

## Wales Dragon's Back North – September 2020

### Introduction

Like the 'Cape Wrath Trail' or the 'Hebridean Way', there are many route choices for a south-north trek through the mountains of Wales. The route can be adapted to all abilities and schedules. The first documented account of such a journey can be found in George Borrow's book 'Wild Wales: Its People, Language and Scenery' (1803–1881), published in 1862.

The first attempt to agree a single route was made in 1968 by Tony Drake. He researched and proposed the 'Cambrian Way', a challenging walker's route from Cardiff to Conwy across the highest mountains of Wales. Tony's guidebook was published in 1984 (see <http://www.cambrianway.org.uk/> and [https://ldwa.org.uk/ldp/members/show\\_path.php?path\\_name=Cambrian+Way](https://ldwa.org.uk/ldp/members/show_path.php?path_name=Cambrian+Way)). The Cambrian Way was officially recognised by national park authorities in 2019, and waymarking is expected to be completed by all local authorities in 2020 (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-49234186>). In 1990 John Gillham published 'A Welsh Coast to Coast Walk: Snowdonia to Gower', providing another option for a trek across Wales (see <http://www.johngillham.co.uk/page11.html> and [https://ldwa.org.uk/ldp/members/show\\_path.php?path\\_name=Coast+to+Coast+-+Snowdonia+to+the+Gower](https://ldwa.org.uk/ldp/members/show_path.php?path_name=Coast+to+Coast+-+Snowdonia+to+the+Gower)).

Further variants have been pioneered by the Dragon's Back Race, a multi-day fell race across the mountains from North to South Wales. The race was first held in September 1992 and the second in September 2012. The 2019 race was from Conwy to Llandeilo, taking place over five days. In 2021 the race will include sixth day, finishing at Cardiff Castle (<https://www.dragonsbackrace.com/>).

In 2020 the period of best weather for mountain trekking in April/May was lost due to the coronavirus lockdown. In June/July/August I struggled with personal health issues, and with some recovery, decided to tackle the route in September. I didn't feel fit enough to tackle the entire route, so finally settled for a week-long trek across Snowdonia, starting from Machynlleth and finishing at Conwy. This area includes the highest and most challenging mountains in Wales, and is scenically the most dramatic section of the route.

The Cambrian Way doesn't pass through Machynlleth – instead it heads northwards from Plynlimon over rather nondescript rolling hills, swings west across the Dovey Hills, traverses Cadair Idris from east to west to reach Barmouth, before continuing over the Rhinogs. Instead, I picked up the Dragon's Back route at Machynlleth, crossing the Tarrens, traversing Cadair Idris from west to east to reach Dolgellau, then continuing to the Rhinogs from there. Beyond the Rhinogs, the two routes generally follow the same line, although there are some variations which I'll note in this report.

### Saturday 5th September 2020 – Tarrens

For the outward journey, I took the earliest possible train, leaving at 6:20am on Saturday from Southampton, arriving at 1:11pm in Machynlleth. I hoped that would give sufficient time to cross the Tarrens in the afternoon. The ticket cost £78.80. I took a taxi to Southampton Central Station, as I didn't want to rely on the bus so early in the morning.

6:20 - Southampton Central	09:13 - Wolverhampton	Train
10:44 - Wolverhampton	12:05 - Newtown (Powys)	Train
12:16 - Newtown (Powys)	13:11 - Machynlleth	Replacement Bus Service

The final section of the journey from Newtown to Machynlleth was on a replacement bus service. Just after 1pm I started the trek, crossing the River Dovey/Afon Dyfi, and commencing the ascent of the Tarrens. This was initially on a minor road, then on a good track (originally constructed to serve a quarry in the mountains), so provided a relatively gentle ascent, perfect for my lack of mountain fitness!

Near the start of the climb I noticed a building located a few hundred metres from the track, marked as 'Bron-yr-Aur' on the map, and wondered if it was the famous songwriting hideaway used by Jimmy Page and Robert Plant. The name crops up in two Led Zeppelin songs, Bron-yr-Aur Stomp (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oC-9aEf0Q-A>) and the beautiful acoustic instrumental Bron-yr-Aur (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QKge6Ay9O4E>). Googling afterwards I confirmed that this building was indeed the one used by Page and Plant (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bron-Yr-Aur>).

The track entered dense forestry, and some careful navigation was needed to trace the correct route at various junctions. Eventually I emerged on the flanks of Tarren y Gesail at around 450m. The Dragon's Back route takes a short diversion here to climb this mountain, but given the time I had left today, I decided to give it a miss. This journey was more a trek than a peak bagging exercise, so it was an easy omission to make.

I now followed a grassy ridge across Foel y Geifr, then began a long climb up to the highest point of the day, Tarrenhendre (634m). The Tarrens are a shapely range of hills, that have been almost swallowed up by encroaching forestry plantations, although some parts have now been clear felled. Only at the western end of the range, where I was heading, do the hills finally escape from the conifers. The clouds today were above the mountains, with the sun occasionally breaking through. In the distance I spotted the great ridge of Cadair Idris looming dark on the horizon. It seemed rather far away and I wondered if I'd have the energy to cross it tomorrow.

