SPIRITUAL LANDSCAPE OF ANGLESEY

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Early English Landscapes

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The isle of Anglesey, or Ynys Môn, is located in the northwestern corner of Wales. Throughout its history, the spiritual realm has made a major impact on its landscape. The earliest inhabitants of the island valued spirituality as central to their lives, as shown by the great monuments they built to their ancestors. Later generations honored nature but left little traces on the landscape that remain today. In time, a new religion, Christianity, arrived and brought with it new ways of worship requiring new places to do so in. Christianity would survive through Viking raids, English invasion, English Reformation, and social unrest, all of which would impact the landscape. The contemporary landscape of Anglesey is a result of all of these factors which have shaped the island’s history, and the spiritual element is still an essential part of it.

The first people to inhabit Anglesey came to the island circa 7000 BCE. Before that time, during the Paleolithic era, Anglesey had been covered by a large ice sheet, creating Pre-Cambrian rock outcroppings among the oldest in Britain. Until the 4th millennium BCE, Anglesey was connected to mainland Wales by a land bridge until rising sea levels filled in, creating the modern-day Menai Straits.¹ It was also around this time, during the Neolithic era, that a major change in social organization occurred. Agriculture was established, including the domestication of animals. Accompanying this so-called “Revolution”—and more pertinent to the topic of this paper—was the development of religious beliefs. These beliefs were centered around the concept of an afterlife. The large stone burial chambers, or cromlechi, that the people of this era built are their only surviving impact on the landscape. At one time, over fifty of these tombs could be found, primarily in the coastal regions of the island.²

The most well-known of these cromlechi is a site called Bryn Celli Ddu, located near Llanddaniel. This is significant as it marks the first evidence of the impact of spirituality on the landscape. It is believed that the site originated as a henge during the late Neolithic era,
consisting of a bank around an inner ditch enclosing a circle of stones. The ditch was 69 feet in diameter, 17 feet wide, and 6 feet deep. At a later date towards the end of the Neolithic era, the cromlech (also known as a passage tomb) was constructed and covered with a mound. It consists of a central chamber reached via a passage 27 feet long and 3 feet wide. Two large stones divide the passage into an inner and an outer section. This outer section was sealed off after the tomb fell into disuse. The chamber itself is eight feet wide and has two capstones. Human remains, some of which were cremated, were found in both the chamber and the passage. Evidence of other ritual ceremonies has been found as well.3

The Bronze Age brought a more individualistic view of the afterlife. Instead of group burials in large chambers, people were buried in urns with beaker pots to symbolize their food source in the afterlife. These urns would be organized around large mounds signified by standing stones. Other goods would be placed next to the pot such as bronze daggers and jewelry. At one time, sixty-four of these standing stones could be found, but only forty-six remain.4 Two of the most famous of these sites are Penrhos Feilw and Tŷ Mawr near Holyhead. Penrhos Feilw, in particular, has a tradition of having a stone cist containing bones along with burial goods in the center of a stone circle, though this is unsubstantiated.5

The next major religious development was the arrival of the Celts in circa 500 BCE. The Celtic religion was polytheistic and heavily rooted in nature. An example of the centrality of nature is the emphasis placed on bodies of water such as rivers and streams. Material gifts would be thrown into the rivers as an offering to the gods. One influence surviving from this Celtic practice is the name of the river Afon Briant, which derives from the Celtic god Brigantia. Also influential in Celtic religion was the sect known as the Druids. These were priests who practiced human sacrifice.6 Most of their rituals were done in the forests, which they believed to be sacred.
The oak and mistletoe, in particular, were thought of as sacred plants and highly revered. Pliny the Elder records that oak leaves were essential to their rituals and that when mistletoe was found upon one a special sacrificial ritual was performed. A priest would climb the tree and gather the mistletoe using a golden sickle, which he would give to the other priests. Two bulls would then be burned as an offering. The mistletoe was also believed to inspire fertility and act as an antidote to poison.

