

Camelot Uncovered

Through the mist-swept castles and lush rolling hills of Wales, a literary lover sets on a quest for truth befitting a knight—
Did King Arthur Ever Exist?

A journey through Wales is like waking up in a detective story. And in this episode we were travelling with the genuine article. Our guide, John Wake, had been a police officer for 27 years. He spent 23 of them as a detective in the Criminal Investigation Division, and seven as head of the Drug Squad. Today, he's an expert on the legendary King Arthur.

The figure of Arthur casts a warm glow over the medieval history of the United Kingdom. He lived at a time when knights dreamt of rescuing damsels and roamed the land for the love of a quest.

Arthur formed the Round Table, a meeting place of equals, where he ruled over a Golden Age the likes of which we haven't seen since. Or did he...?

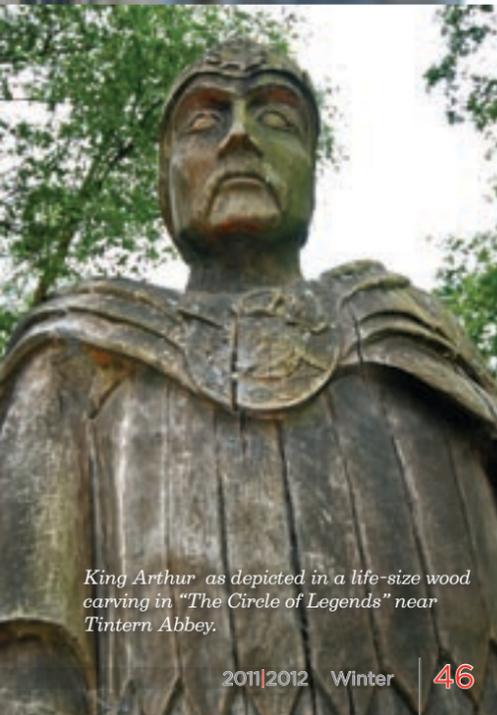
What about dragons and magicians and giants? What about the Holy Grail? Oh, they were just stories, you might say. Fables tacked on. Metaphors for something else. But could you dismiss one while accepting the other? What's the truth in all of this? Was there any truth, at all?

These pages: Tintern Abbey, Monmouthshire. Construction of the abbey began in AD 1131 and started to fall into ruin in the 16th century.

...Story by Ryan Murdock Photos by Simon Vaughan



Top three: Gargoyles on the 12th-century Llandaff Cathedral, Cardiff.



King Arthur as depicted in a life-size wood carving in "The Circle of Legends" near Tintern Abbey.

That's what my friend Simon Vaughan and I have come to Wales to find out. We met detective John one morning over coffee at Cardiff's Parc Thistle Hotel, and I asked him how he developed his rather odd hobby.

"It started as a fascination," he said. "And then became an obsession. Now it's back to being a fascination again."

An awful lot of people have written about King Arthur. Academics have fought over him, England has transplanted and claimed him, and a wide range of tourist sites bill themselves as the "real" burial place, and the place of the round table and battlefields. But no one denies that the earliest references to Arthur come from Wales. The entire topic is so full of misinformation, hidden agendas, personal interest and competing national myths that you'd have to be a detective to figure it all out. And that's where John comes in.

"Here's my angle," he said, cutting straight to the core. "Would a particular fact make it into a court of law? Not, would it prove the case—but would it even make it into court? If a story or a piece of so-called proof doesn't meet these criteria, I dismiss it immediately. It isn't relevant to the case."

This was clearly a man with no patience for nonsense.

"So, what do you think?" I asked, determined to appear even more hard-boiled than 'Detective Wake for The Prosecution.' Trust me, I know how to handle these things.

"Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, written around AD 1136, introduced Arthur to the world. There were a couple of obscure references to an Arthur in Welsh tracts before this, but they had no resemblance to Geoffrey's embellishments. Every other Arthur story is based on the details of Monmouth's fiction, and so everything that comes after it is false."

Wait a second: Monmouth's fiction? We'd barely been in Cardiff a day and a half, and this man with the nose of a prize-fighter and glare that'd cut through a thousand false witnesses had

already torpedoed our quest? I have to admit I was shaken. I'd grown up on stories of Arthur and his Knights, and part of me still wanted to believe.

"So, was there a man behind the legend?" I asked. "Or was it all just an elaborate fiction?"

