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## Dyffrynnoedd Gwy ac Wysg – Disgrifiad cryno

Cyfyngir a ffinir y dyffrynnoedd gwledig hyn ar bob tu gan fryniau Epynt, Sir Faesyfed, Bannau Brycheiniog a'r Mynyddoedd Duon. Wedi'u llunio gan rewlifoedd ar hyd ffawtiau sylweddol, mae pridd y dyffrynnoedd hyn yn ffrwythlon, a bellach yn glytwaith aeddfed o wrychoedd a thir amaeth sy'n gymysgedd o dir â'r a phorfeydd.

Amddiffynnwyd yr ardal yn gadarn o'r cyfnod cynhanesyddol hyd y Canol Oesoedd, gyda chaerau o'r Oes Haearn, gwersylloedd Rhufeinig a chestyll Eingl-normanaidd. Wedi diddymu'r mynachlogydd, sefydlwyd ystadau eang gan deuluoedd newydd-fonheddig, ac y mae parciau cynlluniedig i'w gweld yn amlwg yn y dirwedd. Mae yma rwydwaith o ffyrdd

hynafol, hanesyddol a chyfoes. Llyn Syfaddan yw llyn dŵr croyw mwyaf y de, ac y mae'n enwog am ei grannog (llyndref) a'i amryw gysylltiadau llenyddol. Yn ôl Gerallt Gymro, dyma lle canodd yr adar i Gruffudd ap Rhys, am mai fe, nid y ddau Norman oedd gydag ef, oedd gwir dywysog Deheubarth.

Sefydlwyd Aberhonddu, y brif anheddiad, ym man strategol ar gyfer croesi Wysg, ac y mae wedi cadw gwedd Fictoraidd ddel ei strydoedd. Gyda'i Gŵyl Jas flynyddol, mae'n cystadlu am y flaenoriaeth ddiwylliannol â Gŵyl Lenyddol y Gelli Gandryll. Ceir pentrefannau a ffermydd ar wasgar mewn patrwm llinelllog ar hyd nentydd neu ffyrdd, wedi'u cydgysylltu â rhwydwaith troellog o flonydd culion. Adlewyrchir cyfoeth amaethyddol y fro gan y nifer fawr o adeiladau fferm traddodiadol. Mae'r amryw ddulliau adeiladau'n cynnwys tywodfaen coch, briciau, gwyngalch a rendr lliw. Mae i'r ardal lawer o gysylltiadau diwylliannol a llenyddol, hefyd, ac fe'i masnechir megid "Gwlad Kilvert" ar ôl y dyddiadurwr o'r 19eg ganrif.

## Summary description

These rural vales are bounded and framed on all sides by the uplands of Epynt, the Radnorshire Hills, the Brecon Beacons and the Black Mountains. Shaped by glacial action in major fault lines, these vales contain fertile soils and are now enclosed with a mature patchwork of hedgerows and farmland with a mix of arable and pasture.

The area has been heavily defended from prehistoric to the Medieval periods, with Iron Age forts, Roman camps and roads and Anglo-Norman castles. After the Dissolution of the Monasteries, large estates were established by newly gentrified families, and their planned parklands are strong landscape features. The area is braided with ancient, historic and modern communication routes. Llangorse Lake is the largest natural fresh water body in South Wales and is noted for its crannog (lake dwelling) and various literary associations.

Brecon, the principal settlement, has early origins as a strategic crossing point on the Usk and has retained its quaint Victorian streetscapes, and with its annual Jazz Festival, it vies to share the cultural limelight with Hay-on-Wye and its Literary Festival. Hamlets and farms are scattered in a linear pattern along watercourses or roads, linked by a winding network of narrow lanes. The agricultural richness of the area is reflected in the high number of large traditional farm buildings. The variety of building styles includes red sandstone, brick, whitewash and coloured render. The area also has many cultural and literary associations and is marketed as 'Kilvert Country' after the C19th century writer.

### Key Characteristics

**Sedimentary rocks** - The greater extent is underlain by Silurian mudstones, siltstones and sandstones. The southern part is characterised by mudstones and sandstones from the Devonian period.