A cold wind blew over Tarrenhendre and was being funnelled up the valley that I was descending into. I needed to find somewhere sheltered for the night, and it looked like this would be quite tricky. Looking for water sources, the map showed a spring on the hillside, Ffynnon Ceryddiad and a stream, Nant Sychnant down in the valley, where there were a lot of sheep (so not ideal). I picked up a grassy track heading down the valley, passed the spring, and fortunately just after found a sort of 'lay bay' next to the track, sheltered by reeds, where there was just enough space for my tent.

### **Sunday 6th September 2020 – Cadair Idris**

Overnight it rained, by morning it had stopped, but I had to pack the tent away wet. I collected some more water from the spring, then followed the track down the valley to Dolgoch and the Talyllyn Railway. To reach the Cadair Idris ridge I had to cross an intervening low ridge with a 100m ascent, past Birds' Rock/Craig yr Aderyn.

During the steep climb through woods there was a heavy shower and I decided to put on waterproofs, however the rain soon dissipated, so I removed them as it was getting too hot. Down at the road I passed through a busy campsite and as I crossed the Afon Cadair, there was another heavy shower, so the waterproofs went back on!

A series of field paths along the valley floor took me to tiny hamlet of Bodilan, where the big climb of the day started towards the ridge. There was one more heavy downpour as I left the last farm, but it soon dried out, and remained dry for the rest of the day. There wasn't much evidence of the path on the ground, but the route was well marked with white posts, and stiles were in place to cross the stone field boundaries.

Higher up I cut across pathless ground to reach a track, and ahead could see that the crest of the ridge was obscured by cloud. It was tempting to follow the track that traverses around the side of the ridge, but I decided to stick to the route, following a fence up to the first summit, Twll yr Ogof.

Once on the ridge, the going was easy, and occasionally the clouds lifted to reveal views to the north. In particular there was a lovely view of the sparkling tarns at Llynnau Cregennen and the adjacent “pocket mountain” (Bryn Brith) recommended by Peter Herman in ‘Hillwalking in Wales’.

There was a bit of a climb up to Tyrrau Mawr/Craig-las (661m), before descending to meet the ‘Pony Path’, the easiest and therefore most popular route up Cadair Idris. The map showed some streams in this area, but I had to lose considerable height before I found running water to fill my bottle.

The next mile or so became quite busy, with many walkers and a few mountain bikers on the Pony Path. It was a stiff climb from the low point of the ridge, with about 350m of ascent – thankfully there was no more rain and the cloud level had lifted. Even so, the last 100m was in cloud, so I didn’t get a view from the 893m summit.

I stopped briefly in the stone-built summit shelter to get out of the wind, drink some water and eat some snacks. I briefly considered spending the night here, to test out the famous legend (“those who sleep on the mountain will awake as either a poet or a madman”). However, the shelter was rather damp and draughty, so wasn’t really that inviting, and it was only 4:30pm so I had time to continue walking.

I continued along the ridge, heading eastwards, away from all the Pony Path walkers and didn’t see another soul for the rest of the day. Beyond Mynydd Moel, the ridge lost a lot of height, and I emerged from the clouds, spotting Llyn Arran on one side and the great glaciated trench of Cwm Rhwyddfôr on the other.

I was a little concerned about getting down from the end of the ridge, as it looked quite rocky on the map, but a small path led the way through the rocks, joining a quad bike track onto easier ground. I soon found a source of drinking water and a nice flat place to camp for the night, glad to have covered so much ground in one day. From camp I could look across to my destination for tomorrow, the Rhinogs ridge, with Rhinog Fach and Fawr just catching the cloud.

### **Monday 7th September 2020 – Rhinog Fach**

The day dawned with gloomy grey skies, but the rain held off. The morning’s navigational challenge was finding the right of way through a maze of old fields with tumbledown walls interspersed with small trees and shrubs, down to the road head. Once on tarmac I relaxed, following the steep winding road down to Dolgellau. This was the only major settlement on my route, and the only opportunity to supplement my rations.

I found a bakery and bought a cheese and onion pasty and a pizza slice as an early lunch. On multi-day treks it’s practically impossible to carry enough food to replenish the energy being burned, so any opportunity for extra food should be taken! Unfortunately it began to drizzle as I left Dolgellau, and began to follow the busy path along the Afon Wnion. This was clearly not a passing shower, so I reluctantly put on my waterproofs and marched on.

I joined the Mawddach Train, a cycle path that connects Barmouth with Dolgellau, running along an old railway bed. This was quite sheltered from the rain by flanks of trees, but it didn’t last for long,

and soon I had to cross the Penmaenpool Toll Bridge. I wasn't expecting to pay a toll, but the lady there insisted I pay 30 pence. I didn't have any change, so paid her £5 – at least it was some more money into the local economy. She was taking coronavirus biosecurity very seriously, collecting money in a basket and washing it in a bucket of soapy water!

