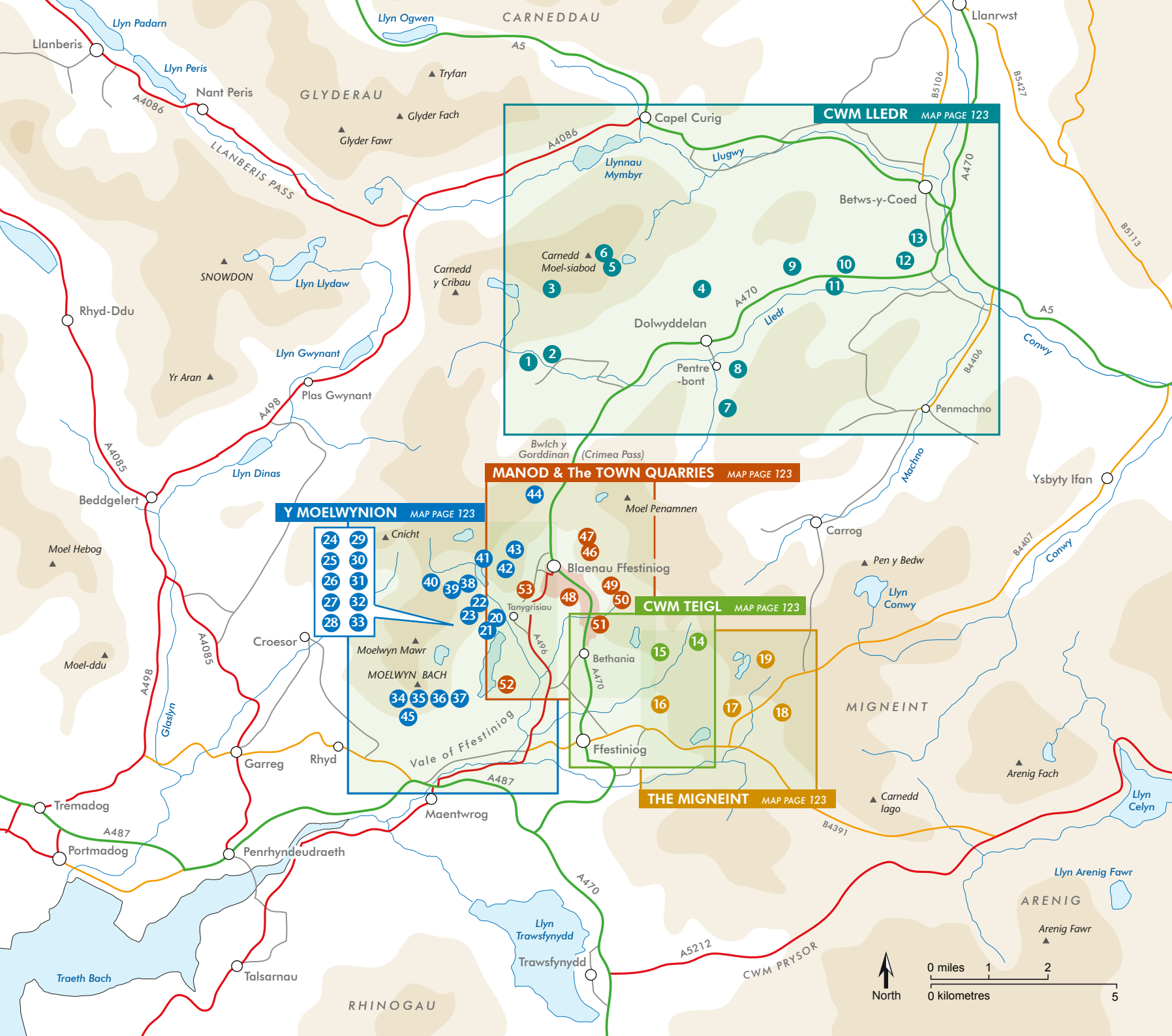


# Moelwynion & Cwm Lledr

## Climbers' Club Guide



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**Cwt y Bugail Slate Quarry**

The Quarry located at the head of Cwm Teigl between Carreg y Fran and Clogwyn Garw is famous, not only for its production of slate and the long internal tramway that carried completed slates all the way around the back of the Manod Mawr mountain before descending to the railway station in the middle of Blaenau (literally passing through the bouldering area known as ‘the Sidings’), but also for its hidden history. The hidden role of a remote Snowdonia slate mine in protecting priceless art from the Nazi bombers of World War 2 is a little-known secret.

