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Blaenau Gwy – Disgrifiad cryno

Âr dyffryn cul, dwfn hwn â Gwy rhwng Pumlumon ar y naill du, a bryniau Sir Faesyfed ar y tu arall. Mae llawer o'r llethrau is yn goediog, ond yn uwch i fyny ceir gweunydd agored, gyda chreigiau a mariandir, weithiau. Mae cyfeiriad gogledd-orllewinol / de-ddwyreiniol y dyffryn yn anarferol yn y rhan hon o Gymru, ond yn gyfleus ar gyfer priffordd de-gogledd yr A470.

Bu tref Rhaeadr Gwy'n ganolfan porthmyn ac yn dref marchnad yn y gorffennol, ond heddiw mae'n brysur gydag ymwelwyr ar eu ffordd tua thirluniau deniadol cronfeydd Cwm Elan yn y gorllewin.

Mae Gwy'n gyfoethog iawn ei golygfeydd a'i llên gwerin, a'r rhan hon yw'r mwyaf dramatig a neilltuol o'i thaith trwy'r bryniau. Tyst i brydferthwch naturiol y dyffryn yw plas Doldowlod,

a adeiladwyd o fewn parc o'r 19eg ganrif yn dŷ haf a chwaraeon yn null oes Elisabeth. Saif, o dan goedwig grog serth, ar deras islaw'r A470, lle mae Gwy'n gwyro.

Summary description

This deep, narrow valley carries the River Wye between the adjacent Pumlimon and Radnorshire Hills upland areas. Many of the lower slopes are clothed in woodland. Higher hillsides are open moorland, sometimes with rocks and scree. The unusual NW-SE valley alignment conveniently carries the main north-south A470 road.

The bustle of the town of Rhayader is somewhat in contrast, historically being a drovers' resting place and market town, but today a distinctly leisure-orientated destination based on the draw of the picturesque waterscapes of the nearby Elan reservoirs to the west.

The Wye possesses a wealth of visual and folklore associations and the length within this area is the most dramatic and distinctive of its upland sections. Testament to the natural beauty of the valley is Elizabethan-style Doldowlod House as a summer and sport retreat, set within a C19th park and garden and set beneath a steep hanging wood on a terrace beneath the A470 in a bend of the Wye.

Key Characteristics

A deep valley between major upland areas - with narrow, twisting, spectacular sections, and underlain by Silurian sandstones, shales and mudstones, intersected by older, Ordovician, Llanvirn Series shales.

Till and boulder clay deposits - south easterly ice flows carved through the valley, leaving behind deposits. Previous courses of the Wye are also displayed in alluvial deposits visible in small cliffs.

River Wye - entering the area in a wide, open valley and then coursing through a narrow valley as its waters gathers momentum. Fast flowing tributary streams drain from the surrounding uplands.

Ecologically outstanding - with wetland habitats such as riparian (riverside) woodlands and submerged aquatic plants. It is also home to nationally important species such as the white-clawed crayfish.

Woodland - Valley sides are often clothed in mixed woodland, with coniferous forestry and improved sheep pasture.

Floodplain - loamy soils give rise to wet grasslands and rush pasture.

Field boundaries - enclosed by mature hedgerows with frequent hedgerow trees.

Settlement is sparse, with the main centres being Rhayader and Llangurig at river crossing points. Elsewhere, scattered small settlements and farmsteads lie on the valley slopes and bottoms along roads. Elan Village (Arts-and-Crafts style), built for the Elan Valley reservoirs construction workers; Medieval remains of Rhayader castle and historic houses and gardens overlooking the Wye.

The main A470 and A44 roads - run parallel to the river, introducing busy traffic noise and movement into the otherwise spectacular valley landscape.

Visual and Sensory profile

This small, narrow area is familiar to road travellers as a distinctly defined section along the A470, the main north-south route through Wales. From the road, the area is generally seen as a picturesque rural valley set deep within surrounding hills, with the Cambrian Mountains enclosing it to the west and the steep sides of the Radnorshire Hills to the east.

However, there are ever-changing views, as the valley twists, with hills on either side opening and closing the vista.

A more intimate perspective is to be gained from the minor roads on the west side of the valley, from which the A 470 appears well integrated and not particularly intrusive, constrained by the steep valley sides, and well-screened by roadside hedges and trees. It is seldom busy or noisy, nor are views of it extensive as it is repeatedly negotiates the many natural bluffs which hide it from view.

The steep valley slopes give way to open hillsides with rocks and rough ground and open bleak, often cloud-covered tops. In places this rough, craggy, open land sweeps down almost to the valley bottom, but in other more benign places, the fields reach up the hillsides. In comparison, the sheltered lower slopes have small fields, woods and hedges, with scattered farms along the lower slopes. At intervals, especially on the western side, there are enclaves within the hillsides where more secluded hill-farms sit back from the main valley against the mountain wall. The river itself is fast-flowing, its banks often clothed in woods, which hide its waters from view. At bridging points, the sound of flowing water drowns out any nearby traffic noise.

