

North Wales and Anglesey Part 1



Snowdonia viewed from Plas Newydd, Anglesey, across the Menai Strait.

Despite being a 'Jones', I know less about the 'land of my fathers' than I really should. It could well be the country's (deserved!) reputation for excessive rainfall that has kept me away in the past - such prejudice has denied me the delights of what is undoubtedly amongst of the most beautiful scenery in the UK.

We hired a cottage for a week in the village of Abergwyngregyn, just off the A55 North Wales Expressway between Bangor and Conwy. The cottage has been beautifully restored, though alas for me that did not include raising the ceiling beams, with which my head frequently collided. Consequently the first three days of our stay were punctuated with some most 'un-Christian' language!



Plas Newydd

Our first excursion was the National Trust property of Plas Newydd in Anglesey, a beautiful country property set in extensive grounds on the Menai Strait not far from the road bridge to the mainland. It is the country seat of the 7th Marquess of Anglesey, whose family still retain rooms at the property. The first Marquess (then Lord Uxbridge) distinguished himself at Waterloo, where he led the charge of the heavy cavalry against d'Erlon's column. He was hit by one of the last cannon shots of the day. According to anecdote, he was close to Wellington when his leg was hit, and exclaimed, "By God, sir, I've lost my leg!" — to which Wellington replied, "By God, sir, so you have!" The remains of his leg were later amputated. Two weeks after Waterloo the Prince Regent created him Marquess of Anglesey.



The 5th Marquess

The black sheep of the family (by a very long way) was the [5th Marquess](#), a flamboyant character who loved dressing up and bought countless expensive items of jewellery on his many travels around Europe. He turned the chapel at Plas Newydd into a theatre (where he was the star attraction) and managed to get through the equivalent of £400 million in today's money. The family's main residence at Beaudesert on Cannock Chase had to be sold to pay off his debts - it has since been demolished and is now a scouting centre.



A classical scene depicted in a vast mural in the dining room at Plas Newydd, by Rex Whistler



Rex Whistler

After restoring the family fortunes, the 6th Marquess commissioned British society artist [Rex Whistler](#) to undertake the decorative scheme at the house. Whistler became close friends (some say the lover of) the Marquess's daughter, Lady Caroline Paget, and painted many portraits of her which are on display at the house. His lasting legacy is a fictional scene echoing the property's maritime frontage, composed in classical style and featuring some well-known (real) architectural icons abstracted from various European cities. Whistler himself appears in the mural.



Aber Falls, Abergwyngregyn

The following day we explored closer to home. My lack of fitness really showed as we climbed toward the Aber Falls up the mountainside at the rear of our cottage. As I puffed and wheezed my way up, a grandfather breezed past me pushing his grandchild in a pushchair and carrying another child on his shoulders (clearly a veteran!). Once reached, the Falls were dramatic and delightful, and well worth the effort.





Both above: Bodnant Garden, Wales, a National Trust property.

Day Three took us to the most famous gardens in Wales, at Bodnant near Conwy, owned by four generations of the Lords Aberconway who even have their own mausoleum in the grounds. If one were to visit every day for a month you wouldn't cover all the varied Italianate terraces, pools and herbaceous borders and all the flora and fauna on show. The terrain is exhilarating too, being built on some steep slopes - yet another opportunity to improve one's fitness!



Interior, Bangor Cathedral



The high altar at Bangor Cathedral

CATHEDRAL TOUR

WITH GUEST CHOIRS

A photograph of Aled Jones, a man with short brown hair, wearing a dark suit and a black shirt. He is smiling and standing in the center of the poster. The background is a dark, atmospheric image of a cathedral interior with high arches and columns.

Aled Jones

OCTOBER

TUE 02 **NORWICH CATHEDRAL**
THU 04 **EXETER CATHEDRAL**
FRI 05 **TRURO CATHEDRAL**
SAT 06 **GUILDFORD CATHEDRAL**
MON 08 **ELY CATHEDRAL**
TUE 09 **COVENTRY CATHEDRAL**
THU 11 **SHEFFIELD CATHEDRAL**
FRI 12 **YORK MINSTER**

SAT 13 **DURHAM CATHEDRAL**
MON 15 **MANCHESTER CATHEDRAL**
TUE 16 **BANGOR CATHEDRAL**
THU 18 **CARDIFF**
METROPOLITAN CATHEDRAL
FRI 19 **GLOUCESTER CATHEDRAL**
MON 22 **DERBY CATHEDRAL**
TUE 23 **LIVERPOOL CATHEDRAL**
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An SJM Concerts presentation by arrangement with The Agency Group

A poster for Aled Jones's 2012 Cathedral tour. A display within the cathedral shows a photo of Aled as a choirboy at Bangor Cathedral.