Once across to the other side of the estuary, I followed a minor road up a deep valley, which provided some shelter from the rain. The road continued for several miles, then became a forest track. I found a small stream and collected some drinking water, then kept an eye out for the footpath turning uphill, away from the track. The footpath is actually an old mining route, this soon relinquished the shelter of the forest, and headed out onto the open hillside. The path goes up to an old mining 'level', and is well constructed, taking an efficient route through the increasingly rocky terrain.

Given the prevailing weather was coming from the west, this approach route was remarkably sheltered and provided a reasonably pleasant climb up to the ridge. However, once I gained the ridge at 668m, it was a completely different story; I was now exposed to the full force of the wind and rain. A stone wall follows the ridge line, but the path is on the 'wrong' side of the wall for the prevailing wind, so it provided no shelter whatsoever. The Dragon's Back route makes a diversion at this point to climb Diffwys (750m), but clearly this wasn't the day for detours!

The visibility was extremely poor, but the navigation was relatively straightforward, simply following the stone wall. The only place where this tactic fails is just after Y Llethr (756m), where the ridge terminates in steep crags, and it's necessary to circumvent the rocks to the west. I don't know what the geology of the Rhinogs is, but the rocks here are extraordinarily slippery when wet, particularly so when you're being buffeted by the wind.

The bwlch south of Rhinog Fach was very windy and it got increasingly windy as I scrambled up toward the 712m summit. I was a little concerned about finding a way down from Rhinog Fach in such poor visibility. The map shows numerous paths around the summit, all of which apparently terminate some way down the mountain. Using a compass and following the shape of terrain, I was able to locate a gully on the west side of the mountain, leading down towards Llyn Cwmhosan.

My original plan was to cross Rhinog Fawr today, but I hadn't realised the 400m loss of height between the two Rhinogs. It was clear that I'd be risking getting caught out in the dark on Rhinog Fawr if I continued today, so the safest thing to do was to camp at the bwlch and continue tomorrow.

The bwlch was a particularly uninviting place – all the flat ground was marshy and waterlogged, and everywhere else was covered in rampant heather. The only well drained flat place was actually on the path, so that's where I camped! I assumed that no one else would be out in this weather, so I wouldn't be blocking anyone's way. While searching for a camping spot I kept getting a whiff of goat – there are feral goats living in the Rhinogs, and they must have been sheltering somewhere nearby.

After getting the tent up, it was a slow exercise of removing my dripping wet waterproofs and damp clothes, sponging up all the water inside the tent, then finally putting on dry clothes. My boots were completely soaked through, I even poured water out from them! Once warm and dry, with my evening meal cooked and eaten, I lay back and listened to the sound of the rain lashing against my tent.

## Tuesday 8th September 2020 – Rhinog Fawr

In the morning the weather was exactly the same as it was the previous day. It was a daunting prospect to be crossing Rhinog Fawr and spending the entire day in poor visibility and atrocious weather.

I carefully packed away my dry clothes, put the wet clothes and waterproofs back on, and set off into the storm. After picking a way across the marshy bwlch, I located the tiny path leading up a rocky gully onto Rhinog Fawr. I thought I had it all sussed and this would lead me to the summit, but somehow I took a false line, perhaps a goat path. I ended up on a terrace contouring around the mountainside, with a wall of steep rocks blocking any further progress uphill.

Being reluctant to lose any height, the only choice was to take a chance on scrambling up the wall and hope that it would lead to easier ground. It was not easy with a heavy pack, and the crux was a narrow squeeze between spikes of rock, where the abrasion scraped a small hole in my waterproof rucksack cover. Fortunately I emerged onto the summit plateau, and turning west, soon found the summit trig pillar. This was exposed to the full force of the wind and rain, so was not a place to linger.

I now had to navigate down to Llyn Du, and beyond to the Roman Steps path. I located the path and carefully followed a compass bearing, but soon the path divided into multiple strands, heading off in different directions (presumably some of them goat paths). None of the paths matched the direction of my compass bearing. I kept peering over the edge of rocky outcrops into misty voids, trying to spot the lake. Reluctantly I got the GPS out and found that I'd gone too far west and now needed to turn northwards to reach the lake.

Casting around, I picked up a vague path which brought me to the lake, but the shore was too rocky to follow, so I had to regain height to gain the east end. I made another navigational error overshooting the lake too far to the east, before finally doubling back and picking up the path down to the Roman Steps. The whole experience was rather humbling – rarely have I struggled so much to navigate off the summit of a mountain!

At the Roman Steps, I stopped for a break and found a small stream to refill my water bottle. Despite the name, these steps are not Roman and are in fact the well preserved remains of a medieval packhorse trail leading from Chester to Harlech Castle. The rock steps are polished from the passage of thousands of feet, and in the wet conditions they were like an ice rink. Careful foot placement was the order of the day, an exercise which I termed “foot placement meditation”, requiring total concentration. Even so, on a few occasions I nearly went flying, were it not for the stability provided by my trekking poles.

On the Roman Steps I started to see the first people of the day, all of whom had walked up from the campsite at Cwm Bychan. A couple of guys had almost given up looking for Llyn Du, and I was happy to provide them with directions. A larger group were heading for Rhinog Fawr; they asked if there was a path, and I replied that there were too many paths!