"Oh yes," John said. "I believe there was a man. But he wasn't the Arthur of these stories."

And so the three of us set out to uncover this person, this mysterious Arthur. And there were many digressions along the way.

Our first stop was Llandaff Cathedral, a 12th-century church north of downtown Cardiff. John briefed us on the case as we drove.

"There are a few things you guys have to know about Geoffrey of Monmouth," he said, beginning with the source of all King Arthur legends—and the most questionable witness in the entire case. "Geoffrey was commissioned to write his *History* by Robert of Gloucester, and the book is dedicated to him."

Robert of Gloucester was one of the powerful Anglo-Norman barons, the so-called Marcher Lords, placed in control of the Welsh-English border region at that

time. In other words, Geoffrey wrote his book for the ruling class of his day.

"You've got to remember that the 12th century was a very corrupt time," John continued. "The kings of Britain needed a back story, something to legitimize their rule. And Geoffrey wanted to please his patron."

His book chronicles the kings of the Britons from mythical Trojan origins right up until the 7th century, when the Anglo-Saxons came on the scene. Geoffrey claimed to have based his Arthur chapters on "a very ancient book in the British tongue." A book which has never been found, or positively identified. Monmouth's *History* was one of the most popular books in the Middle Ages, particularly among British monarchs like the Tudors. It was accepted uncritically well into the 16th century, and it inspired the work of many other writers who extended the

No one denies that the earliest references to Arthur come from Wales

legends, in particular the Arthurian tales. Experts today regard it as a work of fiction, with a few facts sprinkled in. And yet, Arthurian scholars still treat it as the one definitive text on the real King Arthur.

John Wake would have none of it. "You can't pick and choose facts just to support your case," he said, jabbing a finger into the air. "You can't say Arthur set up his camp at Cadbury in one chapter, and in the next, Merlin flew in on the wings of a dragon. The person who wrote that is not a credible witness. All of his testimony must be dismissed."

By questioning Geoffrey, John was casting doubt on the one source of Arthurian legend that is accepted as a baseline by academic researchers. In the world of Camelot—Arthur's mythical kingdom where chivalry, peace and social justice reigned—this is serious business. And with that, we arrived at Llandaff, the first stop on our journey through a confusion of fact, fiction and hidden agendas.

"This place has real historical connections," John said, as we walked through the church's moss-covered lich gate. "The first religious community here was established by Saint Dubricius—St. Dyfrig in Welsh. Geoffrey of Monmouth claimed Dyfrig crowned King Arthur at a nearby Roman site called Caerleon. And Dyfrig was a real person. This places Arthur in the correct time frame, if he were real."

Our detective wasn't the type to mess around with sightseeing. We made our way straight down the vast, echoing centre aisle to a small apse tucked away near the altar. John pointed to a stained-glass window showing three figures: Tewdrig, King

Arthur and Cadwaladr.

"Now have a look here. This is a Victorian-era window, so it obviously came much later and isn't a historical source. But it depicts Arthur as a Romano-Briton, which would have been correct." The Romans left Britain in AD 410, and the Britons still hadn't come on the scene. "If Arthur did exist, this is probably the type of clothing he would have worn."

Despite Hollywood images and later legends, suits of armour wouldn't be invented for many hundreds of years. John pointed to the man in the centre of the triad. "I believe Geoffrey's Arthur was the grandson of Tewdrig. And that the fragments he used to weave his fiction and tales were based on actual events and actual people who lived. I'm going to show you exactly who I think they were."

Having set the stage with some rather stunning stained-glass visuals, Detective John turned and walked down the aisle. "Come on then. Our next set of clues is a bit of a drive."

A journey through Wales is like a conversation in a bar. It's filled with digressions. You never really stick to the point you thought you were trying to make. And you never know where you'll end up, either.

It didn't take us long to realize John Wake had a limitless ability to pull facts and odd places out of his hat like a conjurer pulling a rabbit. If there was ever a Merlin in Wales, this man is it. As we sped down the highway towards

the site of our next clue, I asked him about the Roman occupation.

"Did you know we're driving on one of their roads right now?" he said. "Pull into that parking lot on the right, just up there."

The stone remains of a thick Roman wall stood behind a beer garden, covered in moss, with only a pile of rubbish to mark the spot. We were standing beside the ancient entry to the village of Caerwent, where the landscape still held signs of what was once a very large market town. It spread across a broad bowl of land, and I could clearly trace the sweep of the wall that marked the distant limits of the settlement. This was exactly the sort of place Arthur and his contemporaries would have known in the centuries following the decline of Roman Britain.

