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Maelor Saesneg – Disgrifiad Cryno

Maelor Saesneg yw'r tamaid hwnnw o diriogaeth Cymru sy'n ymwithio i Wastadedd Caer. Y mae hi, a'r rhimyn o dir gwastad ar lannau Dyfrdwy ymhellach i'r gogledd, yn debycach, ar sawl ystyr, i rannau o Swydd Amwythig neu Swydd Gaerllion nag i fryniau Maelor Gymraeg i'r gorllewin. Gwelodd ganrifoedd o lanw a thrai dylanwadau Cymreig a Seisnig, a cheir yma gymysgedd o enwau lleoedd Cymraeg a Saesneg: rhai'n wreiddiol, eraill wedi'u haddasu o'r naill iaith i'r llall. Yn rhai mannau, mae'r caeau a'r patrwm anheddiad wedi ffosileiddio tirwedd Ganoloesol, gyda ffosydd amddiffynnol, a meysydd agored gydag amaethyddiaeth "cefnen a rych". Mae rhannau o'r dirwedd hŷn yma yn cael eu colli gyda newidiadau ac arferion ffermio modern: ond mae'r ardal, yn enwedig yr hanner gorllewinol, wedi goroesi'n rhyfeddol, ac yn heddychlon a llonydd. Mae'n anodd credu mewn cyfarfod ras ym Mangor Is-coed nad yw cyn-bentrefi glofaol Johnstown a Rhosllannerchrugog ym Maelor Gymraeg, ac ystâd ddiwydiannol Wreccsam (y fwyaf yn Ewrop, debyg) ond ychydig filltiroedd i ffwrdd. Mae'n debyg bod yr ardal yn fwy adnabyddus am ei llynnoedd a'i chorsydd, ac am ei mawnogydd.

Summary description

The area includes 'English Maelor', that short sleeve of Welsh territory protruding into Cheshire Plain west of the Dee and parts of 'Welsh Maelor' to the east. It is an area that in many respects belongs to the border counties of Shropshire and Cheshire. It has seen centuries of the ebb and flow of English and Welsh influences, but topographically, it is very uncharacteristic of Wales, with little high ground on either side of the tortuously meandering Dee that crosses it, and it is no surprise that most (though by no means all) of the place names are English. The small town of Worthenbury is the site of a possible Saxon burgh; elsewhere, the fields and settlements have fossilised a Medieval landscape of moated settlement sites and open fields systems with ridge-and-furrow cultivation. Parts of this older landscape are being lost with changes in modern farming practices, but the area, particularly the western half, is still a remarkable survival, and is peaceful and tranquil. It is hard to imagine at a race-meeting at Bangor-on-Dee that the former colliery settlements of Johnstown and Rhosllannerchrugog in Deeside and Wrexham, and the large Wrexham industrial estate, are only a few miles away. The area is probably more well-known for its meres and mosses and for its peat-diggings.

Key Characteristics
Flood plain or rolling lowland - sandstone and siltstone / mudstone is overlain in places by glacial till, fluvio-glacial drift and river alluvium, for example, along the course of the Dee, giving rise to a gently undulating landform.
A rural agricultural character - intensively farmed with much arable land and parkland, with more arable to the east.
Mixed native hedgerows with hedgerow trees - in a medium scale field pattern, with larger scale fields to the east.
Small scale deciduous farm woodland – occasional blocks interspersed with farmland.
Meres, mosses and flooding - The flood plain of the River Dee. Scattered field ponds and mosses such as Fenn's Moss in the south east are distinctive features.
Relict medieval field patterns - much of the pastoral west, characterised by ridge and furrow cultivation patterns, overlain by later, Parliamentary Enclosures.
Archaeology - Prehistoric ritual and funerary sites and distinctive Medieval, moated, manorial sites occur within the area.
Small, rural village settlements, farms and parks - compact nucleated hamlets and

villages often of Medieval formation, for example, Bangor-on-Dee and Overton, with sandstone, red brick and grey slate frequently evident.