Upstream from Rhayader, the valley is particularly distinctive and enclosed as it cuts through the elevated blocks of land on either side. Here the river is slighter and more youthful, with areas of rapids and rocks. Beyond Llangurig, where the river flows into the area from the west, the valley has a sweeping open, upland character.

At Rhayader the valley opens into a wider vale or bowl that extends west along the Elan valley. This presents as softer country, with undulating fields and small woods, centred around a wooded hill, Coed y cefn, away from the main road.

Rhayader is an attractive, small town, typical of mid Wales, with its bridge over the river and mix of building styles, serving as a local focus. The clock tower forms a distinctive landmark at the junction of the A470 and A 44 at the centre of the town. Downstream of its confluence with the Elan, the Wye becomes a larger and broader river as the valley widens, but constrained in places by ridges as it merges into the broader vales of the Irfon and Ithon area (rLCA27).



The Wye valley from edge of the Cambrian Mountains at Monks' Trod, above Nannerch.

© Bronwen Thomas



The enclosed, twisting, rugged, wooded valley of the Upper Wye. © John Briggs



View north from a minor road on the west side of the valley north of Rhayader. © John Briggs



From the mountain road, west of Rhayader, looking across where the valley has become a wide basin, with the hill of Coed-y-Cefn in centre © Bronwen Thomas



The upper River Wye © John Briggs



View of one of the gentler valley and river sections in the northern part of the area. © John Briggs

Geological Landscape influences

The bedrock geology of the Upper Wye Valley is characterised by dominantly north east-striking Ordovician and Silurian sedimentary rocks. The oldest rocks are of late Ordovician (Ashgill Series) age and include mudstones and interbedded sandstones that crop out in the extreme south east of the area. A thick sequence of latest Ordovician turbidite sandstones was, until recently, exploited for roadstone and aggregate at Cerrig Gwynion quarry, at the south eastern end of Gwastedyn Hill. The conformable junction between the Ordovician and Silurian strata crops out along the north western flank of Gwastedyn Hill, cutting across the valley at a point close to the Wye-Elan confluence. North west of this point, the remainder of the Upper Wye Valley is underlain by a thick sequence of Lower Silurian (Llandovery Series) rocks, dominated by deep-water turbidite mudstones and sandstones. Silurian strata crop out in the north west of the area.

Much of the present-day landscape of the Upper Wye Valley and adjacent areas is a product of at least two episodes of glaciation during the Quaternary Period. With the possible exception of Pumlumon in the adjacent Cambrian Mountains, the area was completely covered by ice, with faster-moving glacier ice outflowing eastwards and occupying the Wye Valley. The Wye glacier excavated an impressive valley, which has a broad, U-shaped profile in the Llangurig area, but becomes progressively more V-shaped in profile downstream where the modern river channel is more confined.

The retreating ice-sheets left significant volumes of glacial till (boulder clay) both on the valley floor and valley sides, some of which has been re-worked and re-distributed by post-glacial river processes. In the vicinity of Llangurig and immediately upstream of the Elan confluence, the Wye occupies a relatively broad floodplain and displays many characteristics of a lowland river, including meanders, terraces and point bars, as well as cut-bank sections that reveal an alluvial fill. In contrast, however, downstream of Llangurig, the river becomes progressively more confined, steeper in gradient, and the channel is locally rock-lined and strewn with boulders. Bar and meander development in this reach is more restricted, although some fine examples do occur.

Landscape Habitats influences

Habitats associated with this area relate to the river itself and the narrow steep-sided valley through which it flows, characterised by high rainfall, steep wooded slopes and a seasonally waterlogged valley floor. The river is protected as a SAC and SSSI along its entire length. It is wide and shallow, flowing over rocks with many small rapids, plunge pools and large boulders in the river bed. It supports otter and white-clawed crayfish. The salmon fishing on the Wye is world-renowned, and strictly controlled. The river also supports a number of water crowfoot habitats and riparian (riverside) woodland, with large trees, often overhanging the river, creating a variety of light and shade in summer.

The valley of the upper Wye is narrow and very steep-sided, and forms an important corridor for movement and ecological connectivity. Sessile oak woodlands clad the valley sides. Coed Y Cefn Woodland (SSSI) is an area of rather stunted, secondary oak growth, but is primarily protected for its high densities of the wood ant, in its southernmost locality in Britain, along with chrysomelid beetles, which feed upon ant pellets.

In between Llangurig and Rhayader are a number of exposed rocky outcrops on the tops of the valley sides forming the lower edge of the vast Cambrian Mountains plateau, and creating interesting and diverse habitats. The woodland at Cerrig-Gwalch is an example of mixed deciduous woodland on a craggy and rocky outcrop, where rock stonecrop grows on the inaccessible and ungrazed stone ledges.