It wouldn't be the first such site we stumbled across in Wales. This is a place where you can't throw a stone without hitting a 13th-century church, hilltop castle, or Roman site. Every square foot of the land has a story to tell, and in Wales, these legends are right around the corner. Our investigation continued at the nearby site of Meurig's Well.

"You guys remember Tewdrig, the figure next to Arthur in the window of Llandaff Cathedral?" John asked. "This place is connected to him. And there are some very interesting parallels to the story told by Geoffrey of Monmouth."

Tewdrig was a famous 5th- to 6th-century king of the region of Gwent, an area on the Welsh border with England. He became a holy man in his later years, willingly abdicating his throne to his son, Meurig, and retiring to a hermit's life in the Wye

The small country of Wales, with more than 600 castles ranging from full structures and ruins (like this one in Monmouthshire) to mere mounds, is considered the castle capital of the world.



River Valley near the present day site of Tintern Abbey.

“Tyn-Deryn refers to Seat of the King in Welsh,” John tells us. “It’s a direct reference to Tewdrig. Geoffrey would have seen the building of Tintern Abbey in his own lifetime, and he would’ve been intimately familiar with these stories.” The religious life was much to Tewdrig’s liking, but these were turbulent times. He was soon recalled to lead his old army against an invading Saxon force.

“Tewdrig won the battle,” John said, “but he was mortally wounded. His son Meurig carried him here, to this spot, where he washed the dying king’s wounds in a spring.” John pointed to a coffin-shaped concrete box where stagnant water trickled through a pile of fading litter.

“It’s now called Meurig’s Well. There

were many holy wells in 5th-century Wales. And there really was a well here for hundreds of years. I don’t know why they replaced it with this when it collapsed.”

The old king died nearby, and was buried beneath what is now St. Tewdrig’s Church in Mathern (Tewdrig being Tewdrig), our next stop on the trail of clues. This was a very old site, indeed. The churchyard wall was round rather than rectilinear, indicating that the existing 15th-century church had been built over a much earlier Celtic settlement. John led us straight to a plaque on the wall near the altar.

“We have a plausible evidence trail pointing to the fact that Tewdrig really was buried here. The name of the nearby town in Welsh is “Merthyr Teryn”—Martyred King. And when the floor of this church was dug up

in 1881, they discovered the bones of a very large man who died of a head wound. It doesn’t wrap up the case on its own, but it would certainly be strong enough to make it into a court of law.”

We stepped out of the sacred dimness, back into the gentle daylight road. The whole story sounded vaguely familiar, though I’d never heard of Tewdrig before, and had no idea what our detective was leading to.

“So why did Meurig bring his father here to die?” he asked—rhetorically, really. Court was in session, and I sensed he was going in for the kill.

“There’s an island just off shore called Flat Holm. A holy place. I believe Tewdrig wanted to be buried there.” John grabbed me by the shoulder and pulled me three steps down the road. “In Meurig’s time, the sea would have been much closer than it is today. In fact, it would have been just beyond that house. And the route we followed—from Tintern, to the village of Pwllmeyric and the well, to Mathern Church—would have been the most direct route to the sea and Flat Holm Island.”

The hair stood up on the back of my arm. The parallels to Geoffrey’s legend of Arthur were unmistakable: a final epic battle where the hero, a great king, was mortally wounded; and a dying king taken by sea to the magical island of

Avalon to be healed of his wounds. At that point, of course, Arthur disappears into legend, perhaps to return when needed: the “Once and Future King,” as he is so often referred to in folklore. But things like that don’t happen in real life. Bodies leave traces and stories leave trails. And so I think we might have just found our Avalon.

John continued. “Meurig had a son called Athrwys, who also went on to be king. This would have made him the grandson of Tewdrig, and it explains why those two figures were placed together in the window of Llandaff Cathedral.”

Each element of the original Arthur story was falling into place. John fixed us with a glare that would wilt a hardened criminal. “I think this man—this local chieftain, son of

Meurig and grandson of Tewdrig—was Geoffrey’s King Arthur.” It was a lot more plausible than versions locating Arthur in England. Later most writers based their stories on Geoffrey of Monmouth’s book. And one writer getting his information from another is not evidence. Geoffrey’s version is, indeed, the key to the mystery. But it’s a key that works on an oblique angle.