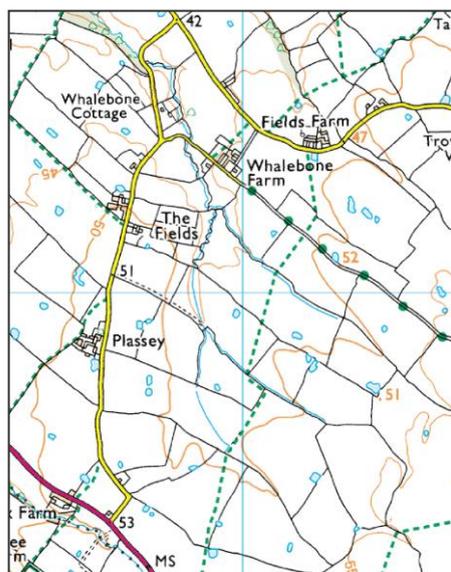
A unified agricultural landscape of simple composition - with texture provided by a variety of land cover elements including pasture, rush, marsh, woodland and meres.

Closely related to the greater Cheshire plain.

Visual and Sensory profile



A typical undulating rural scene in the west of the area, this one being near Overton. © John Briggs



A sample of the widespread pattern of small field ponds and hedgerow trees, shown respectively on map and aerial images.

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Topographically, the area is untypical of Wales, with little high ground on either side of the tortuously meandering Dee that crosses it. It is really a component part of the greater Cheshire and Shropshire Plain, with very impressive river meanders, and flood plain features. To the west the Dee emerges from an undulating landscape through which it has incised.

It is a largely unified, rural landscape, and comparatively tranquil when away from greater Wrexham. There are strong field patterns and a mix of arable and dairy farming. Mosses and fens are a feature, as are numerous small field ponds, scattered throughout. Boundaries are predominantly well managed hedgerows and there are abundant

hedgerow trees. A particularly distinctive feature is the remnant Medieval ridge and furrow open field system, which underlies the more recent landscape. These ridge and furrow corrugations are most apparent at dusk and dawn, when the sun is low, or after light dustings of snow.



The meandering course of the River Dee near Isycoed/Caldecott © Welsh Government 2006

Geological Landscape influences

Although most of the area is blanketed by Quaternary (Ice Age) deposits, the bedrock geology does contribute to the overall, low-lying character of the area. In the western fringe, from east of Wrexham towards Erbistock, the bedrock geology comprises late Carboniferous red-purple sedimentary rocks of the Erbistock Formation. These rocks are part of the Red (Barren) Measures, which are widespread in the neighbouring Deeside and Wrexham area, and record dry conditions with floodplains and seasonal lakes. The bedrock which underlies all of the area to the east of the Erbistock Formation is Permo-Triassic in age and is dominated by wind-blown (aeolian) sandstone. The majority of the Permo-Triassic bedrock is concealed by Quaternary deposits, although there are good exposures at Kinnerton and Holt.

Much of the modern landscape of Maelor is a product of glacial and river process that have occurred over the last two million years. To the south and east of Wrexham there is a large area of sands and gravels termed the 'Wrexham delta terrace' which is some 30m thick and covers more than 40km². The surface of the fluvio-glacial deposits are often characterised by kettle holes (depressions formed following the melting of ice trapped in sediments) and generally form a distinctive hummocky terrain. The deposits of glacial till, sands and gravels have given rise to a gently undulating landscape between 10 and 20 m high along the banks of the Dee, rising to no more than about 100m overall in the south east, and including a number of ponds and lakes known locally as meres and mosses.

The central part of the area is dominated by the meandering course of the Dee. Its impact on this lowland landscape is particularly evident between Holt and Worthenbury (GCR site) where it meanders tortuously across the broad floodplain, displaying a wide range of fluvial landforms which reflect high mobility, including tight and sinuous meander loops, abandoned channels, ox-bow lakes and gravel bars.

Soils overlaying this geology include seasonally wet, deep red loams and clays associated with the glacial till deposits and deep loams associated with fluvio-glacial and river terrace drift material.

Landscape Habitats influences

Much of this area is agriculturally rich because of the fertile alluvial soils deposited by the Dee. The river itself is an important habitat and corridor for movement (SAC, SSSI), especially for migratory fish, salmon and otter. Nearby, seasonally waterlogged clayey soils are prone to flooding in winter and provide areas of wetness and poor drainage. Between Worthenbury and Holt, the Dee has some of the most spectacular and intricately developed meanders seen anywhere in Britain, creating interesting riverine habitats of sand and gravel bars and remnant ancient river cliffs, as well as many abandoned channels and old meander loops, home to aquatic vegetation and invertebrates (SSSI).

