

sense of place myths and legends



Cantre'r Gwaelod

There was a time when, if you had looked out towards Ireland from the Dyfi Estuary, you would see lush, fertile lands stretching out some 20 miles into what is now Cardigan Bay. This area was known as *Maes Gwyddno* (the land of Gwyddno).

Around 600AD, the major settlement on this land was known as *Cantre'r Gwaelod* (the Bottom hundredth). It was a valuable part of the kingdom of Meirionnydd and ruled by *Gwyddno Garanhir* (Gwyddno Longshanks). Owing to the low-lying nature of the land, it was protected from the sea by a large dyke. The dyke had sluice gates that were opened at low tide to drain the water from the land, and closed again as the tide returned, but one terrible night, one man's carelessness caused the drowning of *Cantre'r Gwaelod* and all the lands of *Maes Gwyddno*.

The day of Gwyddno Garanhir's daughter's wedding dawned bright and clear, and the fortress at Cantre'r Gwaelod was a hive of activity and excitement as preparations were made for the ceremony and the feasting that would follow. Merchants brought fine foods and wines from all over Britain, entertainers, harpists, bards and jesters gathered to perform at the celebrations. The household was busy decorating the beautiful courtyards and halls with flowers and fruits which grew in the fertile lands around the palace, and from the bakery and the cookhouse, the rich, sweet smells of meats being roasted and fish being baked filled the air. The whole of Cantre'r Gwaelod seemed to be joyously at work, and full of anticipation for the wedding of their lovely princess to one of the princelings of a nearby kingdom – all except one.

Seithennin was head watchman. It was he who looked after the dyke and ensured that the gates were opened and closed at the appropriate time. He was close to the King and his family, and had long been deeply



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in love with the princess. His heart was heavy and he was distracted and dismal on this bright sunny day. He couldn't bear the thought of watching the princess be married to another man, and so he slunk into dark corners, hid away in the watchtowers and turned his face away from the colourful celebrations.

Soon it was noon and the bride and groom were brought to the palace church where they were married. In their joy, the King and Queen, their families, friends and the 'household' or '*teulu*' did not notice Seithennin's absence. After the wedding came the feast, at which all the very best of Cantre'r Gwaelod's bounty was laid on for the two thousand guests within the great hall. Fourteen courses of meats and fish and vegetables and stews and sweet subtleties and sticky delights were brought out on golden platters, and washed down with the finest wines, mead and ale in gold, silver and horn goblets.

Outside, Seithennin watched the sun setting through tear filled eyes. Unable to bear the pain he took himself to the kitchens and helped himself to some bottles of rich, sweet mead. Back at the watchtower he watched the full moon sail above the swelling sea as he drunk deeply of the golden liquor. Within hours he was drunk and deeply asleep.

He was asleep when the storm clouds gathered and the wind whipped up a storm out in the Irish sea. He was still asleep when heavy rain began to lash the walls of Cantre'r Gwaelod. He was still asleep when the waves began to breach the dyke and when the rising tide came crashing in through the open sea gates.

Eventually, at the heights of the storm, as the wind whistled through the towers and turrets and the open window shutters began hammering against the palace walls, Seithennin awoke. Bleary eyed he rose to his feet and looked out towards the dyke, but there was no sea wall to be seen. The tide was crashing against the fortress walls and waves were hungrily consuming the land. He rushed to the bell tower and raised the alarm, but the two thousand or so guests within the hall were by now dancing to some wonderful lively music from harps and pipes and lutes. Seithennin staggered to the hall and shouted at the guests to get out, to head for the high land, but it was too late.

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The hundred of land of Cantre'r Gwaelod was claimed by the sea that night. So too were the 16 villages of Maes Gwyddno and all their inhabitants asleep in their beds. Only a handful of those guests who had gathered to celebrate King Gwyddno's daughter's wedding found their way inland to safety. Among them were the King and some of his household who escaped by running along Sarn Cynfelin. Some say that Seithennin was drowned whilst trying to guide his beloved princess and her husband to dry land.

If you listen carefully on the shores of Cardigan Bay – particularly it is said on a quiet Sunday morning in Aberdyfi - you can hear the bells of Cantre'r Gwaelod ringing beneath the dark waters of the Irish Sea. This was the inspiration behind the well-know song 'The Bells of Aberdyfi' which became popular in music halls during the 18th Century, and also a beautiful piece of Welsh poetry by poet J J Williams translated below:

*O dan y Môr â'i donnau
Mae llawer dinas dlôs
Fu'n gwranddo ar y clychau
Yn canu gyda'r nôs;
Trwy ofer esgeulustod
Y gwylwr ar y twr,
Aeth clychau Cantre'r Gwaelod
Ô'r golwg dan y dwr.*

*Beneath the Sea and its waves
There are many fair cities
That have listened to the bells
Ringing at nightfall;
Through the idle negligence
Of the watchman on the tower
The bells of Cantre'r Gwaelod
Disappeared beneath the water*

J J Williams

Many versions of the Cantre'r Gwaelod story exist, having been passed down

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from generation to generation. The story has inspired poets, writers and musicians down the ages. The earliest recorded version of the tale exists in the 12th Century manuscript, the Black Book of Carmarthen. There it exists as a poem – probably much older than the manuscript – entitled '*Boddi Maes Gwyddno*' (*The Drowning of Gwyddno's Land*). The Black Book of Carmarthen is currently kept at the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth.