

Trefriw Legends & Folklore Trail

a 9-mile circular route from Trefriw



This 9-mile circular route takes in **Llanrwst**, **Gwydir Castle**, **Llanrhychwyn**, **Llyn Geirionydd** and **Llyn Crafnant**

with an option to return after Gwydir – 5 miles

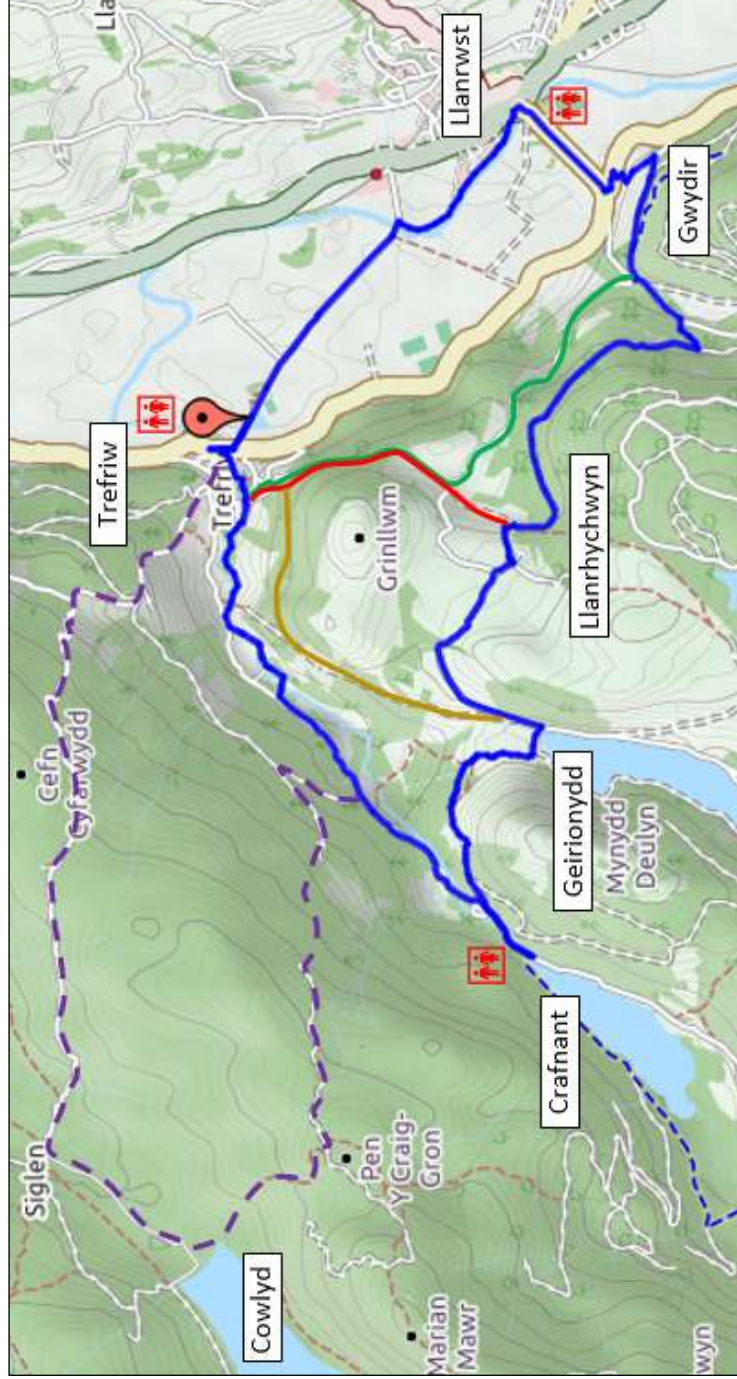
an option to return after Llanrhychwyn – 6 miles

an option to return after Geirionydd – 7 miles

and an option to extend the Trail with a loop to Cowlyd – 13 miles



Toilets are passed at Gwydir Park in Llanrwst and at Crafnant car park.



The start-point, in the main car park at Trefriw, is shown by a red marker. Toilets are indicated.

The Legends Trail is marked in blue, with other options also shown.

Route description

From Trefriw car park (🚗) walk R along the main street to see St. Mary's Church.

Llywelyn Fawr (Llywelyn the Great) had a court (serving as a hunting lodge) in Trefriw in the 13th century. Its location is subject to much debate, but it may have been on the site of the former Ebenezer Chapel on Crafnant Hill.

Tradition says that St. Mary's church was built c.1230 by Llywelyn to save his wife, Joan (Siwan in Welsh), the long walk up to Llanrhychwyn church. Some say that she was pregnant at the time, but if she was, it was probably by William de Braose, a Marcher Lord, who Llywelyn had hanged. (Llywelyn too had a favourite mistress called Tangwystl Goch, his mistress prior to marrying Joan.)

