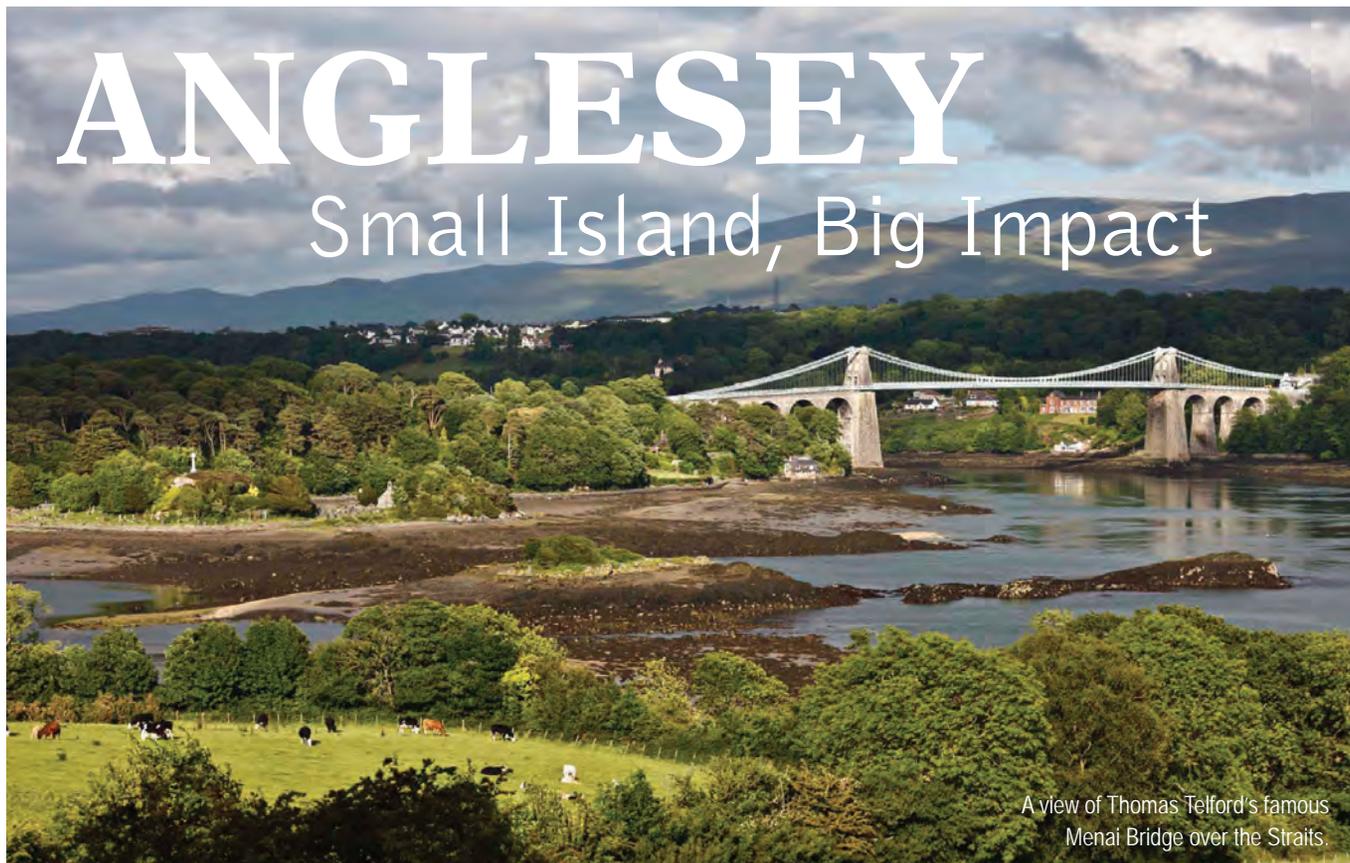


# ANGLESEY

## Small Island, Big Impact



A view of Thomas Telford's famous Menai Bridge over the Straits.

Helen Werin braves the elements to explore the island known as the 'mother' of Wales.

Photography by Robin Weaver

**W**hen you've been informed that a place is "so pretty, that even the jail is picturesque", then it obviously has a lot to live up to.

So, with the words of the local authority's press officer ringing in my ears, I had high expectations as we approached Beaumaris. "It's such a beautiful spot" she'd enthused.

It takes a big leap of imagination to describe the jail as even remotely aesthetically pleasing. But Beaumaris? Well, it's hard to tell. We've arrived on Ynys Mon, to give Anglesey its proper Welsh name, in some of the worst summer weather the UK has seen. When we park beside the promenade, our vehicle quickly becomes an island. Part of the road floods as the Menai Straits fling their worst at us. It's so blustery I can barely open the door.

We make a mad dash across the seafront to Beaumaris Castle. Never has an ancient building looked so appealing. We find little shelter here, not least because this castle was

never actually finished. The rain stops just long enough for us to clamber up on the ramparts of this perfectly-symmetrical white elephant, the last – and the largest – castle in Edward I's chain.

And yes! Beaumaris is lovely, with streets of pastel-painted cottages and small shopping areas dripping with floral decorations. We get glimpses of the Snowdonia mountains across the straits, but our focus is on staying dry. What better way to do that than holing up in the jail?

