Last July Mick Aston was with Time Team on Anglesey; he is seen here at the excavation with archaeologist Frances Lynch. Main photo shows view from Anglesey across the Menai Strait towards Snowdonia. The Pont Britannia (opened 1850) was rebuilt after a fire in 1970; in the background is the Menai Bridge (1826).
We (Time Team) recently made a film in Anglesey in north Wales, investigating an earthwork of unknown date in the middle of a wind farm – it turned out to be a late iron age/Romano-British enclosure. I took advantage of a few days off to look around the sites on the island. I had last visited Anglesey about 40 years ago, and I had forgotten quite how spectacular the monuments are. When I was younger I had been attracted by the density of field monuments. I had obtained a copy of the Royal Commission volume (on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales) which illustrated the sites, and I could walk and visit many of them in a day whilst camping in my small tent. It is no exaggeration to say that my interest in archaeology was encouraged and fostered by my visits to Anglesey during my formative teenage years.
Above: Mick in July 1967 at the two Neolithic burial chambers at Presaddfed. The better preserved, mostly out of sight to left, has a capstone supported by a modern wooden post. They are in the care of Cadw

Below: The Parys Mountain copper mines had a workforce of thousands in the 1780s. Miners then found signs of older workings, assumed to be Roman, but recent excavations identified bronze age mining material radiocarbon dated to c1850BC. The site is now an industrial monument with a waymarked trail.

My interests of course are different now – I no longer visit as many chambered tombs and prehistoric sites as I did then – but Anglesey has remained of interest because of its wealth of post-Roman and early medieval sites. There is much evidence to see of the post-Roman centuries.

Anglesey, or Môn in Welsh, is called the mother of Wales. For centuries it had some of the best and most fertile land in the country, the breadbasket of Wales (paralleled perhaps only by Glamorgan and other such areas in south Wales). Beyond the mountainous inhospitable country of Snowdonia, Anglesey is flat and gently rolling country with fertile soils based on limestone bedrock and sandblows from the sea. The early medieval kings of Gwynedd might have ruled large areas of upland north Wales, but it was Anglesey that sustained them; it was agriculturally so much more productive than anywhere else in the region.

As can be seen from the air, the island is flat with plenty of good land. Around the coast there are a great number of small beaches and coves where in earlier times boats could be landed. Communications with Ireland, Cumbria, south Scotland and the Isle of Man must always have been easy. Indeed, for several days when we were working on Anglesey, we could see Man some 40 miles away to the north, as well as the mountains of the Lake District. But there were other vital resources. While Great Orme at Llandudno has (rightly) recently received a lot of attention as a major source of copper, where it was mined in the bronze and iron ages, Anglesey, if anything, was a more important source. In the 18th century, Parys Mountain was the biggest open-cast copper mine in the world, and plenty of copper ingots from earlier periods have been found on the island.

The island has a rich prehistoric past which has been well-studied and published by Frances Lynch (see her Prehistoric Anglesey, Anglesey Antiquarian Society 1970). There are burial chambers of the Neolithic and bronze ages and lots of later prehistoric and Romano-Pictish settlements. Some of these have been shown to go on into post-Roman centuries. Perhaps the most impressive and most accessible is Din Lligwy on the east side of the island. This is maintained by Cadw (Welsh Historic Monuments) along with the neighbouring burial chamber and medieval chapel, Capel Lligwy. Din Lligwy is on a low eminence, with round houses – very big and impressive – and other rectangular buildings (presumed later) some of which seem to have been industrial and smithing sites. Many of the “modern” field walls around look as if they were the surrounding contemporary fields of the settlement, and so would be at least prehistoric in date.

The Romans spectacularly arrived on the island in AD61, fighting their way across the Menai Strait and defeating...
the Druids who were holed up on the island. Later, a small Roman stone fort was built at Holyhead, probably against Irish pirates. The site overlooks the present port of Holyhead, a fine example of continuity over nearly two millennia.

This fort was later used as the enclosure (of an early monastery?) around an early Christian establishment ruled over by St Cybi (hence Caer Gybi). He was one of the main early Christian saints on the island, the other being St Seiriol at Penmon at the far eastern point of Anglesey. At Penmon there is a later medieval Augustinian priory, probably on the early monastery site, but nearby is the so called cell and holy well of the saint. In the church, much of which is Romanesque, there is a fine Norman font but there are also several pre-conquest crosses, one of which has been brought in from the adjacent deer park to prevent further weathering. There is also an enigmatic Sheela-na-Gig figure. Off the coast, the island of Priestholm, Ynys Seiriol or Puffin Island, seems to have been both a monastery and a hermitage at different times, presumably used by the monks as a “desert” retreat from the main monastery at certain times of year such as Lent (before Easter).

There is much else of early medieval interest. In Llangadwaladr church, which may have been the main church for the royal centre at Aberffraw, is a fine memorial stone built into the impressive late medieval parish church. This commemorates King Catamanus (or Cadfan) who was the grandfather of the Cadwaladr to whom the church is dedicated, and a king of Gwynedd who is known to have died in about 625. It is
rare to have such a memorial to a known individual whose date of death is known. The king is described in Latin as “wisest and most illustrious of leaders”.

There are other good monuments on the island at Llangaffo church, which may also have been a monastery, and at Llansadwrn. At the latter, a Saturninus (presumably the man to whom the church is dedicated) is commemorated in another fine stone built into the church. The inscription reads, “Here lies blessed Saturninus and his saintly wife. Peace be with you [both]”. They were almost certainly early Christians. The stone is dated cAD530.

These examples make the point that there is much of interest hidden away in many of the churches on Anglesey, as elsewhere in Britain. Sometimes the churches are not open to travellers who may wish to visit and look inside. Of course, it relies on local people being available to hold a key and unlock the church on certain days. But I wonder if I am alone in thinking that the wealth of history, sculpture, architecture and archaeology to be seen in our parish churches, makes them an important part of the cultural tourist industry, and hence the wealth generated by foreign visitors, and that, as such, they should receive much more support (financial and otherwise) than they do at the moment?
Above: The 13th century Augustinian priory at Penmon, whose origins are traditionally associated with the 6th century St Seiriol.

Right: A remarkable group of early medieval stones can be seen in and around Llangaffo church, leading some to think the site may once have been a monastery. The early church was on the rock outcrop with the cross-base in the background.