In the valley floor, fine silty soils are often seasonally waterlogged and have given rise to wet grasslands and rush pastures. Occasional patches of semi-natural mire and fen habitat remain in places. Cwm Gwynllyn is a small oligotrophic lake, surrounded by a well developed open water transition mire grading into soligenous mire with a floristically diverse vegetation.

At Rhayader, the Elan joins the Wye, as a short length of river below the extensive Elan Valley reservoir network. This area remained isolated and remote until very recently with traditional agricultural practices continuing, which has led to the survival of many interesting and diverse hay meadows. These contribute to a rich diversity and mosaic of habitats within the agricultural landscape of the valley. Fields are bounded by mature hedges with frequent hedgerow trees.

The Upper Wye Valley is another area favoured by the red kites, and Gigrin Farm, just outside Rhayader, is a well-known viewing and feeding centre.

Historic Landscape influences

The key settlements of Rhayader and Llangurig occupy strategic positions where rivers meet. Rhayader owes its beginnings to The Lord Rhys of Deheubarth who built a stone castle there. Although later destroyed, the castle was rebuilt and fell into the hands of the Mortimers before Llywelyn ap Iorwerth recaptured and dismantled it in 1231. The town's central position between north and south, and east and west later resulted in it becoming a centre for drovers and a cattle market - which still prospers today - and a staging post, like Presteigne, on the London to Aberystwyth road. Later the town became a focus for Rebecca Rioters incensed by the tolls imposed by the newly permitted Turnpike Trusts in the mid-19th century.

Between Rhayader and Llangurig, settlement is sparse, as it is also below Rhayader. Farms are characteristically situated at the break of slope and clearly associated with an upland pasture area, while stone is the predominant building material throughout the area.

In 1892 the Rhayder area was to be affected by another Act of Parliament - the Enabling Act that allowed Birmingham Corporation to dam the Elan (in the adjacent Cambrian Mountains) and to create the vast reservoirs to supply water to the city. The Elan Valley Visitor Centre is built on the site of, and partly incorporates, the former railway buildings and marshalling yard of the network of 50km of track that joined the various construction sites to the Cambrian Railway at Rhayader. Nearby, Elan Village is a small settlement planned as a 'garden village', and an indissoluble part of the whole planned complex of reservoirs and communications, built in 1906-9 to provide for the reservoirs' maintenance staff. The (mostly) pairs of cottages are in 20th century traditionalism design, and are widely spaced along the natural flatness of the riverside site. The school has pride of place on a rise to the south of the village. The original suspension bridge still stands, but has been superseded on the adjacent downstream side by another, less attractive crossing that is more suited to vehicular access.

Llangurig in comparison to Rhayader, is more village than town, and owes much of its surviving historic character to the activity of a small local estate at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Originally, it was clas (early church) settlement, one of the four in Montgomeryshire. The visually and physically dominant building is the Church of St. Curig, which stands in a typical llan-style, circular raised churchyard on the north bank of the Wye. The exposed village possesses no other old buildings, but it does have a distant breath of Arts and Crafts in the charming lettering on the fountain, in the tile-hung public house and in the stone, former police station.

Cultural Landscape influences

Rhayader is a regional centre serving both busy farmers and the leisured – anglers, walkers, bird-watchers, pony trekkers, and all enjoy the unspoiled and remote environment that surrounds this area. As with nearby Llangurig, many travellers and tourists alike pass through the Upper Wye Valley as the iconic gateway to the uplands of Ceredigion, the central spine and dividing line between east and west, running to the sea at Aberystwyth.

There is also a faint air of 'alternative' lifestyles, and to some degree this 'green' reputation is enhanced by the Gigrin Farm Red Kite centre, which has done much to assist in the conservation, protection and recovery of the population of the threatened Red Kite species, arguably a cultural phenomenon in its own right because of the kites' artificial re-introduction. Another contemporary phenomenon is the large windfarm of Bryn Titli visible from the A470 at intervals north of Rhayader.

The Elan Valley Visitor Centre serves a wider purpose, providing a focal point for a wide range of visitors, 100,000+ of whom visit annually to enjoy a range of outdoor pursuits and activities. Recently, the Elan Valley village has been transferred to the Elan Valley Trust that also manages the extensive water catchment area in the adjacent Cambrian Mountains to safeguard water purity.

This cultural landscape both of hard work and of genteel leisure and retirement, has been so for some time. It was James Watt, the improver of the steam engine, who first saw the prospect of leisured ease in the Upper Wye Valley when he bought the Doldowlod estate in 1803, though he was attracted by the possibility of developing timber plantations as well as of enjoying a retreat away from the cares of business. His son and later owners developed the present house along the main road.