

sense of place

myths and legends



Cadair Idris

Cadair (or Cader) Idris is one of Wales's most iconic mountains. It is about 893m in height, standing at the southern gate of Snowdonia, overlooking Dolgellau. The three peaks are Pen y Gadair (Head of the Chair), Cyfrwy (the Saddle) and Mynydd Moel (the Bare Mountain).

There are numerous stories and legends associated with this mountain and Idris, the giant who's seat it supposedly is. A few of the nearby lakes – such as Llyn Mwyngul (commonly known as Tal-y-llyn lake) are reputed to be bottomless, and those who venture up the mountain at night should take heed before sleeping on its slopes. It is said that those who sleep on the mountain will awaken either as a madman, a poet or indeed never wake again.

Idris appears in many guises in the Welsh tradition – as giant, prince and astronomer. One of the tales told of the giant, is that sitting on his great chair one day, he felt pieces of grit inside his shoes which he removed and cast down the mountainside. The three large stones that rest at the foot of the mountain are said to be those annoying pieces of grit. Another tale tells of Idris throwing pieces of grit across the area. One of these pieces – a significant sized rock landed in Aberllefenni, another in Rhydymain and the third in Abergeirw. There are two other stones on the left of the road through the pass as you head for Dolgellau, linked with this story. The largest across the way from the lay-by was thrown by Idris and the other, a smaller stone was apparently thrown there by his wife!

But who was Idris? Where does his fame stem from? The trail in terms of an historical Idris probably begins with Sualda ab (son of) Idris, a seventh century prince of Meirionnydd (c 630AD). The father in this case is Idris – Idris ap Gwyddno of Meirionnydd who died in 632 AD,



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and who is recorded in the Harleian genealogy. He is noted as the son of Gwyddno who, some have linked to that man of the same name - Gwyddno Granhir, owner or ruler of the lower Cantref, or submerged hundred (*cantref* or *hundred* being an area of land). It was upon a stream within Gwyddno's lands that the quasi historical poet and visionary Welsh hero Taliesin was found floating in a basket on May eve.

It is appealing to link these mythological strands historically. In reality, however, we will possibly never know whether Idris was indeed a one time prince of Meirionnydd. A prince who's renown or military prowess caused him to become a 'giant' amongst men, and immortalised as the giant of Cader Idris, or rather if he is the product of local folk tales and the vivid Welsh imagination, fuelled by the dramatic landscape and changeable weather of the Snowdonia mountains.

While the mountain is most strongly associated with Idris the giant, it is sometimes also referred to as Arthur's seat – presumably referring in this case to the legendary King Arthur. This connection has been popularised by Susan Cooper in her book *The Grey King* which forms a part of the well known *The Dark is Rising* series.

In Welsh mythology, Cader Idris is also forms part of the hunting ground of Gwyn ap Nudd, lord of the Celtic Underworld 'Annwn', and his strange, red eared, otherworldly dogs. The howling of these great dogs was a portend of death for those who heard it, as it was believed that the pack herded the person's soul into the underworld.

There are a number of marked, named footpaths leading to the summit of Cader Idris, including the Pony Path (*Llwybr Pilin-pwn*) and the Fox's Path (*Llwybr Madyn*). The Fox's Path between Llyn y Gader and the summit is on a steep and loose scree slope which must be descended with particular care . Much of the area around the mountain was designated a National Nature Reserve in 1957, and is home to arctic-alpine plants including purple saxifrage and dwarf willow. Further information is available for walkers wishing to visit Cader Idris, on www.wales-walking.co.uk.