On Anglesey, they are best known for their resistance against the Roman invasion. In AD 60, the general Suetonius Paulinus led a military force to conquer the island, which had become a refuge for fugitives from Roman conquests. In a pivotal battle, the Druids and a group of women led the Celts in a frenzied attempt to dissuade the Romans from attacking. Tacitus records that the Roman soldiers initially “stood motionless”, but were rallied by Suetonius to crush the Druid opposition, burning not only them but also their sacred groves. Thus, the long era of Celtic Anglesey ended.

Long after the Roman defeat of the Druids, their descendants brought a new religion to Anglesey: Christianity. While Christianity arrived in Wales during the fourth century, it did not reach Anglesey until the sixth with the arrival of the missionaries Cybi and Seiriol. The landscape was impacted through the formation of new Christian places of worship such as the monasteries founded by both men. Cybi founded a monastery at Caergybi (modern-day Holyhead) and Seiriol founded one at the island bearing his name. Veneration of Irish saints is also common, with churches such as the one dedicated to St. Patrick at Llanbadrig and St. Brigid at Tywyn y Capel. An important saint from north Wales, Beuno, is honored at Aberfffraw and Trefdraeth, and his followers Cwyfan and Daniel have their churches as well. Today, at least seventy churches and chapels are dedicated to specific persons, with at least forty-three being
dedicated to Celtic saints.\textsuperscript{11}

However, Viking incursions prevented the church from flourishing for a few centuries. It was not until the twelfth century under Gruffydd ap Cynan that the church really developed on Anglesey. Gruffydd is believed to have built a number of churches such as the ones at Llan-faes and Amlwch. It was also at this time that parish structures developed, there being seventy-four in total under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Bangor.\textsuperscript{12} An example of Gruffydd ap Cynan’s churches can be found at Hen Capel Lligwy. One of the first churches to be built of masonry, it is of a simple rectangular design with no separation between the nave and the chancel. The roofs are no longer present, but evidence of a bellcote can still be seen on one of the gables. There is also a smaller chapel dating from the sixteenth century.\textsuperscript{13}

The monasteries on Anglesey also underwent a transformation. Caergybi and Penmon were the two which best survived the Viking raids. During the twelfth century, they both changed from traditional Celtic monasticism to the new medieval monastic orders. Caergybi became a collegiate monastery, and Penmon became Augustinian. New establishments were also created, such as the Franciscan friary in Llan-faes. In addition, the Cistercian monastery in Aberconwy owned much of Anglesey’s land, though the Bishop of Bangor was by far the largest religious landowner on the island.\textsuperscript{14} Many of these structures, such as the monastery at Penmon, were built in a Romanesque style.\textsuperscript{15} The basic structure of a Romanesque church is a cruciform plan, with the choir and nave forming the long arm and the transept forming the short arm. Inside the church would be architectural features such as rounded arches, small windows, and cushion-cap capitals topping columns.\textsuperscript{16}

Of all the monasteries, Penmon is the most well-preserved. Located on Puffin Island (also known as Ynys Seiriol), it was founded in the sixth century by St. Seiriol. However, the present
Romanesque structure dates from the twelfth century in the aftermath of the Viking raids. The complex consists of three main buildings: the church, the dormitory, and a well. Of these, the well has the longest history, with local tradition dating it back to St. Seiriol himself. It was once believed to have healing powers and served as a place of pilgrimage. The church was constructed between 1140-70 in a cruciform structure. Inside are two stone crosses which were previously in the exterior grounds. The dormitory is a three-story structure dating from the thirteenth century around the time the monastery became Augustinian. The ground floor was a cellar, with a dining hall and dormitory above. A sixteenth-century addition may have served as a private apartment for a senior canon.17

Now that Anglesey’s spiritual landscape had been influenced by outside forces, it was time for Anglesey to influence the spiritual landscape of the rest of Britain through Henry VIII’s English Reformation. It would be his ancestors on the island of Anglesey who paved the way for their descendants to gain power. The story begins with the revolt of Owain Glyn Dŵr in 1400 and 1401. Two key fighters in that revolt were Gwilym and Rhys ap Tudur, who were called the “chief fighters of Anglesey.”18 Their younger brother Maredudd later joined them in a second revolt. It is Maredudd’s line whose influence would be significant, as his son Owain became a courtier at the English court.19