On Day Four we visited Bangor Cathedral (Church of Wales), where Songs of Praise presenter and 'Walking in the Air' singer **Aled Jones** was a choirboy from the age of 9, becoming lead soloist within two years.

Dedicated to its founder St Deiniol, the cathedral was developed from a 'Clas' or Celtic monastery established in the 500s on land granted by King Maelgwyn of Gwynedd and has a tempestuous history, having been destroyed over the centuries in turn by the Vikings, King John's men and later during the revolt of Owen Glyndwyr. For an excellent history of the cathedral see the Church in Wales site [here](#)



A 'Green Man' carving on the choir stalls, Bangor Cathedral

In England, the relatively small size of the building might not merit cathedral status yet it's filled with some striking features such as the carved choir stalls with discrete chairs for the cathedral chapter labelled with the

clergy's archaic Latin titles, the Lady Chapel, and an imposing wooden cross suspended above the altar.



'Still Doubting' by John Granville Gregory, based on Caravaggio's 'St Thomas', hangs in Bangor Cathedral.

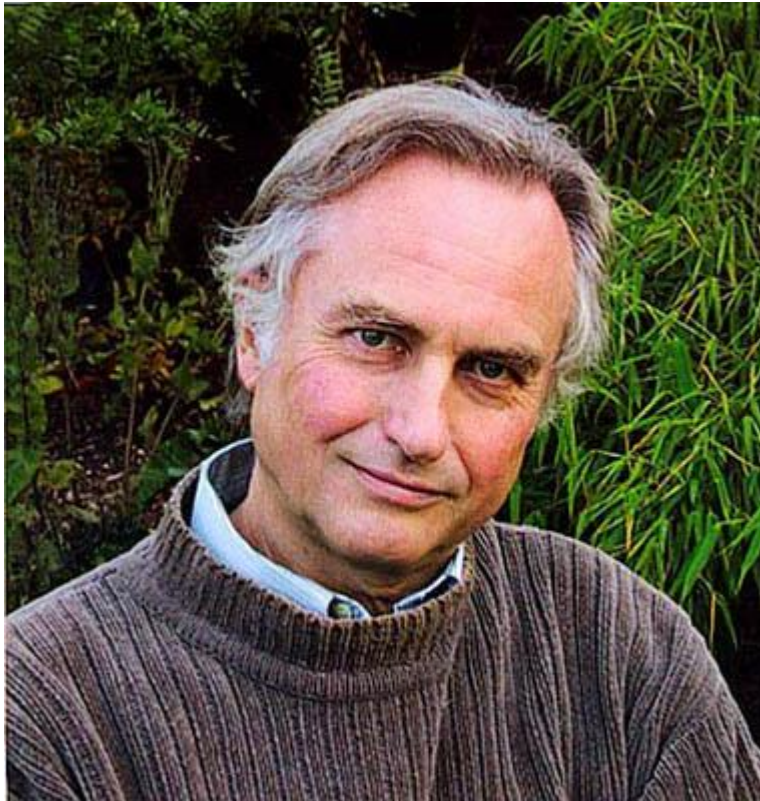
There are two large, intriguing oil paintings on show by John Granville Gregory called 'Why' and 'Still Doubting', which are modern interpretations of the Passion and Resurrection based on Caravaggio's Renaissance masterpieces 'Entombment' and 'St Thomas'.

A lady vicar of the Church in Wales showed me some of the special features in the Cathedral and explained the Church's relationship with the Church of England and Anglican Communion. It appears that while the Church in Wales is the Anglican Church in Wales, it is 'disestablished', ie not the state religion, that some services are conducted in Welsh, and that it belongs to the Anglican Communion. Our current Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams comes from this tradition. I will not attempt to recount any more as Wikipedia contains excellent information about its history: [click here](#)



Penrhyn Castle, Anglesey

Later that day we visited another National Trust property, Penrhyn Castle, near Bangor, which was built around the same time as All Saints' (the 1820s) by George Hay Dawkins-Pennant. Designed for him by the architect Thomas Hopper on an epic scale in the style of a Norman Castle, it has been estimated that it cost £150,000 (£49.5 million in today's money).