One of Llywelyn's uncles was Prince Madoc, who is credited with sailing to America some 300 years before Christopher Columbus.

Tradition tells us that Llywelyn had a dog. This has become the legend of Gelert, now associated with Beddgelert, although Llywelyn never lived there.

There are other fables associated with Llywelyn, such as 'Llywelyn and the Fool', 'The Prince's Wizard', and 'Llywelyn and the Geese'.

At the northern end of Trefriw, on Trefriw Terrace, is a property formerly called *Hafod y Gwragedd* ('Summer dwelling place of the wives'). Tradition says that this was the site of a home for the 'wives' of Llywelyn's soldiers, though it was probably a looser relationship than that! There is also a stream here – known as *Ffrwd Gwenwyn y Meirch* ('The horses' poisoned spring') – whose waters, allegedly poisoned by a traitor, caused the deaths of many of those soldiers.

On returning to the car park, head to the bottom end, continuing over the flood defence hump. Follow this metalled lane for a further $\frac{3}{4}$ mile to reach Gower's suspension bridge over the Afon Conwy. Cross the bridge and immediately turn R to walk along the far river bank for a little over $\frac{1}{2}$ mile, passing on your left the church of St. Grwst. You will emerge on the main road by Pont Fawr, Llanrwst's famous 16th century stone bridge.

Tradition says that the church of St. Grwst in Llanrwst was built in 1170 by Rhun ap Nefydd Hardd, a son of Nefydd Hardd, to make amends for his father's terrible deed in murdering Idwal at Llyn Idwal. This church was destroyed in 1468 in the Wars of the Roses; the current church was built two years later.

Tradition says that when the Black Death swept through the town in the 14th century, not a single person survived.

Tradition says that Inigo Jones built Pont Fawr bridge, as well as Gwydir Chapel at the church of St. Grwst, and Gwydir Uchaf chapel. It is probably not true.

Llanrwst has long been a market town, and a number of fables concern people encountering the likes of fairies and strange creatures or people on the way to and from (usually from!) market. These include 'The Fairy Wife', 'Dancing All Night', 'The Fairy Dog' and 'The Old Man and the Fairies'.

In 1941, during World War 2, Llanrwst's Eagles Hotel was earmarked by MI5's 'Twenty Committee' as a bolthole for one of Britain's most valuable spies.

Cross the bridge to leave Llanrwst behind (passing toilets by the park on your L), and continue on the pavement for 1/8 mile to a road junction. Behind the wall on your L is Gwydir Castle. Turn L along the pavement. (Continue to the Castle entrance if you wish to visit the Castle and gardens, which are open to the public.)

Gwydir Castle is one of the most haunted houses in Wales. Most commonly seen is the 'Grey Lady', reputedly the ghost of a servant girl who was murdered after becoming pregnant. Some say that Sir John Wynn was responsible for both the girl's condition and her murder. Other ghosts seen include that of Sir John himself, a monk, children, a procession on the terrace, and even a dog.

Sir John was generally unpopular locally; tradition says that his moaning spirit lies forever imprisoned under the waters of the Swallow Falls in Betws-y-coed, where he is being tormented for his ill-treatment of others, especially his tenants.

Sir John Wynn had a nephew, Thomas Wiliems, who lived at Ardda, above Trefriw. It is reputed that Wiliems, as a papist, knew of the Gunpowder Plot in 1605, and persuaded Sir John Wynn not to attend Parliament on that occasion.

Tradition maintains that Twm Siôn Cati was the illegitimate son of Sir John Wynn, although he is more usually associated with Tregaron in South Wales. Often called 'The Welsh Rogue', he was a robber and an outlaw, and many of the exploits of this Robin Hood-type character have become classic 'tall tales'.

It is said that Sir Percival (Peredur, in Welsh), one of King Arthur's knights – who is associated with the Holy Grail, and also appears in the *Mabinogion* – may have occupied the rocky plateau above the castle where the chapel now stands.

King Charles I stayed at Gwydir, but other stories about him hiding out here, and even sailing down-river by boat from Llanrwst, are probably not true.

A number of other fables concern Gwydir and other members of the Wynn family, including 'Maurice Wynn & The Mother Of Wales' and 'The Wedding in the Dark'.

If you are not going as far as Gwydir's gate, after just 100 yards from the junction cross the road to go through a small stone arch on your R. Follow the steep path upwards, to emerge between Gwydir Chapel and the main Gwydir Uchaf building.