Once off the slippery rocks, I was able to make faster progress down the valley and into the sheltered lichen-encrusted woodland of Cym Bychan, finally emerging from the mist. I hadn't covered much distance, but I was now getting hungry, so decided to stop for lunch in the shelter of the trees.

From here the Cambrian Way takes the highest ground over Moel Ysgyfarnogod - this option didn't look particularly enticing given the strong winds and rain. Instead I took the Dragon's Back route,

which follows the moorland to the west of this ridge. The route initially takes a vague right of way, then at a ruined stone building, turns to trudge across a mile of pathless saturated bog to reach Llyn Eiddew-mawr.

The map showed a track along the west side of the lake, but this turned out to be of the waterlogged grassy variety, rather than the well-drained gravel road that I'd been hoping for! The track led to a smaller lake, Llyn Eiddew-bach, and from there I cut across the moor to reach an extended right of way, which I followed northeast towards Llyn Trawsfynydd. This path was boggy in places and difficult to follow. I nearly missed the way until I spotted a rocky castle of rock in the distance, marking the start of a stone wall, which the path skirted around.

The final difficulty was turning off towards a ruined stone cottage, and picking a way down a steep bracken covered hillside. At the bottom I picked up a good path that followed a conduit/lead feeding the hydroelectric scheme at Trawsfynydd. It was quite a relief to be out of the complex navigation of the Rhinogs and onto drier ground. Without a doubt, the Rhinogs must have some of the most challenging terrain in the British Isles. The two day crossing felt like an SAS survival exercise!

In my original plan I'd intended to continue walking to the foot of the Moelwyns on this day, but the stormy weather and rough terrain had slowed me down. It looked a better option to find somewhere to shelter in the woods around Llyn Trawsfynydd, although camping a mile from a decommissioned nuclear power station wouldn't be my first choice of campsite!

I collected some water from the conduit, crossed over a concrete dam, and then a few hundred metres beyond, found a suitable camping place on the mossy floor of a mature conifer plantation. The trees certainly provided shelter from the wind, which roared through the trees all night, but the trees also acted as drip collectors, dripping noisily on my tent.

### **Wednesday 9th September 2020 – Moelwyns and Cnicht**

Despite the noise of the storm, I had a good night's sleep, and woke in the morning feeling quite refreshed. Opening the tent I looked up through the trees and was surprised to see cloud-free blue skies and bright sunshine. The storm had passed, and it was almost as if the previous two previous days had been a bad dream. If the bad weather had continued, I would have been tempted to abandon the trek and bail out at Porthmadog or Blaenau Ffestiniog.

I put my wet clothes back on, packed up and draped my damp waterproofs over my rucksack so they could dry in the sun. The route continued through the conifer forest, passed a remote cottage, then took a farm track to a minor road. The next couple of miles were along minor roads down to the village of Maentwrog.

On the way, two men in a car pulled over and asked if I knew the area well. They had a copy of a landscape painting and the older of the two men said it was painted by his grandfather. The scene apparently included Moelwyn Bach, Moelwyn Mawr and Cnicht. From our current position the two Moelwyns were visible, but I told them Cnicht was obscured by the bulk of Moelwyn Mawr, and they'd need to head northwest before Cnicht would appear.

After Maentwrog, I crossed the Afon Dwyrdd in the Vale of Ffestiniog. From a minor road I had to pick a way up the valley side to join the Ffestiniog Railway. The right of way didn't amount to much on the ground, but climbing steeply up through woods I eventually found a good track which zigzagged past a spectacular waterfall and onwards to the residential house at Dduallt. From here a footpath went parallel to the railway line to reach Dduallt Station.

The topography is slightly confusing here because the railway loops back on itself to gain height. I made a wrong turning up to a monument (marked as a viewpoint on the map), beyond which the path petered out, and realising my mistake I returned to the railway station. The path is initially not clear on the ground, but heading northwards, the confusion resolved, and I followed a route parallel to the railway line to reach Tanygrisiau Reservoir. I stopped here for a spot of lunch in the sunshine.

The next section up to the Llyn Stwlan reservoir looked straightforward on the map, but was surprisingly hard to locate on the ground. The turning up the Nant Ddu at the disused Moelwyn Mine was unmarked with little evidence of footfall on the ground. Half way up, I met a couple of backpackers coming the other way, who'd also been in doubt about the route, so we each acted as confirmation for each other. They were doing the 'Snowdonia to the Gower' route, and had suffered a rather exposed camp in the previous night's storm.

Soon the enormous reservoir dam loomed into view, and approaching it, I turned left to gain higher ground. A short climb brought me up to the bwlch between the two Moelwyns. The Dragon's Back route takes a diversion here to ascend Moelwyn Bach, but I decided to give it a miss, partly because I wanted to save some energy to climb Cnicht and partly because I'd already lost quite a bit of time today with navigational conundrums.