Many of the priceless pieces of art and sculptures usually stored at the National Gallery in London were secretly transferred to the mines to protect them from the enemy bombers and the blitz.

These included works by artists such as Titian, Michelangelo and Constable and included over 2000 pieces of important and irreplaceable art-work. Special airtight brick compartments and air conditioning units were constructed underground in the mines of Cwt y Bugail to preserve the art-work and maintain perfect humidity levels. Plans to transfer the art from London even led to roads and bridges along the route being altered to keep the works safe.

At the end of the war, apparently, many of the pieces even arrived home in a better condition, preserved and improved by the humidity and low temperatures inside the mine!

**Cwmorthin**

The origins of the name Cwmorthin are not known – ostensibly it’s Orthin’s Cwm, but the origin of the name ‘*Orthin*’ is unknown in historical terms. There have been many speculations as to its origins, even suggestions that it’s a combination of ‘*oer*’, meaning cold, and ‘*eithin*’, meaning gorse, but this is unlikely. Another suggestion is that it relates to the parish boundary or even the boundary between the territories of ancient Celtic tribes – ‘*ffin*’ being boundary and ‘*Orth*’ referring to the Ordovices tribe. But this is all speculation...!

Cwmorthin has a far longer history of occupation than the surrounding area, with the remains of the farm at the head of the lake supposedly having a history of continuous occupation by the same family of Sionsiad (Jones’s) since the 13th century until the mid-nineteenth century...and allegedly all the male descendants lived to a great age, all surviving to over 100 years old.

The first recorded slate mining in the Cwmorthin

valley started in 1810 but there are in fact four separate slate quarries in Cwmorthin alone, including Rhosydd at the very top of the cwm. A modern-day underground caving through-trip can be made from here to the neighbouring quarry of Croesor on the other side of the hill, involving a boat crossing of an underground lake! Commercial slate production of any scale ceased before the second world war, but intermittent work continued until this century at Cwmorthin mine. Cwmorthin mine was a notoriously dangerous mine to work in, and acquired the nickname ‘*lla-dd-dy*’ or ‘slaughterhouse’ due to the high levels of fatalities and rockfalls.

A ‘Pelton Wheel’, a design of a hydro turbine wheel with ‘cups’ to generate more power and which is now the standard design for most hydro power turbines in the world, was first used to generate power at the Cwmorthin Quarry and this can be seen in its restored state in situ in the copse of wood before the ascent to Craig yr Wrysgan from Cwmorthin.

**Clogwyn Holland**

In 1818 Samuel Holland was a Liverpool merchant who took a lease of land at Rhiwbryfdir on the outskirts of what became Blaenau Ffestiniog to prospect for slate. The lease was from the Oakley family of Maentwrog and this initial prospecting grew to become the largest underground slate mine in the world, with over 26 underground levels, spanning a vertical distance close to 500m from the lowest levels to the top workings. At their peak the Oakley Slate Mines were producing over 60,000 tons of finished slate annually. Samuel Holland junior went on to open a smaller mine himself on the flanks of Craig Nyth y Gigfran, and the stepped path now used to approach Craig Holland was the approach path to his quarry.

**Maentwrog and the cliffs of Moelwyn Bach**
Maentwrog means ‘*Twrog’s stone*’ (Welsh *maen* = stone). According to legend, a giant known as Twrog hurled a boulder from the top of the Moelwyn hills down into the settlement, destroying a pagan altar. This stone is said to be the one located in St Twrog’s Church courtyard. It is said that if one rubs this boulder one is fated to return to the village in the future. With two good pubs that produce excellent quality food located in such a tiny village, its not only rubbing the boulder that encourages return visits!

