

Machynlleth

Needless to say this didn't go down too well with King Henry IV, who vowed to crush this challenge to English power. Within a few years Owain was a fugitive and, after one last daring raid at Brecon in 1412, he disappeared altogether.

No one knows for sure what happened to him. Despite enormous rewards he was never captured or betrayed. He became a semi-mythic figure – second in a poll of “100 Welsh Heroes” behind only Nye Bevan. (Tom Jones came third, if you must know.)

The Grade I-listed Parliament House on Maengwyn Street isn't quite the original building where Owain welcomed the great men of France, Scotland and Spain to his coronation. It was probably built a couple of generations later – but on the same spot.

Which makes it the perfect atmospheric setting for the Owain Glyndwr Centre. There you can watch a video reconstruction of the first parliament, try on medieval costume or have a go at brass rubbing.

And you can see a huge mural of Owain's first victory in the field at the battle of Hyddgen. We can't vouch for its accuracy though. The prince's face bears an uncanny resemblance to local MP David Davies, who commissioned the work around 1912.

Parliament House isn't Machynlleth's only impressive medieval building. Royal House, so called because Charles I stayed there in 1643, is a merchant's dwelling and shop that's been in continuous use since the 15th century.

Now the Machynlleth Tabernacle Trust have sympathetically converted the old store into a self-catering holiday apartment with all mod cons. Well, why not? They'd already transformed a Wesleyan chapel into a performing arts centre and created the Museum of Modern Art Wales, or MOMA, while they were about it.

They now have four exhibition spaces showcasing leading contemporary artists. And the auditorium of the old tabernacle, which once rang to passionate preaching, provides the perfect acoustics for concerts and poetry readings. That's why it hosts the Machynlleth Festival in late August every year.

Not to be confused with the Machynlleth Comedy Festival, “a weekend of stand-up comedy in the heart of Wales” that happens in early May.

Experimentation and intimacy are the order of the day. Not to mention big laughs, as top-class comedians kick off their shoes and relax. “If the Edinburgh Fringe is now a pressure cooker,” says performer Arthur Smith, “Machynlleth is the sun coming out.”

No wonder the population of the town doubles to 4,000 during the Mach Comedy Fest. It brings a different kind of hipster buzz to a town long famous for a vibe so Bohemian that Led Zeppelin came here to write “Stairway to Heaven”.

Ever since 1291 when it was granted its charter from Edward I, Machynlleth has pulled in the crowds. It still holds a busy market on the same day (Wednesday) and in the same place as it did 700 years ago.

There are a few more wholefood shops and vegetarian cafés these days. That's the sort of eco-friendly place Machynlleth has been since an old slate quarry was turned into the Centre for Alternative Technology in the 1970s.

It's still going strong more than 30 years later. In fact it's Europe's leading eco-centre with 65,000 visitors every year. But it's no theme park. It's real people doing real things to help build a better world.

Their pioneering work in all aspects of green living has inspired a rapidly expanding renewable energy industry based around Machynlleth. So it's no accident that the town lies at the heart of the UNESCO-designated Dyfi Biosphere.

It's the very first Biosphere in Wales and only the third in the British Isles. This isn't just because of its sandy beaches, wetlands and estuaries, dense forests and rugged mountains. It's because local people love it so much they want to conserve it for the future.

Walk the Wales Coast Path (which takes a handy inland detour to Machynlleth) and you'll soon see what inspires their affection. Or pick up the 135-mile-long horseshoe of Glyndwr's Way and head for either Welshpool or Knighton.

But if you really want to get up close and personal with the scenery, pack your bike. Machynlleth's iconic clock tower marks the start of a Tour of Britain stage, so that tells you all you need to know about the road cycling. Lôn Las Cymru Routes 8 and 42 pass through the town. And the mountain biking is simply epic.

Three waymarked trails take you just as far into the wilderness as you want to go – right from the town centre. For maximum mud and adrenalin, the 15km Cli-machx trail through Dyfi Forest fires you down the longest descent in Wales.

Almost as far down, in fact, as King Arthur's Labyrinth at Corris. Deep beneath the mountains of southern Snowdonia, a mysterious hooded boatman will sail you through vast underground caverns and winding tunnels. All you need is a hard hat and a bit of imagination.

My Way

“The inhabitants are a good-natured mix of friendly locals and free-thinking hipsters from around the country. It is very easy to find a nice cheesecloth shirt to buy and I did.”

Arthur Smith, comedian