Dafydd ap Siencyn, a skilled maverick bowman and a sort of 'Welsh Robin Hood', lived in the 14th century in a nearby cave at Carreg-y-gwalch, above Gwydir Castle. Many of his exploits during the Wars of the Roses have passed into folklore.

When Gwydir Forest was being planted in the 1920s, one group of workers saw 'hoop snakes that moved like bicycle wheels'. They chased the men for some distance before disappearing into the forest.

Coblynau are mythical gnome-like creatures who, according to tradition, dwell in the mines and quarries of Wales; Gwydir Forest has plenty. They were regarded as lucky, for they often helped the miners, allegedly tapping on rocks to indicate where large amounts of the minerals or ore could be found.

The fable of 'The Harpist and the Key' concerns Pencraig, a house in the Gwydir.

Head down the main drive, and after 100 yards take the path coming down from the R. Head up this path, to join another wide path at the top. Head straight ahead, for ¼ mile, with good views on your R down the Conwy Valley.

In the 19th century encounters with fairies on the Nant Conwy meadows were reportedly common; fairy circles on the grass were taken as an additional sign of their presence.

The Conwy Valley suffered frequent flooding, according to legend, as a result of the Afanc, a beast who lived in Beaver Pool at Betws-y-coed. The beast, who could not be killed, was eventually tempted out by a pretty woman, and was then dragged in chains by horses to Glaslyn, below the summit of Snowdon.

The Garrog, a flying beast who hunted livestock at Dolgarrog, was also said to be a cause of flooding here in the valley.

Mermaids have reputedly been spotted in the river Conwy.

Pass the Marin Trail car park to reach a metalled lane.

If you wish to return early from here (green route) along quiet lanes, go straight over the crossroads by Nant Cottage, and follow the road uphill for a mile. At Llanrhychwyn crossroads turn R to descend back to Trefriw.

Head L along the metalled lane for less than ¼ mile, to then take the wide forestry vehicle track on your R. After 200 yards, at a junction, turn R and follow this good track uphill for about a mile, skirting the edge of the forest, to eventually approach a farmhouse ('Tan-yr-Eglwys') on your R.

Opposite the gable end of the house, take the waymarked path L up the hill to ancient Llanrhychwyn church.

Llanrhychwyn church is said by some to be the oldest in Wales; according to tradition it marks the site where Rhychwyn established his church in the 6th century. Tradition says that the building is so old that it pre-dates the saw, for “saw marks cannot be found”; this is not true, as a saw features in the Bible.

Rhychwyn was the son of Helig ap Glannog, a prince who lived at Llys Helig (‘Helig’s Court’), off the coast at Penmaenmawr before it was inundated by the sea. As a drowned kingdom, it is now itself the subject of myth and legend.

This is the church that Llywelyn’s wife reputedly had to regularly walk up to with her maids, prior to him building Trefriw church “for the ease of his princess”.

From the church head R down the metalled road for 100 yards, to the junction.

If you wish to return early from here (red route) along quiet lanes, continue along the road for ¼ mile. At Llanrhychwyn crossroads turn L to descend back to Trefriw.

At this junction turn L, signed Geirionydd. Follow this metalled lane for ¾ mile, to Llyn Geirionydd.

Tradition says that Taliesin, the 6th century bard – and arguably the most famous bard in Britain – lived on the shores of the lake. Some say that he was even born and died here, but that is generally disputed. A number of fables describe Taliesin’s birth, and his being found in a coracle floating in the rushes.

The fable of Gwion and the Witch tells how Taliesin acquired his wisdom.

A later bard resided here too: Llywarch ab Llywelyn was a 12th/13th century Welsh poet. Mostly known by his bardic name, ‘Prydydd y Moch’ (‘poet of the pigs’), he became Llywelyn Fawr’s chief poet at his court in Trefriw, and nine of his poems, praising Llywelyn, still exist.

If you wish to return early from here (brown route), take the level path which heads N almost back the way you approached the lake. Follow this good path for a little over a mile as it passes high above the Crafnant Valley and through Cwmannog woods to the edge of Trefriw.

Go through the kissing gate on your R (waymarked Trefriw Trail 5) and ahead to the Taliesin monument, then bear R to pass behind it (or go up to it first, which is actually the Right of Way).

Continue on the path, with the lake behind you, and after 350 yards cross the stile over a wall. Immediately take the R path. After a further 30 yards take the L path.

The path skirts round this end of Mynydd Deulyn ('Two Lakes Mountain'), and after ¼ mile you will pass on your L the remains of old Clogwyn Quarry, to then descend over a stile to a wide forestry track and turning circle. Continue down to the metalled lane (with toilets in the car park opposite), then head L up the lane, to reach in ¼ mile Llyn Crafnant. (½ mile along the lake is a seasonally-open cafe.)