The rulers of the time needed a plausible myth of ancestry to increase their legitimacy. Even better if that ancestry included descent from an original hero. John Wake believes Geoffrey created the story of Arthur from known people and places. He added spice from real locations and established Welsh legends, and he wove in the propaganda of his patrons. Exactly the way any present day



Construction on St. David’s Cathedral began in AD 1131 and became a focal point for pilgrims from all over Europe.

novelist builds a work of fiction. You write what you know, and you draw characters from real life.

It fit my own experience as a writer. And the evidence trail was based on verifiable facts. But several important questions remained unanswered. And so, on we went.

Our journey through Wales was a walk through the landscape of my childhood imagination. It was like travelling through the fragments of dreams barely remembered, with a constant haze of déjà vu hovering over my shoulder.

The day after tracing the story of Tewdrig, we were driving to the town of Hay-on-Wye, site of a famous literary festival, and home to more used bookstores than any place on the planet. It was a selfish detour forced by myself with threat of pen-point, and not even Arthur himself could stand in our way. Conversation naturally shifted to books, and that's when John pulled another one of his conjuring tricks.

"Did you guys know Baskerville Hall is in Wales?"

I nearly slammed on the brakes, and I heard Simon's jaw hit the back seat and bounce off.

"Yeah, it's only a few miles from here. We can go if you like."

Wales was proving to be one bizarre surprise after another. We were both avid fans of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, and *The Hound of the Baskervilles* scared the bejeezus out of me the first time I read it. It didn't take long to locate the gate. As we pulled in the long winding drive and made our way towards the manor house, Simon spotted a man walking a little white Yorkshire terrier.

"My God, it's the hound!" he cried, and a fit of giggling nearly sent us careening into some sheep. Baskerville Hall has been transformed into a hotel, but the atmosphere could have been copied from the book. The coat of arms above the door showed a hound's head with a spear driven through it, and blood dripping from the end. Inside, the massive double staircase and cavernous entry hall were true to Conan Doyle's description. The author knew the Baskervilles well, and was a regular visitor to the house. He'd heard



Retired police detective John Wake, standing on the remains of a Roman wall.



The medieval White Castle, constructed in the 11th century and originally known as Llantilio Castle, was renamed when the structure's outer walls were whitewashed in the 13th century.

the family legend, and built what is perhaps his darkest Sherlock Holmes tale around it. But the novel was actually set on Dartmoor in Devon—in England's west country.

"I've heard two different stories to explain it," John said. "One was that the family asked him not to set it here because they didn't want notoriety and uninvited guests."

"If that's the case, then why use their name?" I asked.

"Exactly," he said. "It's not very plausible. The other story, which I believe, is that Conan Doyle's editors advised him to move the location to England because no reader would be interested in a story set in Wales." He turned to Simon and said with a wink, "Another example of you English stealing our stories for your own use."

I think the truth might have had more to do with landscape. Baskerville Hall was imposing but it didn't lack warmth, and the rolling green beauty of the Welsh hills was the farthest thing one could imagine from murder and evil deeds. At least, it looked that way from the front. A caretaker tipped us off to a cluster of graves on a forested hill behind the Hall. One of the older stones read: "Our well loved little doggie, Died 23rd January 1838." Could this be the grave of the dreaded hound?

Even by day the forest cast a strange gloom. The hillside was alive with shadows, and the emptiness of the path tickled our backs with phantom eyes as we crouched beside the little circle of stones. At night this would feel like a very different place. The three of us vowed to return here next year to investigate the legend—and to read *The Hound of the Baskervilles* in the very house that inspired it. By night, of course, with the wind moaning low and a sound in the forest of footsteps coming closer.

Baskerville Hall wasn't the only place John Wake pulled a Merlin, and conjured up images from my childhood. We made another roadside stop that day, at a ruin called The White Castle, hidden down a narrow winding detour just off our Arthur route.

It started as so many of John's stories did. "Would you guys like to see an out of the way castle no one ever goes to?" And we were off chasing the thread of another unexpected adventure.

Set on a low hill not far from the mid-Wales village of Llantilio Crossenny, The White Castle might just be the area's best kept secret. The outer bailey is largely intact and the main fortification—six round towers joined by a high curtain wall—is surrounded by a deep moat complete with wooden drawbridge. Judging by the state of the

remains, it never suffered the demolition visited on most Welsh castles after various civil wars and revolts.

