

# Hiking the Very Mysterious Rhinog Mountains in Wales

*Shôn Ellerton, March 21, 2026*

*I never felt so close to God when I hiked this supremely mysterious hike in Wales.*



I used to do a lot of hiking, although not so much these days. Having a bad left knee doesn't do any favours, which leaves me constrained to shorter and more moderate hikes.

Having once lived in north Wales in the heart of Snowdonia National Park, I was obsessed with hiking. Previous to that, I lived in Colorado in the United States and, likewise, I had an obsession with climbing as many of Colorado's fourteen-thousand summits as I could. But the long distances by car to get there always proved to be an issue. And the weather can prove to be quite unpredictable.

Wales is a paradise for hikers because everything is relatively close. There are no nasty animals to be wary of, except, of course, for those rogue red dragons wandering around the dense woods near waterfalls. That's what my grandmother told me when I was young just to tease me. Not only that, in Wales, it is unusual to experience extreme and inclement weather conditions.

But always be prepared. Despite Wales being a little country, there's a surprising amount of lonely wilderness where you'll never see another soul for miles.

Wales has a number of famous and iconic hikes, many of which lead to the top of Wales's highest mountain, Snowdon. There are others including Tryfan and Cader Idris further to the south. For those who like some safety in numbers, you can rest assured that you'll bound to bump into other hikers.

You'll certainly bump into too many of them in hotspots like Beddgelert, a beautiful little town nestled in a valley near Snowdon which always seems to be overrun with hikers and rock climbers alike.

But if you want a somewhat different experience.

Try the Rhinogs hike from the little town of Bontddu, traversing the southern Rhinogs mountain range which is relatively seldom hiked. It is approximately 15 miles in length, which may not seem long in terms of distance. However, this is quite an involved little hike negotiating four summits which means a lot of walking up and down, and often on boggy and muddy grass or slippery scree.





Personally, I found this hike the most memorable I've ever done. Certainly not the hardest or the longest, but there's something about it which has always stuck with me.

Now, we used to live in the small village of Bontddu, a quaint little town between the foothills and a beautiful estuary. Overlooking the estuary towards the south, you can see majestic Cader Idris.

It is a stunningly beautiful place.

We had a semi-detached stone cottage with an amazing four-tier garden each separated by those infamous Welsh drystone walls. My grandfather did so much gardening but it kept him fit!



*The village of Bontddu with the semi-detached house we used to live in.*

However, the magic happened as soon as you exited the garden gate at the rear of the highest tier of the garden into Bontddu Wood behind. You joined a little public footpath which edges precariously close to a near vertical drop to a tumbling river with a series of waterfalls. The footpath climbs up the valley parallel to the tumbling stream.



*The top tier of the garden*

Surrounding you are beautiful emerald-coloured deciduous trees, stones and rocks covered with lichen and moss, and ancient grey stone walls from time immemorial. The sound of the tumbling water is soothing and the smell of the dampness and the rotting leaves that have fallen to the ground seems peculiarly ancient.



*Walking through Bontddu Wood, the most magical place.*

I loved this place. It was like it was my own personal playground. A veritable paradise. And many decades later, when I re-visited in 2022, it is still there, largely unaltered. The same slippery slab of stone which I slipped on as a child many times. The same stone walls which once cut my hand when I tried to climb over it once. The same rusty sheep gates which make the same exact sound. It's as if, everything was left as it was.

However, the town of Bontddu deteriorated. Our house was overgrown and not looked after with the new tenants. The petrol station was gone. The corner shop was converted into a house. And the pub, the Halfway House, once the heartbeat of the village, was boarded up.

Many times did my grandfather and I walk up the Bontddu Wood footpath to the little stone bridge and the red telephone kiosk at the Upper Road. It was less than a mile each way, but it was always a nice walk. And the bonus was what to come waiting for us at the bottom of the footpath at the house in Bontddu.

My grandmother's cooking.

It was so cosy and nice.



*The top of Bontddu Wood where a little country road continue on*

When I was a teenager, I decided to trek for the entire day, leaving the house and returning by train and bus back to Bontddu. I had studied my 1:25000 scale trusty Ordnance Survey topographical meticulously and decided to explore something entirely new.

Instead of opting to travel to the more well-known hiking spots in Snowdonia, I thought I'd venture in my own backyard and continue past the phone kiosk to hike the Rhinogs. Ahead of me loomed the summit of Dyffwys, but what was it like beyond it on the ridgeline?