**Gently undulating vale landscapes** - carved by two separate ice flows creating the U-shaped valleys of the Wye and lower Usk, with pockets of higher ground of more resistant rocks surviving in places..

**Major rivers** - The Wye and Usk meander across their respective floodplains, fed by many tributaries and fringed by alluvial shingle ridges. They are highly valued for their riparian (riverside) habitats and as fishing resources.

**Llangorse Lake** – the largest natural fresh water body in South Wales. Its crannog lake dwelling has significant Early Welsh historical and cultural associations.

**Fertile pastures** - grazed by sheep and cattle.

<b>Hedgerow field pattern with hedgerow trees</b>
<b>Small woodlands</b> - and forestry plantations are features of slope sides and summits.
<b>Network of lanes</b> - criss-crosses the landscape.
<b>Compact settlements by river crossing points</b>
<b>Hay-on-Wye</b> - with its strong historic village ambience and literary associations and modern day 'book town'.
<b>Brecon</b> - largest settlement and historic county town, with distinctive Victorian buildings.
<b>The Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal</b> - is a notable early industrial transport and communication link.
<b>Quiet, rural away from roads and settlements</b> –a sense of tranquillity in places.

## Visual and Sensory Profile

This rolling, hedged vale landscape has an intimate, enclosed ambience with its patchwork of lush green fields and swathes of woodland intersected by the wide, meandering courses of the Wye and Usk.

In the north, the Wye passes through a landscape tightly framed by the Epynt plateau to the west and the Radnorshire Hills to the east, the close proximity of which heighten the sense of enclosure, with the woodland fringed rivers standing in contrast to the rocky, bracken-covered hill slopes and hills rising above. Nevertheless, the undulating vale landscape that characterises the greater part of the area affords long views across the rolling fields and woodlands in places.

In the south, the Usk is also a powerful and wide river forming the focus of the valley, with its tree fringed and loose meandering course. Its relatively flat productive valley floor, with medium to large fields, contrasts with the steeper, finer grain pastoral sides. Views from the Usk valley, and notably those from Brecon, to the Brecon Beacons are iconic. The narrow Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal runs parallel to the Usk, and crosses it on an aqueduct, opening up access to diverse scenic vistas of the valley sides. Between the two river valleys lies the highly distinctive lake at Llangorse. This picturesque still stretch of water seen in a bowl against the backcloth of the Black Mountains is popular for leisure including boating and nearby a caravan site, which reduces its apparent tranquillity.

Settlements have largely retained their historic character with only minor exceptions. Elsewhere the pattern is of scattered rural farmsteads and occasional cottages. Arterial roads, notably the A40, A438 and A470, form strong, linear features that link the main settlements and run close to the valley floors. Their associated noise and visual intrusion is generally confined within their immediate surroundings, with the area overall retaining a strong sense of peace and quietude and away.



Looking towards the Brecon Beacons from near Brecon © LUC



Llangorse Lake with the Brecon Beacons beyond. © John Briggs



The River Wye above Erwood © Luc



The Brecon Beacons from Brecon town (with the River Usk) © John Briggs



From Hay-on-Wye looking up into the Black Mountains © John Briggs



Rural valley scene with shingle beaches and riparian vegetation, mature trees and hedgerow patterns, and a rolling and hilly lowland landscape. The River Usk near Brecon

© John Briggs

## Geological Landscape influences

The greater extent of the area is underlain by geology of the Silurian period, including some Ludlow Series beds underneath the Wye valley in the north. These argillaceous rocks are interbedded by mudstones, siltstones and sandstones. The transition to the Brecon Beacons lying to the south is marked by a change in geology, with Lower Old Red Sandstone mudstones and sandstones from the succeeding Devonian period predominating.