Despite its military purpose, the castle was a peaceful place protected by birdsong. I climbed the stone steps of the gatehouse tower, where the sun warmed a summer-vacation scent into the air. On the grass of the outer bailey, three children were completely absorbed in an inner adventure of their own.

"Okay, you be Lord Voldemart. And I'm Hermione."

In my day it would have been knights

in armour—today, it's Harry Potter. I was struck by how naturally they took these props for granted. They didn't just have imagination, they had a castle to set it in. For a brief moment The White Castle transported me back to vacation days spent next to an open window reading Enid Blyton's *Famous Five* stories. I dreamed of high adventure and my very own ruined castle on a private island in a lake. Of course, The *Famous Five* novels weren't set in Wales. But it didn't matter.

"You've got to remember that the 12th century was a very corrupt time," John continued. "The Kings of Britain needed a back story, something to legitimize their rule. And Geoffrey wanted to please his patron"



You can't throw a stone without hitting a 13th-century church, hilltop castle, or Roman site. Every square foot of the land has a story to tell, and in Wales, these legends are right around the corner

The landscape and ancient stones conjured up the visions just the same.

Simon and John climbed the tower to survey the defences and earthworks, and our conversation once again turned to King Arthur.

"The seeds of Geoffrey's story make sense," I said. "But there are still unanswered questions that trouble me. Merlin, for example. Where did he come from?"

"Geoffrey again," John replied.

"There was a wizard, a sort of prophet and madman, who lived in the 6th century and became a figure in medieval Welsh legends. He was called Myrddin Wyllt in our language—Merlinus Caledonensis. No connection at all to Arthur, of course. Geoffrey made it all up. He would have grown up on these stories, and he used them as material like so much else."

"What about the Lady in the Lake? Excalibur, and all that?" Simon asked.

"They find old swords in lakes all the time!" John replied. "They're a dime a dozen."

For a moment I pictured Wales as a place of watery maidens who spent their time chucking swords at passing knights.

"The ancient Celts worshipped water," he continued. "They placed their weapons in lakes as offerings. It was such a common practice. Lake beds are actually one of the best places to find those sorts of artifacts." He laughed at the clear disappointment on our faces. "Sorry guys. You won't find any cute girls in these lakes."

The sword in the stone is an easy legend to trace, said John. In Arthurian legend, a sword (called Excalibur) had been magically embedded in a stone, and only the true-born king could retrieve it. That king, of course, was Arthur.

"Stones were used as molds to cast metal," John said. "The molten liquid was poured into the mold and allowed to harden. Of course it would have taken a strong man to pull it free!"

In his book Geoffrey had once again drawn his details from the practices of the times, padding out his narrative for authenticity just as any good novelist would do. The key, once again, was stories. And it's a key that's particularly Welsh.

Wales was magnificent in its treats. We explored the remote ruin of Carreg Cennen Castle, on its windswept limestone crag, and wandered through the perfect specimen of Kidwelly Castle, haunted by doves and the camera click of tourists. And as the pennants of forgotten armies snapped in the breeze, the soaring battlements always brought our conversation back to Arthur.

If what John Wake uncovered was true—and both Simon and I believed it was—then what value does Arthur have today? Can we still accept him if the entire story is founded on a lie, a complete myth? So many writers built on Geoffrey of Monmouth's account of what Wake calls "the world's first superhero." And each author added strands of their own.

The Norman-French poet Maistre Wace (circa AD 1155) added the Round Table. Chretien de Troyes added chivalry and courtly romance. Robert de Boron developed the quest for the Holy Grail, bringing these tales into a Christian era. And Thomas Malory, in his *Le Morte d'Arthur*, pulled all the threads together into a complete narration. Victorian writers like Walter Scott and Tennyson had their say, too.

Kidwelly Castle dates back to the 13th century and although it boasts a long and colourful history, today it is perhaps best known by some as the castle from the opening scenes of "Monty Python and the Holy Grail."



Left: Ancient flags and standards hanging in Llandaff Cathedral, Cardiff. Right: The tombs inside Llandaff Cathedral include that of St. Dyfrig who crowned King Arthur.

They painted on a layer of their own ideals and values, using the chivalric past to educate the present. Today these legends of wizards and knights serve an age intent on escapism and fantasy.

