**Heart
Pumping!**



There is access to good cycle routes from most stations on the Ffestiniog and Welsh Highland Railways and cycles can be taken on the train for a fee of £3.00 (please book in advance 01766 516024). You don't even have to bring your own bikes as there is cycle hire in both Beddgelert (Beddgelert Bikes) and Caernarfon (Beics Menai Bikes) close to the station. From Caernarfon, you can cycle south on the Lôn Eifion Cycle Path, or north along the Menai Strait to Port Dinorwic.



With recreational and sport cycling at an all-time high in popularity across Britain right now, one of the most popular destinations for those wanting to cycle, is the top left-hand corner of Wales.

This is little wonder, given the wealth of beautiful landscapes to cycle through, the relative lack of traffic and the diversity of signposted cycling routes that the region offers. Within North Wales there are cycling opportunities to suit everyone, ranging from extreme downhill mountain bike tracks to family-friendly waymarked cycle trails.

In all, there are over 1,000 miles (1,609 km) of recognised cycle routes and trails to be enjoyed, including Sustrans routes like 'Lon Las Cymru North' (NCN Route 8/82) which runs for 175 miles (281 km) from mid Wales via Caernarfon to Anglesey. Other Sustrans routes include the

'Dolgellau Loops' (NCN Route 8/82) a 53 mile (85 km) route around Cader Idris and the 'North Wales Coastal Route' (NCN Route 5) 41 miles (66 km). Find out more at www.sustrans.org.uk

As UK's first dedicated mountain bike trail centre, with around 90 miles (145 km) of routes, Coed y Brenin Forest, a few miles south of Blaenau Ffestiniog, offers off-road forest cycle routes to suit everyone from 'Green' (easy/novice) to 'Black' (very difficult/expert). Head for the Natural Resources Wales' Visitor Centre off the A470, where several cycle routes begin; also on site is bike hire, a café, shop, picnic area and play equipment for younger children. Both Beddgelert and Gwydir Forests also offer good 'off-tarmac' cycle routes through spectacular scenery.

For some serious downhill cycling, 'Antur Stiniog' near Blaenau Ffestiniog is a must. It is one of only a few 'uplift centres' in Wales, which means when you reach the end of your descent, there is a shuttle service to take you back to the top again! Find out more at www.anturstiniog.com



Cycling

Stars



On certain nights through the year, the Ffestiniog Railway runs night time trains in conjunction with special events such as jazz evenings, rock 'n' roll concerts and, at the end of October, Halloween trains all at Tan y Bwlch station, which is an excellent location for stargazing.

In September 2017, the Welsh Highland Railway is celebrating their connection with the Dark Sky Reserve by holding their 'Welsh Highland Stars' event with a planetarium on site, walks, talks and, of course, lots of trains. For further information on all events visit www.festrail.co.uk

Those who regularly visit the top left-hand corner of Wales have long been aware of the stunning displays of stars that can be seen on clear nights, especially when the moon is not casting its silvery lunar glow. The reason stars appear so clearly here compared to other parts of the British Isles, is due to the lack of light and air pollution. To the west of the region is the unlit expanse of the Irish Sea, whilst the central mountainous regions within the Snowdonia National Park are relatively unpopulated and what towns there are tend to be small and clustered around the coast.

In recognition of this fact, on 4th December 2015 Snowdonia was awarded 'International Dark Sky Reserve' status, joining only nine other regions across the world with the same status – an exclusive club indeed, which includes members in New Zealand, Namibia in Africa and Canada.

Some of the easily accessible low-level locations within the region which offer good star-gazing opportunities include, Llyn Dinas and Llyn Gwynant to the east of Beddgelert, Rhyd Ddu to the west of Snowdon, Tan y Bwlch to the north of Maentwrog and Coed y Brenin Forest to the south of Trawsfynydd.

Both the Ffestiniog and Welsh Highland Railways travel through the heart of the 'International Dark Sky Reserve' and there is plenty of accommodation in the form of holiday cottages, hotels and B & Bs along the way from which excellent views of the stars can be obtained. For further information visit www.gonorthwales.co.uk



Next Steps

Planning Your Trip

We hope you have enjoyed reading about Snowdonia and North Wales in this edition of 'Steaming through Snowdonia' and we hope we can welcome you to the region very soon. As you have seen within these pages, there is so much to see and do here in the top left-hand corner of Wales and undoubtedly something for everyone, be you seven or seventy, looking for a relaxing holiday or a pulse-racing experience. When it comes to accommodation, you really are spoilt for choice; take your pick from campsites, glamping pods, caravan parks, farmhouse B & Bs, holiday cottages, town apartments, guest houses, hotels and spas.

The following information should help you to plan your trip.

BY ROAD

The A55 expressway from Chester is the main route into North Wales with connections off the M56. For those travelling from further south, the A5 runs from the end of the M54 and the A470 comes up from South Wales. These are main trunk roads but remember once you have left them, the pace of life is slower in North Wales - that's why you want to visit – so give yourself a little extra time as the roads are a little slower and you need time to stop and take in those views!