**Moelwynion**

A famous *englyn* (a very strict form of Welsh verse) dedicated to the Moelwynion was written by Hedd Wyn, the famous local poet who tragically died in the battles of First World War, never knowing he’d won the National Eisteddfod Bardic Chair in 1917, still the only posthumously awarded bardic chair and known forever as the black chair! After the adjudicators announced the entry submitted under the pseudonym Fleur de Lys was the winner, the trumpets were sounded for the author to identify themselves. After three such summons, Archdruid Dyfed solemnly announced that the winner had been killed in action six weeks earlier. The empty chair was then draped in a black sheet. It was delivered to Hedd Wyn’s parents in the same condition, “the festival in tears and the poet in his grave”, as Archdruid Dyfed said. The festival is now referred to as “*Eisteddfod y Gadair Ddu*” (“The Eisteddfod of the Black Chair”).

*Oerei drum, garw’idremynt - ywerioed, A’i rug iddo’nemrynt; lachororpraidd a cherynt A’igreigiau’norganau’rgwynt.*

Cold its ridges, harsh it’s demeanour – but always, With its heather a purple hue; ?????????????????????????????? And its cliffs make organs for the winds.

**Sarn Helen and The Romans**
**Geoff Bennett**

If you have ever trudged across the bleak bogs of the Moelwynion on a damp day, spare a thought for the Roman legionaries who were stationed here nearly two thousand years ago, some of whom may well have come from the more pleasant climes of Spain and North Africa. The Romans had ruthlessly conquered the Ordovices, and thus North Wales, by 80AD. The area was of interest to them because of its mineral wealth. They certainly mined copper on the Orme & at Parys Mountain on Ynys Môn and though there is no hard evidence, it is entirely possibly they also did so at Llyn Llydaw, whilst gold was possibly mined further south near Dolgellau.

Conquest was also part of the Roman form of ‘offensive defence’: by conquering the Ordovices, the Moelwynion formed part of what was termed the highland military zone, an area crossed by military roads and protected at intervals by forts, which defended the civilian lowland zone to the east and prevented attacks on the legionary fortresses at Chester and Caerleon.

The road which linked these forts can still be seen and followed in places today and is known as Sarn Helen. It travelled 260 km from Caerhun - the Roman fort of Canovium- near Aberconwy, south to Carmarthen. Historians are divided as to whether the Helen referred to is the Elen of the Mabinogion, wife of the Deputy Emperor Magnus Maximus who persuaded her husband to construct the road, or if it is a corruption of sarn y lleng, meaning ‘causeway of the legion’. In any case it is not of the quality we usually associate with Roman roads, more an adequate, gently inclined,dry route to facilitate the speedy dispersal of troops to hot spots.

From Betws y Coed Sarn Helen split, with one road heading westward to the fort at Caer Llugwy near Capel Curig and the other route heading across the eastern and southern slopes of Moel Siabod towards Dolwyddelan. The Romans would surely have approved of the British Army siting their own camp next door to Caer Llugwy which was excavated in the 1920s and would have been home to 500 cavalrymen as early as 90AD. The largest camp on route to Segontium at Caernarfon, it would have facilitated control of the area. Its Welsh name, ‘Bryn-y-Gefeiliau’ – Hill of the Smithies – suggests another role and the copper deposits towards Llyn Geirionydd may

well have been within its domain. Other marching camps, such as that opposite the Pen-y-Gwryd Hotel may or may not have been permanently manned. The strategic importance of this spot, commanding the routes inland from Caernarfon, is underlined when you observe the position of four WW2 pill boxes within 300m of the Roman camp, with one actually built into it!

It is possible to follow what is left of Sarn Helen on foot or MTB from Betws y Coed, up to Rhiwddolion and on through Pont-y-Pant to Dolwyddelan. Ironically, the further settlement of Roman Bridge in the Lledr valley has in fact no Roman remains, let alone a Roman bridge, but is named after the bridge over the Lledr in Dolwyddelan that carried Sarn Helen southwards through Cwm Penamnen, straight past and under Carreg Alltrem and up over-looking Cwm Penmachno round the edges of the unpleasantly wet Migneint to Llan Ffestiniog. From here the route maintained its southward direction to the quite extensive fort at Tomen y Mur, on a spur overlooking Llyn Trawsfynydd. Indeed it is only by deviating from Sarn Helen that one can fully appreciate how much more unpleasant the route would have been without the road!