The story of Arthur transcended its place in the kingdom of Gwent, at first intentionally, when it was co-opted by the English to enhance the lineage of their kings, and later unintentionally. Each writer placed Arthur in his own time, and projected his own ideas and values onto the characters. And, I believe, it's that essence—that story—that really holds the key.

John Wake summed up my feelings on it precisely: "The way the entire narrative developed tells us more about the times in which the author lived, than the era referred to."

The Arthur of legend doesn't have to be real—any more than the protagonist of your favourite novel does. For me, it's always been a story of adventures and castles and saving the girl. I didn't care about grails and Christianity—and especially not chastity. Instead, Arthur

inspired me to see my life in larger terms. To go out and do things that frightened me. And to hold firm to my truths, no matter what fantastic monsters I encountered along the way.

In the end it doesn't matter if Arthur was a small Romano-British chieftain, or the Once and Future King. It's the story that's important, and what it teaches us about ourselves.

We came to Wales in search of the man behind King Arthur, but we found so much more: friendship, childhood memories, mystery, and many layers of the past. On the last night of our trip we shared a pint with John Wake in a quiet Cardiff pub. We'd covered a lot of ground together, and that, in itself, seemed to be the final clue.

"How much does all this have to do with landscape?" I asked him. "Not just the story of Arthur, but all of these stories?"

"It's terribly important," he said, setting his glass carefully on a coaster.

"You can't have a tale of wizards and dragons and mystical kings without mist, fog and hidden valleys. The landscape of these legends is the landscape of Wales. It is Wales."

And that, I think, is the constant here. The green rolling hills, the torn-off coast, the music of place names, ruined castles and Roman hill forts, and above all the mist which conceals and transforms. These things are constant. Everything else, pliable.

Wales taught me that the future is vague and uncertain, but the past is fluid. Events from the past are not just cold hard facts, because we can interpret them. And, quite simply, they change over time.

Long a lover of literature and travel, Ryan Murdock is Outpost's editor-at-large for Europe and requisite book reviewer. His boyhood fantasy at playing knight morphed into a manhood fascination with martial arts, which he teaches to...undisclosed clients...at undisclosed locations.



5 Cwmdonkin Drive

At his childhood home in Swansea, the spirit of Welsh poet Dylan Thomas Comes to Life

Story by Ryan Murdock Photos by Simon Vaughan

Stories have always been important to the Welsh people. They linked place names together, and served as a reminder of the legends connected to them. The longer we travelled, the more it seemed like every square foot of ground had something to tell us.

Welsh literature is unusual in another sense: its construction. According to Sioned Davies, Chair of Welsh at Cardiff University, verse was not used for extended narratives in Medieval Wales. "The preferred medium, unlike most Indo-European countries, was prose."

Despite the strong development of prose storytelling traditions, the Welsh did make a major contribution to English language poetry that challenged the way we manipulate and use words. Or rather, a particular Welshman did. His name was Dylan Thomas.

We took time out from our Arthurian investigation to visit sites associated with Thomas's life. For writers, it's a sort of pilgrimage.

To me, Thomas has always been a monumental figure. The originality

of his word usage was intimidating and sometimes difficult to approach. He was also a poet whose facade of unruly drunkenness could overshadow the importance and uniqueness of his work. So much of his life is shrouded in myth that it's difficult to see the person behind it.

Thanks to John Wake, we were able to visit the house at 5 Cwmdonkin Drive, Swansea, where Thomas spent the first 23 years of his life, and where he wrote two-thirds of his published work. The home has been carefully

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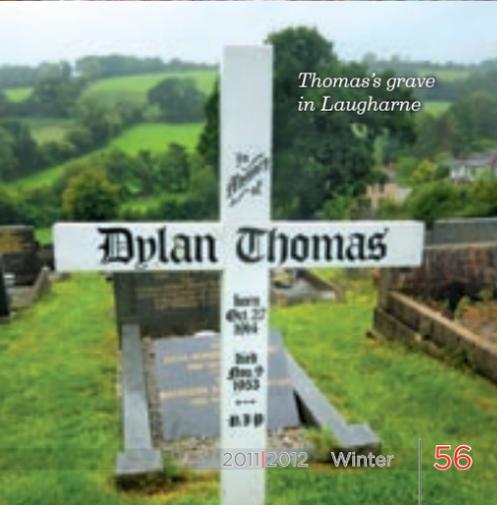
Thomas was born at 5 Cwmdonkin Drive, Swansea in 1914 and remained in the house with his parents until he was a young man. It was here that he wrote many of his best-known works



Ryan gazes through the window that inspired some of Thomas's best poems



The town of Hay-on-Wye in Powys is referred to as the world's largest bookstore because of its annual literary festival and its many bookshops



Thomas's grave in Laugharne

restored to its 1914 condition by current owners Annie and Geoff Haden.