A couple of hundred metres more of climbing brought me to the summit of Moelwyn Mawr at 3:15pm, with clear views in all directions, although rather chilly in the wind. On the way down I stopped briefly to chat to a retired teacher, then a little further on a father and son who estimated it would take two hours to reach Cnicht. This area is split across two OS maps, and understanding the contours is further complicated by a host of old mine workings and text describing them on the map.

The Dragon's Back route attempts to minimise the distance and the loss of height from Moelwyn Mawr to Cnicht on a pathless route, connecting a series of lakes as landmarks. However I found this extremely difficult to follow, mainly because the lakes don't become visible until just before you reach them!

I missed the direct line to Llyn Croesor, and had to awkwardly traverse a steep hillside to reach the correct side of the lake. My feet were becoming rather painful sliding around in still wet boots, so I stopped to put on an extra layer of socks. I was also developing prickly heat on my back, probably from wearing waterproofs the two previous days, so decided to tie back the rucksack waist straps, and hitch up my shirt to get some ventilation.

Crossing the track at Bwlch y Rhosydd, I located the south end of Llynnau Diffwys, but missed the south end of the next lake, Llyn Cwm-y-foel. There there was a torrent of water pouring out the end of this lake, which I wasn't sure would be fordable, and beyond the slopes of Cnicht looked unpleasantly steep. Instead, I headed for the north end of the lake, and ascended an easier gully towards Cnicht. All this navigation and rough boggy ground sapped my energy, and I'm not convinced the Dragon's Back route saves very much here. The right of way that passes through the Rhosydd Quarry buildings and climbs up towards Llyn yr Adar would be an easier and more enjoyable route, although the distance is further.

Now established on the ridge, it was a straightforward climb up to the summit of Cnicht, which I reached rather late at 5:45pm. Cnicht is sometimes called the "Matterhorn of Wales", although this is rather wishful thinking. I'm yet to see a photo of it from any angle that even remotely resembles the true Matterhorn!

From the summit there was quite a steep descent with a few sections of easy scrambling. On the way I stopped to chat to a Welshman who was up for an evening stroll. The Cambrian Way route continues down the southwest ridge and on to Beddgelert (presumably for food and accommodation), before turning northeast up the valley to Nantgwynant. Instead I took the Dragon's Back route, which heads more directly for Nantgwynant, avoiding Beddgelert. From Cnicht I descended a steep scree gully down towards Bwlch y Battel. Just south of the bwlch there's a bivvy shelter under a boulder, enclosed by drystone walling, marked as 'Cave' on the map (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U-AvlsrRF2c>). This is a potential spot to spend the night, but I wanted to cover a little more distance today.

I soon picked up a footpath descending beside the banks of a mountain stream. By now my feet were extremely sore from walking in wet boots and I couldn't walk without limping. It took a while to find a flat dry spot, and eventually I settled for a pitch beside some ruined walls. There were lots of sheep about and I had to remove some ticks from my trousers before getting into the tent. It had been a long tough day over rough ground with considerable ascent and descent, so I was completely exhausted. After dinner I relaxed, listening to Anthony Griffiths 'Ysbryd – The Spirit of the Celtic Guitar'. The sky was beautifully clear and I could see the full splendour of the milky way.

### **Thursday 10th September 2020 – Snowdon and Crib Goch**

In the morning the skies were overcast, but the cloud level was above the summit of Snowdon. From my campsite I could see most of the ascent route for the day – it looked rather daunting, particularly given the state of my feet. I put plasters on all my toes where the boots had been rubbing, then used gaffer tape to hold the plasters in place. I also had a tingling sensation in one heel and hoped that it was just localised damage from sliding around in boots on steep hillsides, rather than a more serious problem with tendons. Having said that, I felt more confident as this was now familiar ground – I'd explored Snowdon, the Glyders and the Carneddau extensively in 2003/2004, climbing each mountain every possible way.

Once I got going, the repair job on my feet appeared to have been successful and I was able to walk without pain. Soon I got down to the Nantmor Mountain Centre at Gelli Iago, where I turned to follow a minor road northwards. Several signs warned that the road ahead was closed, but I pressed on as any other route would have involved a long diversion. As I neared Nantgwynant, a right of way was marked as being closed due to a damaged bridge.

Continuing along the minor road, I found that the road bridge over the Afon Glaslyn was closed to vehicles, but fortunately pedestrians could still cross. Repair work was underway to shore up the bridge supports, which had been undermined by the flooding caused by Storm Francis on 25th August (<https://www.dailypost.co.uk/news/north-wales-news/dozens-people-rescued-flooding-storm-18830954>). Once across the river, a short walk along the A498 got me to the start of the path up Snowdon.

There were several choices of ascent route from here. The Dragon's Back goes northeast on a right of way up to an old copper mine, then climbs cross-country to gain the ridge, scrambling over Y Lliwedd, before continuing to Snowdon. This to be looked quite a touch option: the lower reaches would be probably quite wet underfoot, while the scrambling would be time-consuming. The Cambrian Way goes west to Bwlch Cwn Llan, then ascends Snowdon by its south ridge, over Bwlch Main.