Owain later married Henry V’s widow and anglicized his name to Owen Tudor. It would be his grandson, Henry Tudor, who defeated Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth Field and became King Henry VII, the first of the Tudor dynasty.20 Henry’s son, Henry VIII, would however eclipse him in fame and go down in history as one of the most infamous kings in English history. It was also he who would have the greatest impact on the spiritual landscape through the English Reformation.
In 1534, after being denied Papal authority to divorce his wife Catherine of Aragon, Henry declared England’s spiritual independence from Rome and made himself the Head of the Church of England. Two years later, Parliament passed laws subjecting Wales to England’s legal system (and, with it, its church) in what are—according to Welsh, euphemistically—known as the Acts of Union.

Fortunately, Anglesey, unlike much of the new united realm, was spared from the violent turmoil this radical change brought about. The first impact to be had was Henry’s Dissolution of the Monasteries. Despite the island’s monastic tradition, by Henry’s time, only two monasteries remained: Penmon and Llan-faes. However, neither was in any position to benefit either the monks or Henry. Penmon had just two monks, and Llan-faes had four. Indeed, Penmon was the poorest monastery in all of Wales. In 1535, it earned just £40. In response, Henry decided to discard their spiritual trappings and turn them into secular foci. Instead of taking them for himself as he did with grander monasteries, Henry allowed the local Bulkeley family to assume control of the monasteries. Penmon was kept as a parish church, and Llan-faes was demolished after Sir Richard Bulkeley paid Thomas Cromwell just £100 for the friary. The stones from the friary were used to help repair Beaumaris’s walls. These repairs were of the utmost importance considering the threat of a Catholic invasion, with Bulkeley raising a force of 1,200 men to defend the island in case of attack.

The most radical changes were brought by Henry’s son Edward VI, a full-throated Protestant who introduced reforms such as the new prayer book and English, rather than Latin, liturgy, alienating the local population who did not speak English. Churches were stripped of much of their ceremonial trappings such as altars, religious icons, ornaments, vestments, and incense, leading the poet Siôn Brwynog to speak for many when he described churches as
looking “like barns” left in “icy coldness”. Most on Anglesey, however, simply conformed rather than revolt. Indeed, the staunchest Anglesey Catholics, such as Owen Lewis, exiled themselves on the Continent, especially after Elizabeth I’s accession to the throne signaled the end of England’s brief return to Catholicism under her sister Mary I. Some, like the Bulkeleys, remained and simply hid their Catholic loyalties, treating the new Anglican church with indifference. However, Catholic sympathies remained, with a Catholic missionary named William Davies being the only Welsh priest martyred during Elizabeth’s reign at Beaumaris.24 This general indifference continued into the Jacobean era, with one parish being recorded as not having a sermon for a six-year period.25

Such indifference was a bleak omen for Oliver Cromwell’s attempt to turn England—and, with it, Wales—Puritan. By 1650, there were just five Puritan ministers in Anglesey, all of rather dubious quality. This problem was not confined to Anglesey, and, as a result, Parliament passed an Act sending Puritan missionaries, known as Commissioners, to Wales. Two of the seventy-one were assigned to Anglesey, and together they dismissed eleven clergymen. Other clergymen were restricted to a single parish as a condition of their continued employment.26

This left a number of parishes’ clerical positions unfilled, but acceptable ministers were few and far between, leading to itinerant preachers filling their place for significant gaps of time, up to eight years in one instance. These preachers were poorly trained, and some were even illiterate. Eventually, seventeen ministers were authorized to serve the people of Anglesey, but only one, Hugh Humphreys of Amlwch, was considered to be “good and frequent”.27 In terms of religious revival, Puritan actions on Anglesey were a failure by any standard.

The Restoration brought with it renewed fervor for the established Church, and nowhere was this fervor more powerful than in Anglesey. Anglican preachers established a grammar
school in Beaumaris, where forty-eight boys from the surrounding area were given a classical education. Ministers also supplied the local peasantry with alms of money or food, with one minister providing six loaves of bread each week. The poorest were lodged in alms-houses, though under strict rules such as abstaining from drinking and mandatory church attendance. Failure to follow these rules could result in fines or even expulsion from the alms-house. As a result, support for Anglicanism was strong on the island, evidence for which can be seen in the Religious Census of 1676, which recorded just five Puritans and two Catholics amongst the island’s population.