*The summit of Dyffwys looming in the distance*

Now, the Rhinogs mountain range is intriguing. It's a series of summits with one side looking towards the west to the sea, and the other side overlooking a large vast valley which, far off in the distance, the busy A470 road meanders to the north coastal town of Llandudno from Cardiff in the south.

I've travelled the A470 frequently and when I'm on this road travelling north, I can see, to my left on the horizon, the mysterious hardly every frequented summits of the Rhinogs silhouetted against the setting sun. They are not havens

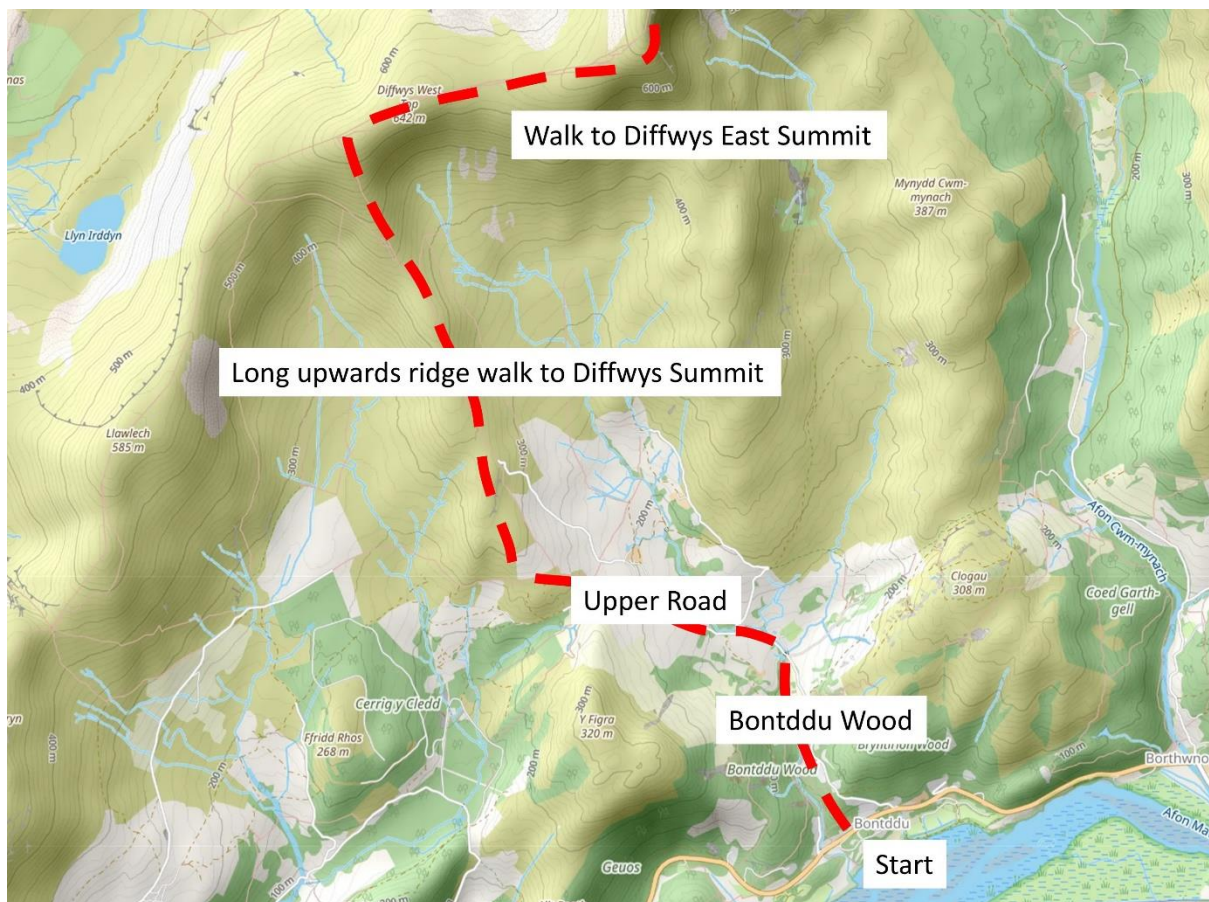
for most hikers because none of the summits are particularly impressive in their own way and they are rather off the beaten track.