Some relict areas of wet pasture have been protected. Shell Brook (SSSI) pasture is an area of wet pasture on calcareous clay soils, floristically diverse, and represents a type of habitat that survives only as isolated fragments in the area. It is managed by grazing. Cloy Brook Pastures (SSSI) are similar, with a variety of unusual plants such as dyer's greenweed, pepper saxifrage and spiny restharrow.

Maelor Saesneg forms the western edge of the Shropshire meres and mosses, a nationally important series of open water and peatland sites. The majority lie in Cheshire and North Shropshire but extend over into Staffordshire and Maelor Saesneg. They are all derived from glacial activity on the Dee floodplain, leaving a series of depressions and hollows now either flooded (as meres) or filled with peat (the mosses).

Fenn's Whixall and Bettisfield Moss (RAMSAR, SAC, NNR, SSSI) is the largest moss in Wales. Sphagnum mosses and other plant remains have accumulated in the stagnant acid bog water, so that now there is up to 12m thickness of peat, forming a raised dome. It is a outstanding example of a lowland raised mire, and one of the most southerly in Britain. The site has a long history of peat extraction, but remains important as a raised mire habitat, dominated by heather and purple moor-grass, with a range of bog mosses, grading into lowland heath as conditions become drier, with occasional birch scrub encroachment. The moss supports a very diverse invertebrate population, a number of breeding birds and is a local stronghold for adder.

Woodland is also a strong element of the area's character. There are many small broadleaved woodland blocks, especially along the course of the Dee and its many small tributaries, providing important habitats, as well as fringing trees and wet woodlands along the courses of the streams themselves, and occasional mixed estate plantings.

Historic Landscape influences

As rich agricultural land, this area has supported a series of large landed estates, such as Gredington, Bettisfield and Iscoyd, whose investment in improved agriculture during the 19th century has left its mark in large numbers of planned farmsteads, small-holdings and estate cottages – and, around Bangor-on-Dee, stables and studs. Some of the parklands are associated with significant natural landscape features; Hanmer Mere, for instance, forms part of the setting of Gredington Park, set against a backdrop of mature parkland exotics. Some former moated sites are evident, such as at Lightwood Farm and Haulton Ring. Remnant Medieval field systems are often associated with compact, nucleated villages of Medieval origin, Bangor-on-Dee, Marchwiell, Worthenbury and Overton, though they are dominated by 18th and 19th century building. The Georgian churches at Bangor-on-Dee and Worthenbury are particularly fine examples. Timber and local red brick are the

dominant building materials, with some sandstone and grey slate roofing. These relatively formal landscapes contrast with the settled areas that grew up on greens, commons or waste grounds, some of which include the place-name element 'green'.

The area is particularly notable for its evidence of Medieval field systems and cultivation patterns, most notably extensive networks of ridge and furrow, which have been fossilised into the later, Parliamentary Enclosure pastoral landscape, in addition to areas of early, small scale enclosure. This is a rare survival in Wales, but was once commonplace across vast tracts of the English Midlands to the east. Prehistoric ritual and funerary sites, such as the round barrow at Sutton Green, are earlier historic markers.

Cultural Landscape influences

Even though this border area may owe more to farmlands of Cheshire and Shropshire than to the pitted hills which rise to the west of Wrexham and Ruabon, culturally it is a powerful mixture, and is still in flux. Agriculture continues to dominate the landscape and its way of life, but it is going through profound changes, and the typical large brick-built courtyard farms erected in the 19th century are often falling into disrepair. Welsh-place names often underlie apparently English ones, such as yr orsedd for Rossett and the element erw in the 'Arrowry' near Hanmer. Some Welsh place-names reflect immigration in the 19th century from areas further west.

Hanmer church was where, about 1383, Owain Glyndwr married Margaret Hanmer, daughter of his patron David Hanmer, an illustration of the principle that revolutions are not made by those in rags but by those who have learnt the style and manner of the conquering class. David Hanmer's descendants are still important locally. The autobiography of Professor Lorna Sage (1943-2001) *Bad Blood* has described her life in the Hanmer rectory and the dysfunctionality of her family amidst a backdrop of the poverty and tiredness of the area and of Britain as a whole after the war. Other examples of cultural mixing are the now-dispersed Polish displaced persons' camp at Penley, which functioned into the 21st century. Bangor-on-Dee (Bangor Iscoed) is the legendary site of the great monastery whose monks were massacred by Aethelfrith of Northumbria in about 616AD. Today the town of Bangor-on-Dee is better known for its popular race-course.