It would not be until the eighteenth century that full-scale religious revival as Cromwell envisioned occurred. A major instigator of this revival would be Dean John Jones, part of a group called the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (SPCK). Setting up four schools himself, Jones taught Welsh students the Bible, how to write, and arithmetic. To assist him in this, Jones undertook the writing of religious tracts and a new version of the Welsh Bible. Many of these works were published in London and arrived either on wagons from Chester or on ships which docked in the ports of Holyhead, Beaumaris, or nearby Caernarfon. Though Jones died in 1727, work continued, and between 1754 and 1758, his successors distributed 820 Bibles and 614 New Testaments on Anglesey alone. By 1777, there were eighteen schools with just over 1,000 students. In all, 435 schools were held and over 20,000 educated between 1746 and 1777. Unlike prior schools, which were stationary, these schools were known as “circulating schools” and itinerant teachers would travel throughout the island, teaching in farmhouses and local churches.

This religious bounty would be reaped by the Methodists. Failures of the established church such as using English-speaking preachers in Welsh-speaking areas and English bishops
who were indifferent to the needs of the Welsh people contributed to this revival. With dissent such as Quaker meetinghouses forming, Methodist preachers saw Anglesey as a prime target, and, in 1740, preachers began arriving. By 1745, Methodist zeal was dubbed “religiously mad” and major leaders in the movement, such as Peter Williams and John Wesley, came to preach on Anglesey. Even though the Methodists made great headway, it was only in a few areas that they were firmly planted. Not until the latter part of the century did the Methodists place themselves in a position to become the main religious group on the island, especially as the Anglican SPCK schools shuttered, leaving a void which the Methodists were more than eager to fill. By 1798, twenty Methodist Sunday schools were educating 1,000 students a week.  

This Nonconformist attitude would continue into the nineteenth century. It was powered by a strong middle class led by a number of outstanding preachers who became the elite of Anglesey society. By 1811, a majority of the island’s residents were Nonconformists, with Calvinistic Methodists being the largest denomination. Some estimates even placed the proportion of Nonconformists at 90%. Such fervor created a demand for chapel building, of which the 1820s and 1830s would be the peak. Often times, these chapels were quite expensive, reaching £270 in one case, and congregations were stretched to their financial limit. Ministers were paid paltry sums, no more than £20 per annum. To defray their expenses, they were often forced to open schools or businesses. For instance, two ministers in Amlwch ran shops, and the minister at Llangefni, in addition to being a grocer and a builder, even dealt in the stock market.  

Evangelical ministers continued to be the driving force behind religion in Anglesey. One of the most popular was John Elias, nicknamed the “pope of Anglesey”. Elias was so popular that ten thousand people—one-fifth of the population—would attend his sermons. A similar
number attended his funeral in 1841. Elias was succeeded by Evan Davies, the “bishop of Anglesey,” who was a major leader in the temperance movement. By 1838, over 24,000 of the island’s residents were members of a teetotal society. These ministers were so popular that images of them would often be hung in local churches.34

As a result of this and other factors, the Established Church and other minority denominations were virtually nonexistent. A Mormon missionary was driven out of Llannerch-y-medd by the Methodist congregation, and Catholicism was active only in a small group of Irish immigrants. Even more on the ropes was the Anglican church, which had fallen far from its heyday in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A commentator in 1832 noted that no less than sixty-two parishes had non-resident ministers. One even lived 150 miles away in Staffordshire.35 Such migration of predominantly English ministers would contribute to the growing tension between the local population and the established church.