Atheist Richard Dawkins: an ancestor of his, George Hay Dawkins-Pennant, built Penrhyn Castle

The family's immense wealth derived from sugar plantations in Jamaica; money, it seems, was no object in its design and construction. In a recent piece of journalistic mischief, it was revealed by the [The Daily Telegraph](#) that Dawkins-Pennant was a plantation and slave-owning ancestor of present-day atheist campaigner Richard Dawkins, who opposed the abolition of slavery.

Queen Victoria visited the castle in 1859 and apparently rejected the one-ton Welsh slate bed that had been specially constructed for her, on the grounds she would feel like she was 'in a coffin'!



Welsh mountain railway exhibits in the courtyard at Penrhyn Castle



The astonishingly ornate staircase at Penrhyn Castle

The castle has some wonderfully furnished rooms and an impressive chapel. It also has a fine display of Welsh mountain railway engines and rolling stock in the courtyard and a temporary exhibition of around 60 superb wildlife photographs. The stone carving around the giant staircase is among the most intricate and ornate I've ever seen.



Plas yn Rhiw



Aberdaron beach

On Day Five we drove south on the mainland to Plas yn Rhiw near Pwllheli on the Llyn peninsula, a National Trust property overlooking Cardigan Bay. Dating back to the 17th century, it was lived in by the unmarried Keating sisters from 1938, who together restored the property from its former dilapidated state and later donated it with the surrounding land to the Trust. We continued to the nearby small holiday town of Aberdaron where there is a fine beach.



Beaumaris Castle, Anglesey, built by Edward I.

On Day Six we explored more of Anglesey. First port of call was Beaumaris Castle, built as one of a chain of defensive castles in West Wales by Edward I to impose English rule in Wales, though it was never completed. The Welsh were defeated even before its construction began, and money was diverted as Edward turned his attention to the Scots. It is however a textbook example of Norman design with moat and rounded turrets. We only viewed the outside as it was tipping with rain; in an effort to escape the deluge we pressed on west on the coast road, stopping at two small fishing villages on our way to Holyhead.



Holyhead sea port and terminal connecting the UK with Ireland

Holyhead is best known as a place of transit between the UK and Ireland, with the Holyhead-Dublin car ferries running from the port. While the port is certainly the chief feature, it is also a lovely coastal town that alas remains unvisited by most people en route elsewhere.



A mosaic by the bridge in Holyhead town centre commemorating the Celtic missionary St Cybi



The hefty walls of the 1700-year-old Roman fort at St Cybi's, Holyhead, which encircle the medieval church.

St Cybi was the first cousin of St David, the patron saint of Wales. He was the son of a Cornish king who became a monk and travelled widely in Europe and Ireland as a missionary. He was granted land by Maelgwyn, king of Gwynedd to found a monastery in Holyhead in 540 AD, on the site of a former Roman fort. Its walls surround the church and bear the characteristic herringbone stonework of Roman construction. There is an excellent site run by the Friends of St Cybi about the church and its history, including a downloadable biography of St Cybi [here](#)



The bridge connecting town and ferry port in Holyhead

After walking round the town and viewing the amazing tubular steel bridge connecting the town with the port, we returned to Bangor on the A55 North Wales Expressway, a speedy highway connecting Holyhead with the mainland.



Riverside Memorial Park, Llangollen

Our route home on the A5 via Betws-Y-Coed passed through some of the most beautiful mountain scenery in Britain. We stopped in Llangollen by the spectacular riverside park, built to commemorate the town's dead from World War I, before leaving Wales in the direction of Oswestry and Shrewsbury.

The north-western area of Wales is one of the most beautiful in Britain and contains hundreds of churches worthy of exploration - sadly we only looked at two. The location provided a well-balanced holiday that we would strongly recommend - we certainly made excellent use of our annual National Trust membership.

Martin and Magda Jones, April 2012