I decided to take the middle way, the Watkin Path, climbing up to the head on Cwm Llan. The path is paved with stone slabs, so would give my boots a chance to dry out. There's also water available in the cwm, so I could avoid carrying so much water on the ascent. It took a while to get used to so



many people being on the path, after days of hardly seeing anyone. Just as the path turned for the final climb to Bwlch Ciliau, I stopped to fill my bottle from a tiny trickle of a mountain spring, the last water available.

I stopped for lunch at Bwlch y Saethau, then continued the climb up Snowdon. On this section the Watkin Path crosses an unpleasantly steep slope of loose rocks and scree - a notorious accident black spot. Once I reached the stone marker pillar at the top of the path, I turned right toward Snowdon's summit, getting there at 1:45pm. The summit café was shut and the railway wasn't in operation, but the area was still swarming with people, with a long queue to take a photo on the summit! I've never seen anything like it, and hope to never again!

I didn't stop, and followed the railway line downhill to Bwlch Glas. From here the Cambrian Way takes the Pyg Track down to Pen-y-pass, while the Dragon's Back goes over Garnedd Ugain with a grade 1 scramble across Crib-y-Ddysgl and Crib Goch. I'd been trying to decide which route to take, and my mind was quickly made up after seeing the hoards of people marching like a line of ants up the Pyg Track and Miners' Track. Also the weather was dry and still, and there was plenty of time to complete the scramble before it got dark.

I found some of the scrambling on Crib-y-Ddysgl harder than I remembered, in particular some down-climbing, which was awkward with a heavy pack. I overtook a group of three, a client and two guides, who'd just ascended the Clogwyn-y-Person arête (<https://www.expeditionguide.com/2020/09/10/clogwyn-y-person-arete-9/>).

One of the guides took his client down from Bwlch Coch to the easier ground of Cwm Uchaf, while the other guide continued on his own over Crib Goch. We chatted as we scrambled over the pinnacles and continued along the sharp crest. The guide introduced himself as Tarquin, and at 2:30pm we stopped for a longer chat at the junction of the north and east ridges, discussing the routes in Steve Ashton's infamous "book of death" 'Scrambles in Snowdonia'. I asked Tarquin for his telephone number as I quite fancy doing some of the grade 2 and 3 routes in future.

Tarquin headed off on north ridge of Crib Goch, while I scrambled down the blunt east ridge, soon gaining easier ground at Bwlch y Moch. From here there was a straightforward stone slabbed route to the car park at Pen-y-pass. I stopped briefly to dispose of some rubbish and fill up my water bottle at a drinking fountain at the YHA hostel, then picked up a path behind the hostel towards Llyn Cwmffynnon. I'd contemplated camping at the lake, but decided to ascend to higher ground for a better view across the valley to the dramatic crest of Crib Goch. Also I wanted to locate a small stream that was marked on the map, since that would be the only source of water for tomorrow's route.

### **Friday 11th September 2020 – Glyders and Tryfan**

Overnight it was quite windy and I slightly regretted not picking a more sheltered spot. Still the rain held off and I packed the tent away dry. The skies were still overcast and the clouds were lower today, obscuring the highest summits. There was a brief spell of drizzly rain as I began climbing, so I put on full waterproofs. I'd camped at 472m, my highest camp of the trip so far, and was glad of the head start it gave on today's ascent of Glyder Fawr.

The path up Glyder Fawr from Pen-y-pass is known as the "red dot route" as years ago a lady went up and marked out the route with splodges of red paint on the rocks. Such a practice is common in the Alps, but artificial aids in the British mountains are rather frowned upon. Nevertheless the red dots are useful because the south ridge of Glyder Fawr is broad, and without the markers it would be difficult to pick out the best route. The red dots are now quite faded (they were faded when I first

explored this area in 2003/2004), and now Ordnance Survey has scrubbed the path from the map, which will likely mean the route will get even less footfall.

As I climbed higher, I entered the clouds, but the trusty red dots kept going, leading almost all the way to the summit of Glyder Fawr, which I reached at 11am. It was quite windy on top, and I sheltered behind one of the many rock outcrops here for a short break. Continuing to Bwlch y Ddwy-Glyder, the clouds cleared briefly and the impressive rock formation Castell y Gwynt (the castle of the winds) came into view. While it's possible to scramble over this, I opted to go around it today, as it would have been very exposed on top! Instead I negotiated the field of giant boulders on the south side, reaching Glyder Fach at 12 noon. I picked a sheltered spot amongst the rocks to have lunch, and watched the antics of a group of walkers taking the obligatory photos on Y Gwylwr, the cantilever.

There are several choices of route from Glyder Fach to the next mountain Tryfan. The easiest and longest is to descend eastwards to Llyn Caseg-fraith, then double back to Bwlch Tryfan. A steep scree gully goes down directly to Bwlch Tryfan, and parallel to this path is the grade 1 scramble Bristly Ridge. I've never tried Bristly Ridge in descent, but the morning drizzle had now passed, the rocks were dry and it was sheltered from the wind, so I decided to give it a go.