According to legend, if a person caught and mounted the Crafnant Water Horse, it would flee away to Crafnant Lake and plunge in; the person would never be seen again. (A Water Horse is also connected with Llyn Cowlyd.)

Tradition says that Nefydd Hardd, a 12th century tribal warrior and founder of the Sixth Noble Tribe, lived in the Crafnant Valley. Nefydd and his son Dunawd drowned Idwal at Llyn Idwal. Rhun, another son, donated land in Llanrwst for the construction of a new church, to make amends for his father's terrible deed.

Crafnant Valley is home to the sessile oak, which was sacred to the Druids, who lived in Wales at around the time of the Romans, some 2,000 years ago. It was the Druids too who first expressed huge respect for the wren, calling it 'The King of the Birds'. The wren is sometimes called 'The Bird of Taliesin', tradition telling that Taliesin was once transformed into a wren, his favourite bird. The wren is one of the commonest birds in the Crafnant Valley.

From Llyn Crafnant head back down the metalled lane for ¾ mile, to a gate and a waymarked path on the R.

*If you wish to undertake the **strenuous** 4-mile additional loop to Llyn Cowlyd (purple), see the directions over the page.*

(If you want a slightly more off-road route, and are happy to cross the Afon Geirionydd by a narrow plank bridge, go down the drive here on the R and cross the Afon Crafnant by a narrow concrete-walled bridge. Bear L to follow close to the river, then cross the Afon Geirionydd by a plank bridge. Head L across the clearing to join a wide track, and follow this for ½ mile to the concrete bridge by the lane.)

Otherwise continue down the lane for a further half mile, and take the waymarked path R down the bank. Cross by the bridge, and on reaching the main track turn L. On reaching the concrete bridge by the lane, don't cross it, but take the waymarked path to the R of it, to go through a gate in a gap in the hedge into the meadow.

Follow the path (which sticks close to the river) for ⅓ mile, and on exiting from the play park go L past the houses to the road. Go straight over, and after a few yards take a path L in front of a terrace of houses. Cross the river, go L down to the Fairy Falls, then follow the riverside path down into the centre of Trefriw.

If you wish to visit Llyn Cowlyd – and this is a **strenuous** 4-mile extra loop – pass the waymarker and after a few yards head L up the steep vehicle access road, initially metalled. Follow this for a little over ½ mile, then as Lledwigan farmhouse comes into view, take a waymarked footpath which comes in from behind you on the R.

Shortly cross a stile, then bear R uphill to follow this well-waymarked path for virtually a mile up onto the barren ridge of Cefn Cyfarwydd. You will reach a stile at a junction of fences. Cross over the stile and continue ahead for ¾ mile along a narrow path, down through the heather, descending eventually to Llyn Cowlyd dam, and the vehicle track which accesses it.

In *The Mabinogion*, Cwm Cowlyd is the home of the Owl of Cowlyd, one of the wisest of all creatures. In this story, Culhwch is the main hero, and he is obliged to perform some difficult tasks, as set by the giant Ysbaddaden in order to win the hand of his daughter Olwen in marriage. Culhwch is first cousin to King Arthur, who sends him to find the owl. Arthur himself is, of course, the source of many local legends.

There is also a fairy fable called Einion and Olwen. Reports from the 19th century tell of several encounters with fairies in this area.

Llyn Cowlyd is the legendary home of a Water Horse ('Ceffyl Dŵr'), which can shape-shift and fly. Appearing solid, they can quickly evaporate into mist. This is also the home of a mythical Water Bull, which appears with 'fiery horns and hoofs with flames issuing out of its nostrils', and reputedly drags the unwary to their doom.

Llyn Cowlyd is said to be a place where witches were thrown. Those that survived were evidently demonic, and the ones that drowned were deemed blameless! Overlooking the lake from the far side is Pen Llithrig y Wrach ('The Slippery top/summit of the witch'); witches were reputedly thrown from here too.

Overlooking the lake from this side is Craig Eryrod ('Rock of the Eagles'), and near the head of the lake is Bwlch y Tri Marchog ('Pass of the Three Horsemen').

Follow the vehicle track NE for about ½ mile to Siglen, at a T-junction of vehicle tracks, close to where the metalled lane comes in R from Trefriw (beyond the gate). Go through this gate and follow the lane for 3 miles; the first mile up to its summit on Cefn Cyfarwydd is followed by a steeper descent of 2 miles, back to Trefriw.

The top of the ridge offers excellent views N to the coast, and over the Conwy Valley.

(Want to know more? Much, much more detail can be found in our book '*Legends, Fables & Folklore from around Trefriw & the Conwy Valley*', available from the P.O.)