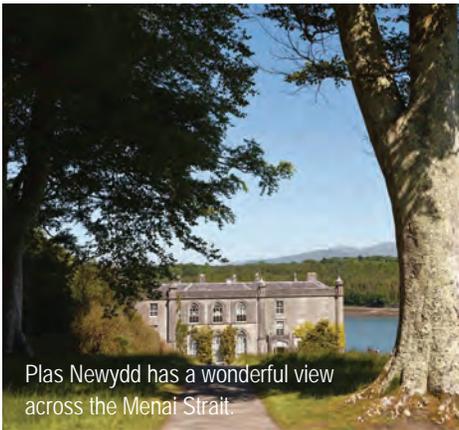
We walk in the footsteps of condemned men. We're shocked to see that the door to the scaffold is next to the nursery. Outside, it's the human tread wheel that powered the water system, which proves darkly fascinating. It's hard to imagine anything more punishing.

We're rather being punished by the rain, but determined not to let it stop us walking some of Anglesey's beautiful coastline. I'd heard that the island's beaches were among the best

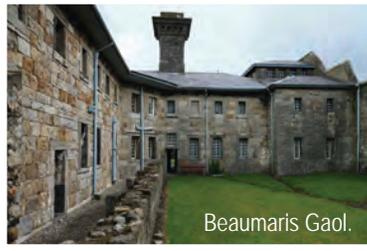
in the UK so we make Benllech, one of the most popular, our first stop.

Our appetite is whetted on the road down by misty views of the Great Orme headland above Llandudno. Waves are splashing over the sea wall, while families shelter in the shuttered ice cream kiosk. When we visit next day in what turns out to be a rare spot of blazing sunshine we can, indeed, see that the beach is fabulous and, not surprisingly, packed.

The sun brings out the wildlife. We spot red squirrels, for which Anglesey's also famous, in the woods at Newborough. There's more in the arboretum at Plas Newydd, home of the Marquess of Anglesey. From the lovely gardens here we watch water skiers and pleasure boaters out in force on the Menai Straits. At Coed Cyrnol nature reserve, near Menai Bridge, footpaths lead us down to the water's edge, home to redshanks, dunlin and oystercatchers. At low tide you can walk over to Church Island for even better views.



Plas Newydd has a wonderful view across the Menai Strait.



Beaumaris Gaol.



Bwa Du natural arch near Rhoscolyn.



The currents here are treacherous currents, so it's amazing to learn that, before the bridges were built, drovers would have had to swim thousands of cattle across.

It's on Holy Island – the area including Holyhead that's an island in its own right – that we go in search of the dramatic Bwa Gwyn sea arch that we've seen in postcards. An easy three mile walk takes us across the Rhoscolyn headland and past the coastguard lookout staffed by volunteers who apologise for not being able to offer us a cup of tea as the rain returns. Goats, imported from the Great Orme, leap about the rocky cliffs. A sign informs us that they're here to help choughs and nature. There's certainly dozens of the red beaked choughs as we walk past the ancient St Gwenfaen's well. Off Borthwen beach the islands are also smothered in birds.

Near Aberffraw, we're dive bombed

by a squeaking oystercatcher as we photograph St Cwyfan's Church, known as the church in the sea. It's on a tiny island, which we reach via a rocky path at low tide. We can't go inside and services are only held a few times a year, but it's in a gorgeous location.

The 18th century copper mine at Parys Mountain above Amlwch resembles the surface of the moon so much that sci-fi movies have been made here. To say that it's other-worldly and slightly spooky does not begin to describe this landscape of enormous craters. We're surrounded by rocks tinged with purples, oranges, yellows and reds. We're looking at a mountain with its heart quite literally ripped out as it became one of the largest opencast mines in the world. It doesn't take much to imagine the chasm spread in front of us as a hell of noise, sulphur and danger in to which miners would have descended on ropes.

Down at Porth Amlwch, where the vast quantities of copper ore were smelted and shipped around the globe, we imagine another nightmarish place. The images in our heads are of a flaming, raging crucible of industry with smelters, chemical works, saw mills and conical sulphur extraction kilns 35ft (10.6mtrs) high. After the mines were exhausted, Porth Amlwch developed a thriving ship-building industry. That ceased in the early 20th century. Looking at the peaceful village now it is very hard to equate it with being a major industrial town 240 years ago. There are plenty of reminders of it in the visitors' centre though.

On our last day we leave the pretty beaches of Treaddur Bay for what the RSPB calls 'seabird city' at the clifftop Ellins Tower. All I can hear above the gusty weather is the foghorn from South Stack lighthouse 400 steps below. Suddenly my husband appears. "Come and see this!" he yells. I climb up to where signs warn about unprotected cliffs and peer gingerly over the edge. Ahead of me are what seem to be millions of guillemots perched on every available shelf of rock and making an absolute racket. They look just like members of an audience waiting in anticipation of some kind of spectacle.

The fog may have thwarted my ambition of seeing seals or even dolphins out in the Irish Sea, but this wonderful wildlife 'concert' provides an unforgettable finale.



The Stag at Cemaes is the most northerly pub in Wales.



Lligwy Beach, Near Moelfre.



Helen beneath the famous station sign at Llanfairpwllgwyngyll.

## FACT FILE

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