There were several awkward sections of down-climbing, difficult with a heavy pack, but my rucksack was now considerably lighter than at the start of the trip, since most of the food had been eaten. I made it safely across the Great Pinnacle Gap, a prominent notch in the ridge. Continuing down, the next challenge was to locate the top of Sinister Gully. As I approached there was a choice of two forks, and I opted for the one that lined up with the drystone wall across Bwlch Tryfan, which I knew goes to the foot of the gully. Sinister Gully is presumably named because it's gloomy, very steep, and a fall from near the top would have serious consequences. Having said that, there are plenty of hand and footholds, and it's no problem as long as it's taken slowly and carefully.

After a short rest at Bwlch Tryfan, easier scrambling took me past the Far South Peak of Tryfan and on to the main summit at 2:10pm. The summit was cloud free and gave fantastic views up and down the Ogwen Valley. The isolated position of Tryfan, off on a side spur from the main Glyders ridge, means that it's often clear of cloud when the other mountains are obscured.

Beyond Tryfan's main summit, there's a good path descending the west side towards Llyn Ogwen. Since there was plenty of time, I decided to descend via the north ridge on a grade 1 scramble instead. The great thing about this ridge is that there are so many choices of route, some easy, some more difficult, and it's pretty much impossible to go same way twice - every time is a new adventure.

Like Bristly Ridge, there was some awkward down-climbing in places, but nothing too difficult. I even managed to locate 'The Cannon', a prominent spike of rock thrusting out of the mountain side, and a popular spot for photos. Lower down, I escaped the steep rocks and located the short section of stone slabbed path down to the A5, reaching the road at 4:15pm.

There's a campsite at Gwern Gof Uchaf at the foot of Tryfan, but I decided to continue as there were still several hours of daylight and I wanted to gain some height on the other side of the valley, towards Pen yr Ole Wen (also at the time the campsite required advance booking due to coronavirus restrictions). I took the reasonably gentle path from Glan Dena along the Afon Lloer to Cwm Lloer. At the start there were several signs saying "no camping", these look recent, and are perhaps a reaction to increased numbers of wild campers due to limited places on the official sites.

I intended to camp by the lake Ffynnon Lloer in Cwm Lloer, but when I arrived, there was someone fishing. I wasn't sure if this was official or unofficial, but to avoid any confrontation, I ascended to higher ground and found a flatish spot amongst rocks. This was my highest camp of the trip at 660m. Just after it got dark, it began to rain heavily, and I assumed that I'd got the place to myself. However, several hours later I was surprised to hear voices, and a few hundred metres away a group was setting up tents on the shore of the lake! Brave of them to set out in such atrocious weather!

### **Saturday 12th September 2020 – Carneddau**

This was the last full day in the mountains, and after the initial ascent, I'd be on a high ridge for the entire day. The clouds were just clipping the highest summits, but the forecast was for dry weather and sunshine by the afternoon. The high camp gave me a good head start on Pen yr Ole Wen, which I reached at 9:45am. I continued past the huge Bronze Age cairn on Carnedd Fach to a couple more Bronze Age cairns on Carnedd Dafydd, which I reached at 10:20am.

There were a lot of fell runners out today – presumably the high ridges and rolling terrain make the Carneddau a popular destination for fell running. This must be a comparatively recent phenomena, I don't recall seeing so many fell runners back in 2003/2004. The clouds had now lifted and I had good views along the top of the Ysgolion Dduon, and across Bwlch Cyfryw-drum. There was a bit of a climb up to Carnedd Llewelyn, which I reached at 11:30am. This mountain also has a Bronze Age cairn, perhaps the highest in Britain.

Beyond Carnedd Llewelyn, the ridge broadens out to a featureless plateau, and I took a compass bearing to make sure I was on the right track for the next mountain Foel Grach. I reached Foel Grach just after 12 noon, and decided to stop in the emergency refuge shelter for lunch. It was occupied, but fortunately the two guys in it were packing up, so I was able to get out of the cold wind for a break. I'd stayed in this shelter when I did the Welsh 3000s in 2004, so it was nice to see it again.

The next summit was Carnedd Uchaf which I reached at 1pm. This is a minor rise on the ridge with a rocky outcrop, barely qualifying as a distinct summit. In 2009 this was renamed as Carnedd Gwenllian – in honour of Princess Gwenllian, daughter of Prince Llewelyn and Eleanor de Montfort (the nearby mountains Carnedd Llewelyn and Yr Elen are believed to have been named after Gwenllian parents). The official renaming of Carnedd Uchaf took place after a long campaign by the Princess Gwenllian Society. Both names are shown on the Ordnance Survey map, since in the event of a mountain rescue, either name could be used.

Heading onwards, I reached the most northerly of the Welsh 3000s, Foel Fras at 1:30pm. On the way down from Foel Fras I met a backpacker heading out and back to Foel Grach. We had a long chat about mountain adventures and it turned out that he had a packraft. The first person I've ever encountered who owns a packraft!