During the Quaternary period, the landscape was carved and smoothed by two separate ice flows: the Wye glacier flowing north east and fed by numerous glaciers from the

surrounding uplands. Similarly a separate glacier flowed northwards from the Brecon Beacons, to join the main Usk glacier flowing south east. These giant ice masses created the wide, U-shaped valleys of the Wye and Usk, which are readily seen where the later widens into a typical glaciated valley east of Brecon. The more narrow, northern section of the Wye valley within this area was cut through by a southward glacier, which fed the main mass of the Wye glacier below.

Today, the vales of the Wye and the Usk are dominated by their respective rivers, which meander through the area re-working alluvial deposits from their former courses. Both rivers are fed by many tributaries flowing from the surrounding uplands.

The principal effects of the ice-sheet glaciation were to change existing drainage patterns, over-steepen and over-deepen valleys, generate a wide range of landforms, and to deposit a variety of glacial and fluvio-glacial materials in valleys and topographic hollows. Hummocky glacial deposits, forming irregular moundy ground, often accompanied by kettleholes, are widespread on the floors of both the Usk and Wye valleys (e.g. between Brecon and Sennybridge, and Hay and Clyro) and represent deposition at a static ice front. Some of these deposits form cross-valley moraines which define still-stands in the retreat of the valley glaciers. The Hay-Clyro moraine forms a spectacular ridge of sand and gravel plastered on bedrock, that is followed by the B4351 road.

In between a narrow strip of land forms a gentle watershed between the two river systems. Glacial and alluvial deposits have given rise to fertile, silty soils along the rivers supporting a mixture of pastoral, arable and horticultural activities. The eutrophic, glacial Llangorse Lake is here too, being the largest natural fresh water lake in South Wales.

## Landscape Habitats influences

It is an area of rich agricultural production, based on fertile and well-drained red sandstone-derived soils, supporting many large farms and estates. It is a well-managed landscape of rich pastures enclosed by hawthorn hedges and hedgerow trees. There are many large, often veteran in-field trees, especially in the west, often associated with estate land and forming important habitats and visual landscape features.

The Wye and the Usk and their tributaries are valuable water habitats, wildlife corridors and migration routes, which are protected as SACs and SSSIs for their diversity of water and riparian (riverside) habitats, including shingle ridges, bank-side flowering plants and lichens and riparian woodlands dominated by willow and alder. The river water itself supports populations of Atlantic stream crayfish, freshwater mussels, and otter.

South east of Brecon, Llangorse Lake SAC and a SSSI is one of only a very few natural eutrophic lakes in Wales, formed in a large glacial kettle hole, now supporting a rich diversity of submerged vegetation and associated invertebrate fauna.

The landscape is well-wooded, with many ancient sessile oak woodlands on the steeper valley sides and in the steep gorges formed by many of the smaller tributaries. Cilcenni Dingle Woodland SSSI has formed in a very narrow dingle on sandstone rocks, supporting a diverse woodland flora, as well as otter and an important population of dormice. Over the whole area there are many different woodland communities. Pwll-y-wrach Woodland is a good example of an ash-field maple-dog's mercury woodland community, with small-leaved lime and wild service-tree on the steeper slopes. Small areas of wet woodland

occur at Drostre Bank with alder, downy birch, ash and rusty willow, which are important for their association with adjacent rush pasture and fen-meadow. In addition, there are small areas of coniferous plantations, of less value as habitats, but adding to the general connectivity of woodland in the area.

The agricultural landscape is one of improved and cultivated land, however, patches of semi-natural habitats remain on the small areas of common land and other areas where improvements have been limited. Hen-Allt Common supports a botanically diverse damp grassland, base-rich flush and mire. Under the dominant bracken covering it contains the largest known population of meadow saffron in Wales. Adjoining Llangorse lake, Caeau Ty-Mawr is one of the most extensive areas of unimproved lowland grassland in Brecknock, with a diverse grassland flora, including the regionally rare pepper-saxifrage.