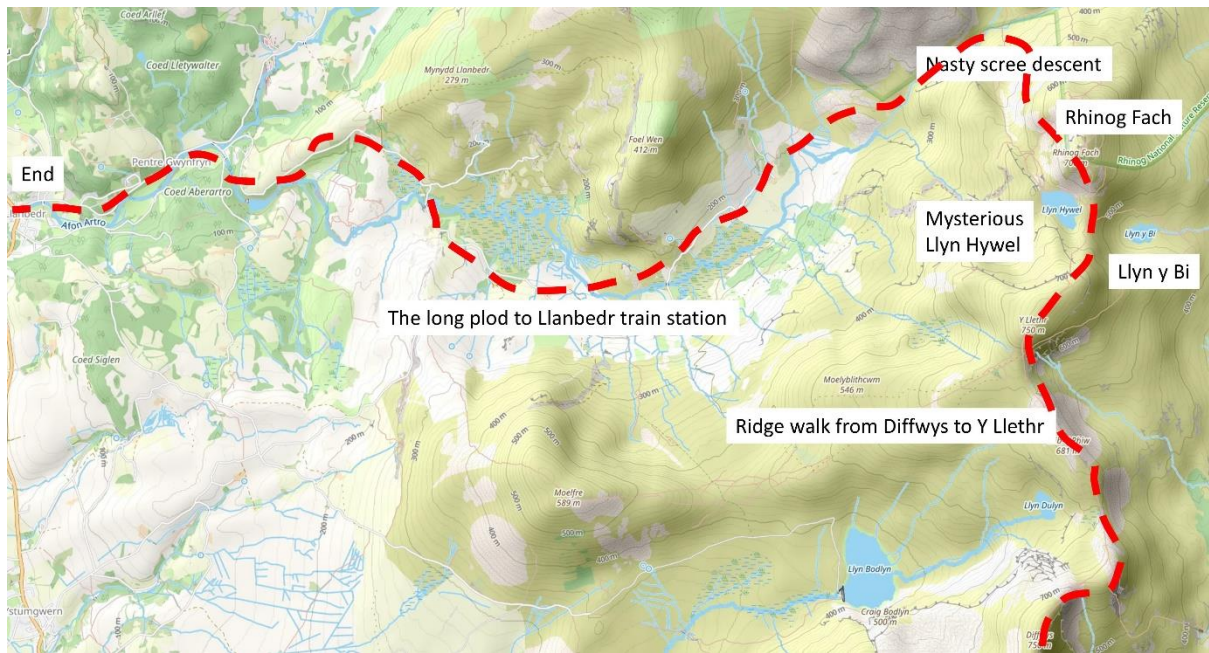
It's actually a little isolated because there's not much in the way of roads that get near to the summits either.

What a strange place it must be standing on these summits and the connecting ridgelines.

But what really intrigued me were the rumours of mysterious lakes and ponds that lie up on that ridgeline. If you like mysticism and esotericism, dark and haunting legends, and stories of certain things that belong to the bottom of deep stygian lakes, you would be equally captivated.

So, I planned the route which was ascending the ridgeline to Diffwys summit, continuing the ridgeline to Y Llethr summit, passing by one of the most mysterious lakes in Wales, to Rhinog Fach (Little Rhinog) summit and going up to the summit of Rhinog Fawr (Big Rhinog) and then descending and trekking to Llanbedr to catch a train to Barmouth, and then hop on a bus from Barmouth to Bontddu.





*The hiking route*

I set out early in the morning with a stockpile of cheese and onion, bloater paste, and lamb sandwiches kindly prepared by my grandmother. It was a cool and overcast day, which, for hiking is perfect. And yes, I *like* bloater paste!

I travelled the well-trodden path through Bontddu Wood. Got to the phone kiosk at the top, and then walked up the Upper Road for an equal distance to get to the beginning of the long, seemingly endless ascent up the ridgeline to the summit of Diffwys.

Now, do you ever get that feeling when you've just got to the end of your comfort zone. The place where you always feel that the house is near and you're safe? I guess when the little Hobbit got to the point where he felt hesitant to go any further because the land became alien and peculiar?

Well, there I was looking at a mesmerising long distance, the summit of Diffwys, the path of which to get there was up this dreadfully long climb on a dull L-shaped ridgeline. A vast bowl of green and nothingness nestled in the 'L' shape. Except for hundreds of bleating and lonely sheep.

The clouds were ominous, everything seemed dark, and it started to rain.

But I pressed on.

With raincoat adorned, I trudged up the long and endless grassy ridge. The visibility got worse when the clouds flew into me. The only thing guiding me was the fact that the slope on either side was going down which mean that I was going up on the ridge eventually to reach the summit. There was also a drystone wall to guide me as well built by stoic ancient people of the past no doubt.



*Approaching the summit of Dyffwys*

I could hear nothing in the cloud except the occasional bleating sheep.

Oh. It was so eery. And I never felt quite so alone.

At least the rain had now ceased!

I had my map and my compass, and thank heavens, I was competent enough in orienteering to get a grip of where I was and how to proceed.

