



St Dwynwen's Island

Ynys Llanddwyn



Anglesey (Ynys Môn) boasts the oldest rocks in England and Wales. Travel to Newborough beach and look at the rocks at the north end; pillow lavas that are testament to the volcanic activity, 700 million years ago, when the rocks that became the basement of the newly created southern Britain were laid down on a shallow seafloor off the coast of what would become Gondwanaland. To the east lies Ynys Llanddwyn which has stood withstood the elements since those Pre-Cambrian days. Though not a true island, in that at low tide it is connected to the 'mainland', venture onto it and you feel that is an island in all other respects.

Ever wondered why the Welsh lads always seem to get to go out with the girls first? Here's why

The island is named after the Church of St Dwynwen built here. She was a daughter of Brychan Brycheiniog, a Dark Age chieftain, legendary for having fathered 24 sons and 24 daughters (some accounts give higher figures). Dwynwen was considered the most beautiful of the girls and was desired by a young man called Maelon. But she rejected him and in his lust he raped her. She prays for help and an angel gives her a potion to put in Maelon's drink. This turns him to ice. Dwynwen regrets this and prays for his release. This and two other wishes are granted her. She asks that through her God looks after true lovers and that she should never marry. To help this one along she exiled herself to the island and lived the life of a hermit and founded a convent there. Because of this she has become the Welsh equivalent of St Valentine.

Since early Victorian times Llanddwyn has become a sanctuary for those who desire a hermit's existence. One estimate put the number of hermits on this small island at over 20 at the height of its popularity. Whilst making the most of their (relative) solitude, they made a little cash by unusual and entertaining guided tours of the island. Some would walk ahead of the group apparently muttering to himself, while others would leap out of cover and rant about some notable feature before running away. The visitors would hear about Dwynwen, the convent and the subsequent church, the caves and of course St Dwynwen's Well. This is what those seeking love seek. The legends state that the eels that live in the well foretell your destiny. Sprinkle breadcrumbs (cake will do too) on the surface of the water, and place a handkerchief over them. If this is disturbed them you will find true love. Money left for the hermits kept them in fresh straw for bedding and other little luxuries.

So how did a postal service arise? In 1205 Llewelyn the Great of Gwynedd, who by then was nominal ruler over much of Wales, had made a decree that all messengers and messages from St Dwynwen's Island, on her feast day, should have free and unmolested access across Wales. By 1283 and after two campaigns Edward I of England had displaced the Welsh Princes. But he was unusual, if not unique, among medieval kings; he was devoted and faithful to his wife Eleanor of Castille. While much of the Welsh law was replaced by English when Edward heard about the free movement of messages in the name of St Dwynwen he decided that this should now cover England and Wales, so that others seeking true love should be as lucky as the king himself. Over the centuries this law became forgotten, until it was rediscovered in archives in 1923. Two years were spent with legal and historical experts and it was concluded that on St Dwynwen's Day alone the Royal Mail should deliver any love letters posted on the island to wherever within Britain. As the law applied to messages leaving the island the hermits there could charge for the posting of the letters.

Since then a posting box has been made available from 8:07 am till 4:42 pm for those sending a card on St Dwynwen's Day. The envelope receives as evidence of its origin a St Dwynwen's Isle stamp for a fee payable to the hermits themselves. This is very popular these

days. A queue starts to form while it is still cold and dark, waiting for the post box to be available. Would be lovers buy a stamp and post their card or letter. The hermits are very strict about one card per person. No hedging your bets by sending to two or more, but some will post one and join the end of the queue for another card. At sunset the last cards are posted and the contents of the post box are formally handed to the Post Office collector where Llanddwyn meets Newborough beach for delivery to the addresses the next morning. Collectors will be interested to know that this was the only service not affected by the postal workers strike of 1971.

The first stamps for this service went on sale in 1927 and were of a simple design, but soon became more ornate telling us that the postal service was immediately popular. Since then a number of issues have appeared, but not on a regular basis. Some years may see two new stamps and but most years none at all. Designs that do not sell out are not withdrawn, but brought out in subsequent years and those sending the cards can choose the stamps they like. There is considerable, but friendly, rivalry between the hermits to have their design for a stamp adopted. They will have spent up to five years or even longer contemplating ideas, and will have hidden important details within the design - or not, because some are chosen purely on aesthetic grounds. Eels and scenes of the island are favourite subjects. Though they do have a value on them, if the price has risen since they were printed the current price is charged. Rarely the stamps have been overprinted with a new value. Originally the charge was 2d, gradually rising to 7d by 1971 when decimalisation came in. Since then the price has risen to 30p by 2010. It is never know prior to St Dwynwen's Day whether a new stamp will be available or what the charge will be.

This package only contains a small selection of the Ynys Llanddwyn stamps from over the years. You will find some early examples featuring the eels and some with some the verse of Gwerful, a 15th century poetess. Academics amongst you will have recognised that the full poem is not represented on these two stamps. Stamps featuring the remainder of the verse are less frequently found. There are a couple of more recent full colour issues depicting St Dwynwen's Cave from 2005 and 2006, and the 2011 stamp with the lighthouse, the most prominent feature on the island.

Whilst being printed in relatively large numbers availability of stamps for collectors is limited. Those receiving a card from a would-be lover would keep the envelope with the stamp. Unused examples mean queuing and buying them one at a time ... after posting your own card of course.

. and to answer the earlier question, St Dwynwen's Day is 26th January, nineteen days before Feb 14th and that's why the Welsh are lucky in love.