BY PUBLIC TRANSPORT

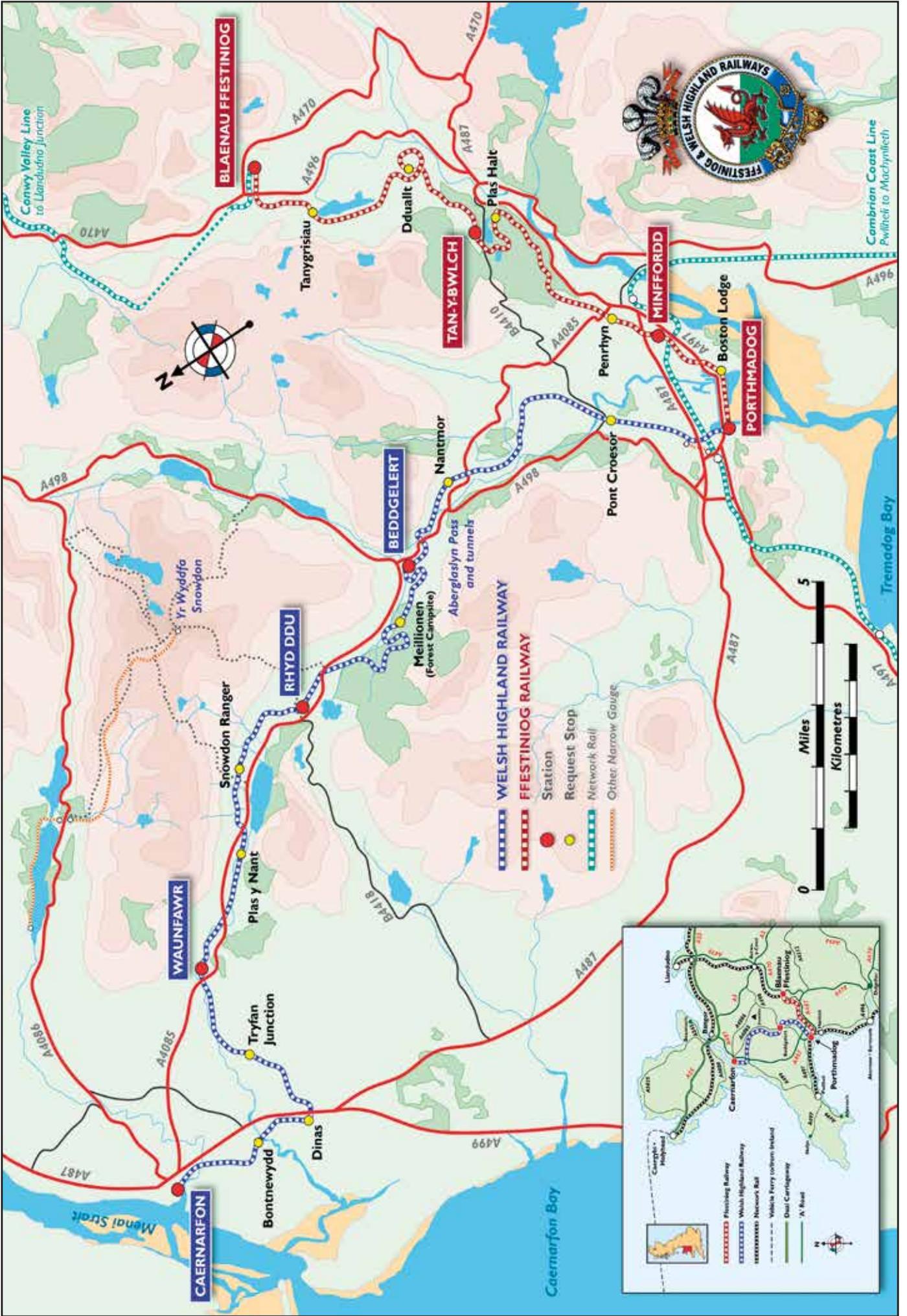
Did you know that Llandudno Junction is only three hours by Virgin Trains from London and two hours from Manchester? Once in Wales, there are a number of great value rover tickets which mean you can explore by bus and train from just £10 a day. Why stare at the road ahead when you could be taking in the view? If you are coming from the Midlands, the stunning Cambrian Coast line will bring you from Birmingham via Shrewsbury, right into the heart of Wales.

REALLY USEFUL WEBSITES

Ffestiniog & Welsh Highland Railways:
www.festrail.co.uk

Public Transport:
www.arrivatrainswales.co.uk
www.virgintrains.co.uk
www.traveline-cymru.co.uk
www.bigtrainlittletrain.com

Accommodation, attractions and things to do:
www.gonorthwales.co.uk
www.visitmidwales.co.uk
www.visitwales.com
www.walescoastpath.gov.uk
www.showmewales.co.uk
www.snowdoniapass.co.uk





Ffestiniog & Welsh Highland Railways

01766 516024 www.festrail.co.uk