## Historic Landscape influences

This area has a rich diversity of archaeological remains and historic features that relate to the use, settlement and defence of the landscape. Prehistoric ritual and defensive sites occur on sloping ground above the two rivers. An early example of the former includes the Neolithic funerary monument at Little Lodge, which is part of a larger cluster of distinctive tombs found in the area. The Usk is overlooked by a number of burial cairns and standing stones, including the Ty Illtyd Neolithic chambered long barrow. Also of note, on Llangose Lake, are the remains of a wooden defensive homestead built out in the water, known as a crannog, built in the 9th Century. It was the only example in England or Wales, until it was joined by the nearby reconstruction that forms part of today's visitor centre.

The Romans exploited and assimilated the existing Iron Age pattern of settlement, with the impressive remains of Brecon Gaer fort, west of Brecon, remaining as a potent symbol of territorial control in the landscape. This fort was built to guard the Roman road leading to west Wales, and there are a number of minor Roman roads extending from Brecon to Abergavenny, Usk, Monmouth and Chepstow as well as Sarn Helen, the arterial route running northwards from Neath (Nidum).

The Medieval period saw further exploitation of the area's fertile soils and strategic river corridors. One of the oldest settlements is Glasbury, which is a 6th century clas (early church) site, and later the site of the Battle of Claspburg in 1095 between the Welsh and the Anglo Saxons.

The area's agricultural history is much in evidence at Talgarth and Bronllys where Medieval open arable field systems utilising the fertile alluvial soils remained unenclosed until the middle of the 19th century. Elsewhere this evidence has largely been overlain by subsequent agricultural activity. The Medieval period also spawned a number of defensive features, including castles which occupied prominent positions above the rivers with long views across the vales – such as Castell-Du near Sennybridge, and at Hay, Brecon, Bronllys and Boughrood.

Today, key settlements remain concentrated at river crossing points. Hay-on-Wye and Brecon are the main towns serving the area, both of which display a long history of occupation in their street plans, castle remains and vernacular style. Hay-on-Wye is now famous for its annual Literary Festival and concentration of second hand bookshops. Brecon, the old county town of the former county of Brecknockshire, displays a distinctive Victorian architecture and a prominent cathedral (originally the 13th/14th century

Benedictine Priory Church). The town became the northern terminus for the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal in 1800.

Elsewhere, hamlets and farms are scattered in a linear pattern along watercourses or roads, linked by a winding network of narrow lanes. The agricultural richness of the area is reflected in the high number of large traditional farm buildings. The variety of building styles includes red sandstone, brick, whitewash and coloured render.

## Cultural Landscape influences

Much of the cultural essence of the area is visible in the historic landscape of a fertile, heavily defended and exploited region, but the area also has important, early cultural and literary associations. The Llangorse crannog or lake dwelling, built by Brychan the 9th century king of Brycheiniog, was an important royal and ecclesiastical centre where some of the early Welsh stanzas *Canu Llywarch Hen* could have been written. The site later became much embellished in legends. The modern day crannog that visitors see is a reconstruction. Gerald of Wales lived in Llanddew castle, when he was Archdeacon of Brecon, 1175-1203.

In more recent times, 'Kilvert Country' broadly describes the area where the Rev Francis Kilvert is known to have roamed around Hay, Clyro and Glasbury. While he ministered to the people of Radnorshire in various parishes he met many people, including ecclesiastical, gentry and ordinary folk, with Clyro being the centre for Kilvert Country. In contrast, the more flamboyant jazz musician, author, film and music critic, George Melly had his holiday home on the banks of the Usk at Scethrog.

The 21st century emphasis is now largely based on leisure activities. The area includes several popular informal leisure destinations, from Hay-on-Wye to Erwood, for browsing in bookstores, to walking and fishing, cycling or visiting the quirky Erwood Craft Centre & Gallery, a small-scale private venture centred on former railway carriages. Kilvert Country is promoted as a tourist tour embracing a church trail through and beyond the area and his parish church of St Andrew's, Bredwardine (Herefordshire).

Llangorse lake is a popular destination for water sports, while the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal is enjoying a resurgence as a leisure waterway, with the buildings around the canal basin at Brecon including a well-regarded theatre and arts centre, and whose towpath forms part of the route of *Lonlas Cymru*, the long distance north-south section of the National Cycle Network.