



# Sand dunes through time - | Newborough Warren



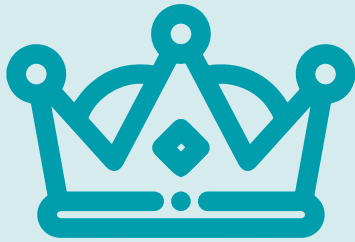
**5th Century**



Llanddwyn Island is named after St Dwynwen. She fell in love with a youth named Maelon but rejected his advances depending on which story you read, either because she wished to become a nun or because her father wished her to marry another. According to legend, she prayed to be released from being unhappily in love with Maelon.

An angel visited her and gave her a potion that healed her loss and turned Maelon into ice. She then prayed that she be granted three wishes: firstly, that Maelon would be thawed; secondly, that all true lovers find happiness; finally, that she would never again wish to be married. She then devoted her life to God and lived on the island until her death in AD465. Dwynwen became known as the patron saint of lovers in Wales and pilgrimages were made to her holy well on the island.





**13th Century**

The Newborough area was a region of rich farmlands and a prosperous town. Part of the Kingdom of Gwynedd, a Royal Court (Ilys) called Rhosyr, was located in Newborough.

This was the administrative centre where Llywelyn ab Iorwerth, the Prince of Gwynedd stayed when he travelled around his kingdom. King Edward I's conquest of 1282 led to Rhosyr being abandoned.



## 14th Century

A series of extremely violent storms buried a large portion of Newborough and the surrounding agricultural area under sand dunes.

In 1331, an area the size of 150 football pitches was buried overnight including what remained of Llys Rhosyr. The sea and wind dumped so much sand that eight farm cottages were buried, making it impossible to live in them or to continue farming in the area. As blown sand continued to be a problem, marram grass planting was undertaken to stabilise the dunes and stop the sand from taking over.



**16th Century**

During the Elizabethan period, visitors would leave offerings at St Dwynwen's shrine. As it was such a popular place of pilgrimage, the offerings funded the building of a substantial chapel on the site of Dwynwen's original chapel, the ruins of which can still be seen.

Today, we celebrate Saint Dwynwen's Day on the 25th January each year.



**16th Century**

Following the storms in the 14th Century, Queen Elizabeth I, enacted a law, making the uprooting of the grass a punishable offence, as the roots of marram grass helped to stabilise the dunes.

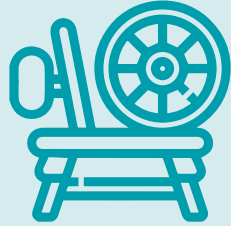
The planting of marram grass was ordered by her Government in an effort to stabilise the dunes and stop them advancing further.



## 18th Century

Rabbits colonized the dunes, giving the area the name Newborough Warren. A stone sign with Gwnhingaer Fawr can still be seen today, which is a way of writing cwningar – a rabbit warren, in Welsh. Rabbit catching became an important part of the economy.

At its peak 100,000 rabbits a year were caught from the warren and were sold or eaten. Rabbit meat became a major part of the local diet while cattle and sheep were sent away to market. The rabbits at Newborough would have helped to rejuvenate the sand dunes by removing vegetation to reveal bare sandy areas, helping to create species-rich habitats which allowed many invertebrates, lizards, and snakes to thrive.



## 18th Century

The harvesting of marram resumed at Newborough with marram leaves being weaved to form mats, ropes, nets, baskets, and matting. This became the main industry of the area, other than agriculture, with each family unofficially having a patch of the dunes where they harvested the marram grass in summer.

Residents would leave the grass to dry for two years, turning from its green colour to a golden yellow before commencing weaving.



**1840**

Llanddwyn (meaning the church of St. Dwynwen' Island) is situated near the southern entrance to the Menai Strait, an important shipping route from the ports of Bangor, Caernarfon and Felinhelli. Cottages were built near the tower to house 'pilots', men who guided ships into the Strait.

A lifeboat manned by the pilots, as well as volunteers from Newborough, was established on the island in 1840. The cannon that was used to summon the lifeboat crew, can still be seen near the cottages. Between 1840 and 1903 when it closed, the lifeboat saved 101 lives in 35 separate incidents.

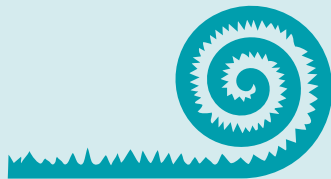




**1845**

A beacon, called Tŵr Bach, was built at the tip of the island, used to provide guidance to ships heading for the Strait.

A lighthouse called, Tŵr Mawr, which was modelled on the windmills of Anglesey, was built in 1845, replacing the beacon and was used to guide ships through the perilous waters.



**1913**

The enclosure of the common land in the early 19th Century, led to the loss of rights to collect marram grass, hindering the industry in Newborough.

In 1913, the industry was revived with the establishment of the Mat Makers Association and marram from Newborough Warren was woven once more until the area was commandeered by the War Ministry in 1939.




**1939**

Newborough Warren was taken over by the War Ministry and used as a military training area during World War 2. A dummy airfield was set up to divert German planes and their bombs away from the real RAF stations on the island.

The only clue to this previous life is a small underground bunker buried deep in the sand.




**1947**



The Forestry Commission began planting the Corsican pine trees that make up Newborough Forest, to meet the post-war demand for timber and to stabilise the shifting sand dunes.

This resulted in the some of the original dune vegetation being smothered as there was less available light. The water table at the site was also lowered due to the demand for water from the trees.






**1954**

Eight months after the disease was first recorded in the British Isles, the first outbreak of myxomatosis, a highly contagious viral disease in rabbits that is usually fatal, was reported in Newborough in August 1954. Prior to the outbreak, Forestry Commission reports stated that trappers took some 7,000 pairs of rabbits off the Warren annually without reducing the population density.


Following the outbreak, only some 30-50 rabbits were killed annually. The decline in rabbit numbers led to thick grass cover and a decline in the floral richness of the dunes.



**1955**



Newborough Warren and Ynys  
Llanddwyn are declared the first  
coastal National Nature Reserve  
in Wales.





**2019**

The Sands of LIFE project, a major conservation project is launched to revitalise Welsh sand dune systems, including Newborough Warren.

The aim of the project is to recreate natural movement within sand dunes and rejuvenate these habitats which are home to some of Wales' rarest wildlife.



**Today**

Newborough Warren is a popular area for recreation and home to wildlife, especially red squirrels. The 870-mile-long, Wales Coast Path runs through the site and visitors can walk anywhere on the beaches and along the network of footpaths.

A sculpture commemorating the marram grass weaving industry can be found at the Natural Resources Wales Llyn Rhos Ddu car park.