To offset this tension, Anglican ministers attempted to undertake a revival during the middle portion of the century, when they spent £30,655 on a church rebuilding campaign, rebuilding or repairing thirty-four churches. Most of the churches at the time were located far from town centers, and English-language services were a further dissuasion to the local population.36 An example of the products of this campaign is the Church of St Gwenllwyfo in Llaneilian. The church dates from 1856 and is built in a Gothic Revival style.37 Gothic Revival was the prevailing architectural style of the time and was preferred for its low cost, as the decorative elements could easily be cast in iron, and an expanding glass industry made the cost of the style’s ornate windows much cheaper than previously. Plus, rather than ornate stonework, the exteriors could be covered in simple brick. Additionally, the era was a time of renewed interest in England’s medieval past.38 Much of the £1,417 cost was defrayed by the family of
Lord Dinorben who are buried inside the church. The church is best known for its Flemish stained glass dating from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries which was donated by Lord Dinorben’s son-in-law Sir Arundell Neave. True to Gothic style, the nave has five arched roof bays with the windows placed on both walls and a large window on the east face of the church depicting both the Nativity and the Crucifixion.39

However, this program did little to help the Anglican cause. Instead, a new movement was gathering steam: disestablishmentarianism. This movement sought the disestablishment of the Anglican church, i.e. separation of church and state. A key cause of this movement was the ethnic tension of the day. With 77% of all Welsh being Nonconformist, the Anglican church represented English domination over Wales, which extended to the English-speaking elite. It was dubbed “Yr Eglyws Loegr”: the “alien church.” And such representation was not merely symbolic, for example, the English Book of Common Prayer’s rites and rituals were the only legal forms of marriage and burial, ignoring the local Nonconformist disposition. An 1847 report on Welsh education was written from a pro-Anglican bias and inordinately criticized Nonconformist schools and even “the evil of the Welsh language”.40

Such an attitude could only cause conflict and the issue of tithing would have the largest effect in Anglesey. The tithe had been present for hundreds of years and predated the Reformation, but it had generally been paid through goods and services and not cash. However, an Act of Parliament in 1836 required that tithes to henceforth be paid solely in cash. At first, no protest was registered, but a decline in agricultural prices during the 1870s saw farmers pushed to their limit and unable to pay the tithe. Consequently, an Anti-Tithe League was formed and violence occurred in some areas of Wales.41

Anglesey, though, was spared from the worst of the violence. Most of the protests were
nonviolent, such as a series of meetings held in 1886-7 to demand a 20% reduction. Whenever resistance to the church bailiffs was encountered, it was generally met with intimidation from police and infantry troops, who mounted bayonets in one instance. In the end, bailiffs on Anglesey were only able to collect £5 3s 10d out of the £100 due. A law was passed in 1891 to transfer the burden from tenant to landowner, but some landowners responded by raising rents, leading to further protests.42

By contrast, the Nonconformists remained strong. A revivalist in 1859 converted 1,100 in Holyhead alone, and spiritual revivals continued throughout the second half of the century. Such fervor meant that church building continued unabated, and the costs were ever increasing. Whereas churches in the early days had cost approximately £200, now churches were being built at costs ranging up to a staggering £6,000. However, this money was put to good use, and by 1890 there were eighty-three Methodist chapels serving 20,000 congregants. By comparison, the Anglicans had just 4,807, the Independents 3,200 and the Baptists 2,200.43

The twentieth century, however, would bring great challenges to spirituality on Anglesey, although that would not have been conceivable at the beginning of the century. The years just before the Great War were a time of religious revival. This revival started in south Wales, and Anglesey men working in the coal mines in that area brought home the religious fervor. The year 1905 would be the peak of this revival with the arrival of a minister named Evan Roberts. Over the course of a one-month period that summer, Roberts led twenty-eight meetings attracting between 90,000 and 100,000 people (accounting for duplication). The largest were at Holyhead (10,000) and Llanfair Pwllgwyngyll (7,000). Once again, the Nonconformists reaped the reward, with 1,700 joining the Methodists and 700 joining the Baptists. The revival had the effect of shuttering many of the island’s taverns and even the Llanfair Pwllgwyngyll Rovers soccer
However, such an effect was short-lived. By 1908, the number of drunkards prosecuted had returned to normal, and the soccer league was reestablished four years later. An even greater threat came with the First World War, which challenged the old norms such as pacifism and led to an increase in focus on other activities. While an immediate drop in church membership did not occur, a long-time decline was predicted and eventually bore fruit, with only 7,000 attending Sunday Schools in 1938, a decline from a peak of 12,000. One positive effect from the war—at least from the Nonconformist perspective—was the final disestablishment of the Anglican church in 1920.