The sky was now clear and the sun was shining bright, typical for the weather to improve on the last day of the trip! I reached the next hill, Drum, at 2:30pm. This also has an impressive Bronze Age cairn, Carnedd Penyborth-Goch. Beyond here the ridge drops away gently to Bwlch y Ddeufaen. This pass is steeped in history, going back thousands of years – near the top of the pass there are a couple of standing stones, while a mile or so to the east there's a stone circle. A Roman road also crosses the pass. Completely insensitive to the history, a line of modern pylons now marches across!

From Bwlch y Ddeufaen I began the last big climb of the trip, over Foel Lwyd and on to Tal y Fan, the final rocky outcrop on the ridge. In 2013 Tal y Fan was remeasured to confirm it's over the magic 2000ft height, and therefore can be considered to be a 'mountain'

(<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-22420985>). It certainly has a lot of character with numerous rock outcrops and a shapely summit.

A cold wind had begun to blow, so I hurried off the mountain, heading directly downhill. I'd not found any water all day, and now needed to locate a water source before stopping for the night. The ground was surprisingly dry as I contoured around the springy bilberry moorland. I found one small stream where I filled my water bottles, then a more substantial stream a little further on, which I concluded was a better water source.

The first farm buildings on the edge of the moor were about a mile away at Bryn Derwydd, and I didn't want to camp any closer to habitation, so cast around for somewhere hidden from view. I found an unusual stone shelter with a corbelled roof, possibly an old mining building. The floor was uneven, muddy and it was quite drafty, so not up to bivvy standard. Nearby, I found the ruined walls of some buildings, and managed to shield my tent from view by setting up inside the walls. It was still extremely windy overnight, so I was glad of the shelter.

I was now about five miles from Conwy station, but that station was closed because the platform was too short to allow social distancing. The next station is at Llandudno Junction, a mile further on, with the first train at 8:49. I set my alarm for before sunrise, so I could pack up by torchlight and leave as soon as it was light enough to navigate.

### **Sunday 13th September 2020 – Conwy Mountain**

The weather was clear as I set off around 6:30am. Navigation across the moorland was quite exacting, there were multiple paths and I couldn't afford to take a wrong turning. By Maen Esgob I left the moor and took a contouring path above the Fairy Glen to reach the Sychnant Pass (Bwlch Sychnant). Before the railway was constructed along the North Wales coast, the road across the Sychnant Pass was used by mail coaches at high tide, when the faster and safer route along the sands was unusable.

To reach Conwy I had to cross one final hill, Mynydd y Dref or Conwy Mountain. At the summit there are Neolithic hut circles and the Iron Age hillfort of Castell Caer Seion. The hillfort is an extensive stone walled construction incorporating more than fifty hut circles and levelled platform houses, with a citadel and outposts.

I descended for a mile on the ridge of Mynydd y Dref, then turned off to take a right of way to a minor road. Navigation was now straightforward through Conwy town and over the bridge past Conwy Castle to Llandudno Junction. I only just had enough time to buy a ticket (£92.30) and get on the train. The journey home involved three changes. I don't normally take a change of clothes for the return journey, but was very glad that I did so this time, even though it had meant carrying extra weight.

8:49 – Llandudno Junction	09:39 - Chester	Train
9:57 - Chester	10:22 - Crewe	Train
11:02 - Crewe	11:34 - Wolverhampton	Train
11:42 - Wolverhampton	14:42 – Southampton Central	Train

## Conclusions

I found the trek extremely tough, partly because I was not mountain fit at the start, so my feet were soft, my muscles were out of shape and I wasn't used to carrying a heavy pack. Having said that, I do think that this is a genuinely tough route, with 8400m of ascent across seven whole days and two half days. The terrain is challenging, from the bogs and heathery ground of the south to the rocky mountains of the north. There's an extraordinary variety of mountain scenery within one fairly compact route, and I'd go as far as to say that this route (or variants of it) can be regarded as one of the finest treks in Britain.

I'd been quite unlucky with the weather at the start, but given the proximity of the mountains to the sea, Snowdonia does have a very wet climate, and rain is possible any time of year. My kit definitely wasn't up to the job – my waterproof trousers need replacing, they didn't keep the water out at all. Gaiters would have been a useful item of kit to prevent water running down into my boots, and also to protect the boots when walking through long wet vegetation.

It was nice to revisit places that I've been to previously, experience some new places as well, and satisfying to connect them all up into a continuous route. I was glad to be able to complete one trek in what has been a frustrating year for mountain travel. A future trip could cover the southern part of Wales, across the Brecon Beacons, up through the Elan Valley and over Plynlimon.

## Route Statistics

Day	Distance (miles)	Ascent (metres)	Descent (metres)
Day 1. Over the Tarrens	7.3	741	361
Day 2. Cadair Idris	14.3	1314	1255
Day 3. Rhinog Fach	13.0	986	1127
Day 4. Rhinog Fawr	9.3	800	900
Day 5. Moelwyn Mawr and Cnicht	11.2	1144	1062
Day 6. Snowdon and Crib Goch	10.1	1237	1056
Day 7. Glyders and Tryfan	5.4	1118	931
Day 8. Carneddau	11.1	951	1192
Day 9. Conwy Mountain	6.1	116	528
<b>Totals</b>	<b>87.7</b>	<b>8407</b>	<b>8411</b>