After what seemed an endless amount of time, I finally arrived at the summit of Dyffwys. It had one of those stone cairns at the top, a pile of stones to mark the summit of the mountain.

I was thick in cloud. Complete silence except the wind, which seemed silent. I took solace in tucking into a cheese sandwich in my backpack while uncapping a thermos of hot tea. It's funny that despite not being very far away as the crow flies to the nearest main road, one can feel so damned isolated and removed from society.

But it's a feeling that I actually yearn for more than I fear.

I love the feeling of being isolated from time to time. Your thoughts are so prevalent. There is no distraction from others. It is your mind talking to you amongst the soft-sounding banshees carried by the wind.

At this point, I was thinking. OK. This was nice. Should I just head on back to home? It's cloudy. I can see bugger all. And surely, I certainly do not want to be lost if I can't see where I'm going!

However. No. I was determined to see, or not see, what's ahead.

Remember, the mind must be made to perceive before the eye can be permitted to discover!

I continued north along the ridgeline which skirted what appeared to be a vast space of nothing, or like being on the edge of a steaming volcano.

Despite the cloudy and wet conditions, the weather conditions made this hike far more memorable than if the weather was sunny, clear of cloud, and dry.



*Descending Dyffwys and walking north towards the ridge*

I encountered peculiar ponds up here.

Picture this. Being in a cloud and coming across a deep azure pond immediately bordered with thick lush grass. On the other side is a small bit of ground but beyond is white nothingness. As if the pond was its own infinity pool.



*Nature's natural infinity pool*

For some bizarre reason, I wanted to embrace that pool. I wanted to get into it and feel the essence of being in that space. I felt that I was about to get into one of those iconic landscapes beautifully drawn up by Roger Dean who created the artwork for the album covers for the prog rock group, Yes. For example, those floating islands with pools of blue and inviting water with lovely knotted pine trees giving shade. But alas, no trees here!

It felt completely surreal.

I ventured a little further, and there was another one of these ponds, but this one was shaped like a cat. It was a little lower down than the other one, but again, I had this strange instinct to want to swim in it. Despite it being damned cold. And just a little further, there was, again, a white drop of nothingness.



*The pond shaped like a cat*

Along this ridgeline, were such landscapes that were so alien and foreboding in design. A chasm of rocks leading downwards into the whiteness of nothing. Weird and deep little ponds as if they have no business being there. And strange slabs of rock abutting ancient drystone walls created hundreds of years ago.



*The eery landscape of the ridgeline*

I felt that I was going up again along the ridgeline and at some point of another, I had ascended to the top of the clouds.

Yes! The top of the clouds.

I finally got to the broad and dull-shaped summit of Y Llethr, however, the sun miraculously shown through and I found myself looking *over* the tops of the clouds.

It was magnificent!

I was on top of Mount Olympus!

Now. Where are all the gods to greet and invite me for an Olympian feast?

Nothing! Just to have make do with the occasional loner sheep!

But if still felt like I was in a space reserved for jet aeroplanes, the Gods of Olympus, or the foyer for gaining admission to the Elysium Fields or Valhalla.

This was the halfway point. The Rubicon. The point of no return.





*The round and broad summit of Y Llethr*

I was getting close to the infamous Lake Hywel. A lake so mystical, so mysterious, so ominous and yet so incredibly beautiful, that I *had* to pursue onwards.

And, I wanted to feel the energy of this place while being in and above the clouds.

So, I descend from the summit of Y Llethr, following the grassy and rocky path along the ridgeline to Rhinog Fach.

Looking back at the summit of Y Llethr, I perceive a vast drop filled with cloud. It was quite thrilling.



*Looking back to the summit of Y Llethr*

Surely, there would be an ancient warrior from the past resurrected to the present to greet me?

Perhaps not.

That was just the wind being whimsical and playing tricks on my mind.

A little further on.

Hundreds of feet below to me to the right is a lake. Way down there. It seemed such a long way down. The clouds broke apart and I can see the unbridled beauty of blue lake below. This is Llyn y Bi and sits in the foothills as approached from the east side of the Rhinogs range.



*Llyn y Bi far down below*

I continued onwards along the ridge and I finally got to the mysterious Llyn Hywel. Or, in English, Lake Hywel. It was much closer to the top of the ridgeline than the other lake, Llyn y Bi on the east side of the ridge. I saw it when the clouds broke apart drifting by me as they dissipated in the air.

The lake lied just to the west of the ridgeline, but in essence, the lake was cradled *at* the top of the ridgeline guarded by steep slabs of rock reminding you not to get too close for fear of slipping. It looked ominously cold and deep. This was the fabled Llyn Hywell which was surrounded by steep slabs of rock and looked like something straight out of Lord of the Rings.