The greatest threat, however, would be the Second World War. Anglesey, due to its remote location, was deemed a primary location to place refugees, and an influx of over 3,000 came in, primarily from Liverpool and the surrounding region. The majority of these refugees were Catholic and initially clashed with the Nonconformist population. However, they were soon assimilated into the surrounding community, and some of the children even began to attend Nonconformist Sunday school. Also assimilated into the religious community were a number of German POWs, with a chapel at Caergeiliog even handing out German New Testaments for use during services.

Despite its remote location, Anglesey was not spared from the horrors of the war, and the spiritual landscape was no exception. Beginning in October 1940, German bombers began raids on Anglesey. Although the port at Holyhead was the main target, religious structures received collateral damage. Bethel chapel was completely destroyed and had to be rebuilt at a cost of £6,000, and the chapel at Pentre Berw had to receive a new roof. Even those chapels which were not destroyed faced declining attendance as the influx of refugees, POWs, and servicemen
precipitated an increase in competing social events such as dances and cinemas.\textsuperscript{50}

This decline continued after the war. At the end of the war, the Methodists counted 11,500 residents of the island among their ranks, but this number fell to just 8,700 twenty years later. In 2002, there were just 3,300 Methodists. Another measure of the decline was the septennial referenda on Sunday alcohol sales. Voters in 1961 rejected them with a majority of 10,353 but the majority was just 1,743 in 1975. In 1982, a majority approved of Sunday alcohol sales. It was not all bad news, however, as some denominations saw an increase, with nine Catholic churches being present on the island, and a Mormon chapel as well.\textsuperscript{51} The 2011 Census found that 45,400 Anglesey residents still professed to be Christian, with 17,800 having no religion, 5,750 declining to say, and the remaining 800 being non-Christian.\textsuperscript{52} Thus, despite two millennia of conflict and change, Christianity has kept its hold on the spiritual landscape of Anglesey.

Christianity may be the focus of the spiritual landscape we see on Anglesey today, but we mustn’t forget what came before. The ancient Neolithic people with their great monuments, the Druids with their fondness of nature, and the early Christians who continued these traditions still have echoes on the landscape which can be seen today. Through millennia of conflict and change, spirituality has shaped, and continues to shape, the landscape of Anglesey, and there is no reason that can be seen as to why that would change anytime soon.
1 Pretty 2005, 1  
2 Ibid., 1-2  
3 Yates and Longley 2001, 31, 33  
4 Pretty 2005, 2-3  
5 Yates and Longley 2001, 46  
6 Pretty 2005, 4-5  
7 Greenough, D’Ooge and Daniell 1898  
8 Pliny the Elder, Naturalis Historia, XVI.95  
9 Pretty 2005, 5  
10 Tacitus, Annals, XIV  
11 Pretty 2005, 9-11  
12 Ibid., 19-20  
13 Yates and Longley 2001, 29  
14 Pretty 2005, 20  
15 Ibid., 19  
16 Charles and Carl 2009, 13  
17 Yates and Longley 2001, 23-27  
18 Pretty 2005, 27  
19 Ibid., 29  
20 Ibid., 32  
21 Morgan 2011, 49  
22 Ibid., 51  
23 Pretty 2005, 36-37  
24 Ibid., 37-39  
25 Ibid., 46  
26 Ibid., 50  
27 Ibid., 50-51  
28 Ibid., 55  
29 Ibid., 52  
30 Ibid., 57-58  
31 Ibid., 59-62  
32 Ibid., 90  
33 Ibid., 91  
34 Pretty 2005, 92-93  
35 Ibid., 93  
36 Ibid., 93-94  
37 Cadw 2001  
38 Anderson 1987, 1-2  
39 Cadw 2001  
40 Taylor 2003, 228-229  
41 Ibid., 229  
42 Pretty 2005, 85-86  
43 Ibid., 94  
44 Ibid., 117-118  
45 Ibid., 119  
46 Ibid., 122  
47 Taylor 2003, 230  
48 Pretty 2005, 135-136  
49 Ibid., 139  
50 Ibid., 137-139  
51 Ibid., 148-149  
52 Office for National Statistics 2013
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