"It isn't the original furniture, of course," Annie told us. "But we spoke with the Thomas's cleaning lady and tried to get the same type of furniture, in the same places, and the same colours on the walls. She cried the first time she came here because it was so close to what she remembered."

Annie showed us the room at the front of the house where Thomas was born, and the tiny bedroom where he spent so many nights dreaming up his lyrical verse. But the greatest surprise awaited me at the back of the house, from a window in his parent's room.

When I leaned my elbows on the sill and put my nose against the glass, the row houses at the bottom of the hill formed a level horizon against the waters of Swansea Bay, revealing the origin of that strange line in Thomas's poem about boats bobbing across the rooftops.

"No one could figure out where in the house it was written until we found this window," Annie said. "It had been blocked up by later tenants, but one day a piece of plaster fell out. It was like the house wanted it to be found."

The key to so many of Thomas's images came to life there, in a middle class neighbourhood on a steep hill in what he called his "ugly lovely town."

The next morning Simon and I hiked out to Three Cliffs Bay on the Gower Peninsula, where a broad sand beach is guarded by a triple-pointed crag of rock. We climbed the hill to the ruins of Pennard Castle, where we talked about life and literature just as Thomas and his friends did in a vanished age of bygone lives. The only thing we didn't have was a bottle.

The wind blew across the sand and ruffled the tendrils of a textbook oxbow river far below, carrying with it the smell of horses. I thought about how many times I did the same thing in my small-town youth.

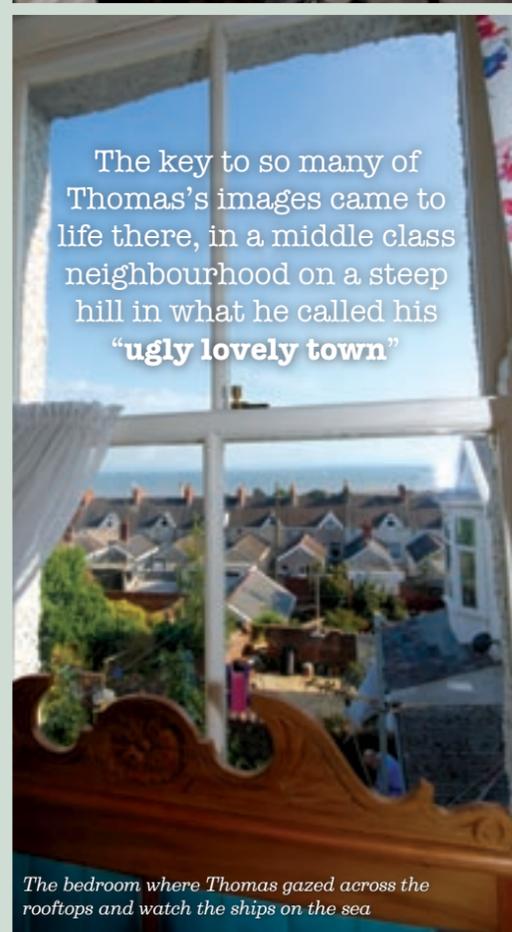
Like Thomas, my friends and I sometimes hiked to a quiet spot and sat up all night, sharing secrets in gentle voices and talking about how one day we would escape this life that caged us. We burned with a desire to journey into a wider world we hadn't even begun to understand. Life must have looked

so simple to Thomas then, before the coming of fame and admirers, and the struggle to support a legend no one could have lived up to.