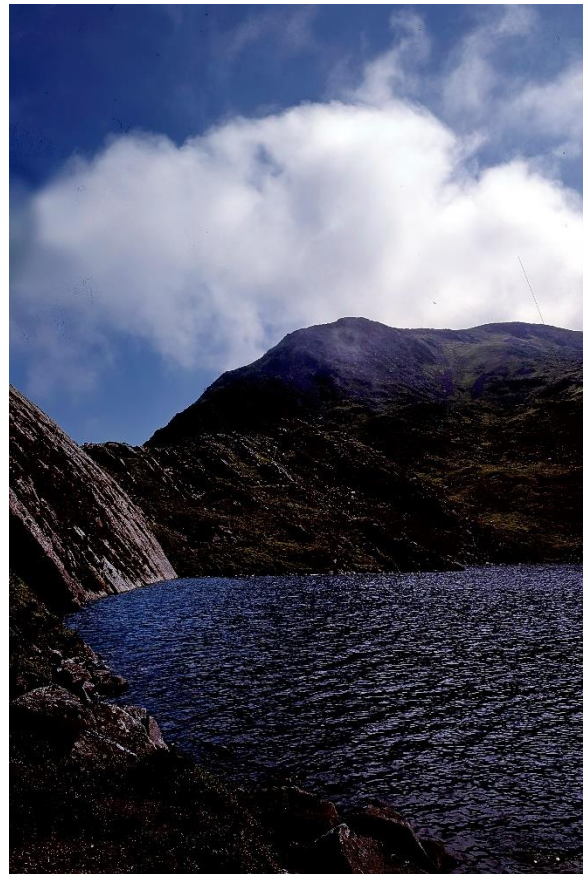
*The brooding and mysterious Llyn Hywel*

It looked cold and not all that inviting to swim in. I'm sure the water is pure and clean, however, there was something that felt odd and brooding in the overall atmosphere. Not only that, the wind funnelled up the side of the mountain quite strongly where I was standing which made the place not terribly inviting to linger for too long.

That lake looked *deep*. Incredibly deep. And it looked like it hid secrets and mysteries which should never be improperly disclosed.

But I was tired and hungry and sat on a rock near the shore of the lake diving into a bloater paste sandwich.

The darkness of the clouds started to return and it was getting a bit chilly.



Allowing my imagination to run wild, I thought to myself.

How cold was this lake? How deep was it? Is it true that for some strange reason, there are fish in there that have only one eye? Why was the legend borne? If I were to swim in the lake, would some horrible whirlpool in the middle of the lake open up suck me down to some watery grave!

The place had me spellbound for too long and being conscious with the time, I packed up and continued on.

I ascended the rocky ridgeline to Rhinog Fach and reached the summit cairn. It was at this point, I was getting really tired and I still had a long way to go.





*The rough scree climb and summit of Rhinog Fach*

I began to descend the summit and saw across the valley to Rhinog Fawr.

It looked like a very nasty scree climb so I said to myself. Bugger this! I'm skipping Rhinog Fawr and heading off straight to Llanbedr train station!



*Looking north to Rhinog Fawr, which I sensibly skipped*

Descending Rhinog Fach into the valley was a nightmare.

Lots of grass and bush hiding lots of rocks and scree making every step downwards a potential ankle injury. There was either no path or I had lost it.



*The rough descent from Rhinog Fach although it looks easy in the picture*

I finally got to the base of the valley between Rhinog Fawr and Rhinog Fach. It still isolated like crazy. Rough, unkempt, wild, I felt like I was in the middle of nowhere.

I found a trail and headed west towards the sea. This was a very long trek but at least it was relatively smooth going because there was a path and it eventually led to a road.



*Looking back to the lonely pass between Rhinog Fawr and Rhinog Fach*

Now, when I got to the little country road, I confess that I cheated.

A very happy and friendly farmer man said to me, ‘Boyo! You need a lift a what?’

I said, ‘You’re not going to Llanbedr are you?’ and he said, ‘Get in and don’t mind the dog. He’ll only slobber you to death!’

He gave me a ride to the train station. I called my grandfather who would pick me up at Barmouth Train Station instead of me catching the bus from there.

When I got home, I was so flipping tired! My grandmother made me a beef and kidney pie, a warm mug of hot cocoa, and I sat there next to the electric bar fire feeling the wonderful cosiness of home.

I felt like the Hobbit!

It was wonderful!

I felt that I went to Mount Olympus and back.