Walking through these scenes of Thomas's early years humanized him in a way a biography never could. I began to relate to his life, and it opened a new gateway into his work. It was another of Wales's unexpected gifts. 🇨🇪



Ryan sits at a desk in Thomas's childhood home



The key to so many of Thomas's images came to life there, in a middle class neighbourhood on a steep hill in what he called his "ugly lovely town"

The bedroom where Thomas gazed across the rooftops and watch the ships on the sea

Outposting

Full Name: Wales (Welsh: Cymru)

- ▶ **Location:** Western Europe, southwest British Isles, bordered by England to the east and surrounded by the Irish Sea and Celtic Sea
- ▶ **Capital:** Cardiff (Caerdydd)
- ▶ **Area:** Land, 20,540 sq. km; water, 259 sq. km
- ▶ **Population:** 3,006,430 (2010 est.)
- ▶ **Ethnicity:** Caucasian, 95.9%; Asian, 1.8%; other 2.3%
- ▶ **Languages:** English and Welsh (both official)
- ▶ **Religion:** Christian (mostly Presbyterian, Anglican, Roman Catholic), 72%; no religion, 18.5%; undefined, 8.1%; non-Christian (primarily Islam), 1.5%
- ▶ **Currency:** Pound Sterling (GBP)
- ▶ **Time Zone:** GMT/UTC+0
- ▶ **Climate:** Wales has a maritime climate, characterized by rain, wind and overcast skies. An extensive coastline, which brings in warm Atlantic currents, and a hilly terrain can cause daily fluctuations and localised differences in temperatures, which overall are balmy and mild year-round.

When to Go:

Though there isn't a distinguishable wet or dry season, October to January are generally the wettest months. The best time for water sports like kayaking is early spring (December to March), when levels in inland waterways are higher. April and May are perfect for trekking and walking the Welsh countryside. With the sunniest weather, July and August tend to be the peak travel season, but May and September are also climatically inviting.

Getting There

The only international airport in Wales is in Cardiff. While there are no direct flights from Canada, most major airlines, including Air Canada, Delta and KLM, offer flights with stopovers in European cities through their affiliates.

A more affordable and scenic option is to fly into England, then travel overland to Wales. Air Transat has several flights each week to Manchester and London—both of which have excellent highways that lead into North and South Wales, respectively.



Wales (Welsh: Cymru)

Auto rentals in the U.K. are pricey, as is fuel, so book in advance. Also, be aware that most vehicles have manual transmission, and that you must be 21 years-old to rent a car. While driving from London to Cardiff takes almost three hours, the Welsh-English border is less an hour from Manchester.

The region's extensive rail system, which connects major U.K. destinations with hubs in Wales, is also a great option. Operated by First Great Western, the London-Cardiff line takes two hours, while Arriva trains from Manchester to North Wales take an hour. If more a seafarer, consider the ferry from Dublin, Dun Laoghaire, Rosslare and Cork, Ireland.

Getting Around

Travelling by car is most ideal in Wales. Buses are well priced, but driving at your own pace offers the best opportunity to explore Wales's rural heartland. The winding back roads are great for cycling, as they're often wide open and accompanied by striking backdrops of limestone crags. Travelling by train, however, offers the unique experience of traversing the Welsh highlands by heritage lines—steam trains, tramways and cliff-side railways.

What to See and Do

Famed for its rich Celtic history, Wales boasts a distinctive blend of old-world nuance and modern experiences for the 21st-century traveller. In Cardiff, try the Centenary Walk—a 3.6-kilometre route that weaves across the city and follows its grandeur through cathedrals and medieval marketplaces.

Known as the castle capital of the world, Wales is perfect for castle-hopping. Cardiff Castle has medieval charm and offers visitors a Welsh banquet fit for a king. Less than 12 kilometres north, Caerphilly Castle is another must-see. The largest in Wales, it is purportedly the home of the Ghost of the Green Lady—Princess Alice of Angoulême.

Wales's rugged terrain and cliffs lend themselves to many an adventure, including coastering, an extreme-sport that involves scrambling over rocks, jumping off sea-cliffs and swimming through narrow bays. There are three national parks, including Pembrokeshire Coast National Park, the only coastal one in Britain, found along the rocky western shore. Brecon Beacons National Park has dozens of country inns, such as Peterstone Court, an 18th-century Georgian manor in the Welsh countryside—perfect for walking, trekking and horseback riding. Further north, scale Snowdon—the highest mountain in the British Isles outside of Scotland—at Snowdonia National Park.

A visit to the Llechwedd Slate Caverns, in Gwynedd County, is a must. Explore inside the Welsh mountains via an underground slate mine that has been active since 1836. When you're back on land, hop aboard the Ffestiniog Railway as it chugs along the steep gradients of the Cambrian Coast. Split by tumbling rivers and dramatic ravines, this rocky western fringe has seascapes that are uniquely Welsh.