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Canol Sir Fynwy – disgrifiad cryno

Dyma dirwedd fryniog ar lawr gwlad lle ceir brynau, dyffrynnoedd a gorlifdiroedd. Mae'n gwrthgyferbynnu'n llwyr â thirweddau cyfagos yr ucheldir sy'n esgyn tua'r gorllewin. Mae dyffryndiroedd a ffurfiwyd gan ffawtiau a dyddodion rhewlifol yn esgor ar ddyddodion llifwaddodol ffrwythlon sy'n hollbwysig i ffyniant yr ardal wledig hon a gaiff ei ffermio. Mae Afon Wysg yn draenio rhan helaeth o'r de a'r gorllewin. Afon Mynwy ac Afon Troddi sy'n draenio'r gogledd.

Gwelir bod lonydd gwledig â gwrychoedd uchel yn cysylltu pentrefi a phentrefannau a chanddynt naws werinol arbennig mewn Hen Dywodfaen Coch a bythynnod gwyngalchog sydd â thoeau llechi. Yn y cefn gwlad agored, gellir gweld ffermdai gwyngalchog yn glir yn erbyn cefndir gwyrdd y caeau pori a'r coetiroedd.

Mae'r tawelwch hwn yn cuddio gorffennol o ymgiprys pan fu cyfres o gribddeilwyr tir pwerus yn ymladd am y ffermdir toreithiog. Cafodd caerau a chestyll eu lleoli'n strategol mewn nifer o lecynnau manteisiol, yn arbennig wrth groesfannau afonydd, fel yn Y Fenni, Brynbuga a Threfynwy. Ar ôl Diddymu'r Mynachlogydd ymddangosodd tirwedd o ystadau mawr, a daeth y rhain wedyn yn lleoliadau ar gyfer plastai a chanddynt barciau a gerddi. Mae nifer o'r rhain yn gyfan, i raddau helaeth, hyd heddiw.

Yn aml, arweiniodd cyfoeth mawr y tir at noddi'r rhai a oedd â diddordeb mewn celfyddyd a diwylliant, ac mae gan Sir Fynwy nifer o noddwyr, beirdd a chroniclwyr.

Summary description

This is a gently undulating lowland landscape of hills, valleys and floodplains. It is in great contrast to adjacent upland landscapes that rise to the west. Fault-aligned vales and glacial deposits give rise to the fertile alluvial deposits that are key to the prosperity of this rural, farmed area. The River Usk drains much of the south and west. The Monnow and Trothy drain the north.

Country lanes with high hedges link villages and hamlets that have a distinctive vernacular style in Old Red Sandstone and whitewashed cottages with slate roofs. In open country, whitewashed farmhouses stand out against the green backdrop of pastured fields and woodlands.

The tranquillity belies a contested past where the rich farmland was fought over by successions of powerful land grabbers. Forts and castles were strategically placed at many vantage points, notably at river crossings, such as at Abergavenny, Usk and Monmouth. A landscape of large estates emerged after the Dissolution of the monasteries and these subsequently became the setting for mansions with planned parks and gardens, many of which remain largely intact today.

The great wealth of the land frequently led to the patronage of those with an interest in the arts and culture and Monmouthshire has many patrons, poets and chroniclers.

Key Characteristics

Silurian mudstones and shales surrounded by a large band of earlier, Devonian Old Red Sandstone

An area of gently rolling hills, intervening valleys and the Usk flood plain.

Morainic deposits and fertile alluvial flood plains aligning with geological faults,

especially to the north. Post-glacial alluvium across the Usk flood plain.
The Usk, the main watercourse , flows south from Abergavenny and eventually becomes tidal. Rivers Trothy and Monnow in the north feed into the Wye in the adjacent character area to the east. Their alignments are influenced by geological faults .
Hedge-bound fields are mainly given to sheep grazing and dairying, with areas of arable farming on the fertile floodplain.
Woodlands and mixed plantations cover many slopes and hill tops in parts of the area.
Mixed habitats , notably mixed broadleaved woodlands containing a variety of rare tree species and are important habitats, as is the open water of the Llandegfedd Reservoir - a key site for overwintering birds.
Small nucleated hamlets and villages are scattered throughout the area, linked by a network of winding rural lanes. Medieval stone churches are characteristic of the villages.
The historic market town of Abergavenny sits on the banks of the Usk in the west of the area, against the striking backdrop of the Blorenge and Sugar Loaf Mountain.
Grosmont, Skenfrith, White, Raglan and Usk castles are distinctive monuments and witnesses to the area's contested past.
The sheltered landscape has a peaceful rural character , with any significant modern intrusion confined to the road corridors of the A40 and A 449.

Visual and Sensory profile

The area is a rural, gently undulating lowland landscape of hills, valleys and floodplains. Higher land is only encountered in the steep sided hills, valleys and scarp slopes of the Trelech plateau edge in the east, and around Graig Serrethin, a conspicuous isolated hill in the north. The wooded mosaic of the Gwehelog hills also differs, albeit more subtly from the gentle terrain of the area's wider landscape.

The principal feature is the River Usk, with its lower reaches meandering across a wide, flat floodplain. It is more open to the south where the river becomes tidal, exposing the steep-sided mud banks of the high tidal range.

The area's lush green fields are pastoral although there are arable fields on the better drained gentle slopes. Most fields are medium scale in size, bounded by well-cut hedgerows with some hedgerow trees, although field sizes and the use of wire fencing is greater in the more productive areas. Woodland is generally deciduous or mixed and tends to be concentrated on the steeper hillsides with only occasional copses in the more productive, gently sloping areas.

This tranquil area exhibits the signs of a more troubled past as border country with its numerous castles still forming visually prominent landmark features. Within the Usk valley, the Llanover estate farms large areas with its distinctive white and light blue/grey painted buildings. Clytha Park is a fine example of parkland with a house close to the river.

The principal settlement is Abergavenny, located at the gateway separating this lowland landscape from the upland landscapes to the west. It is a busy market town which has significantly expanded in the 20th century beyond its original historic core.

The other main settlements in the area are generally linked - or bypassed - by the A40 or A449, which are busy dual carriageways reducing the tranquillity of their immediate corridors, but affording some superb prospects of the area to the traveller. Views across this landscape are often enhanced by the backcloth of the Brecon Beacons and Black Mountains with their bracken clad slopes to the west. Blorenge and Sugar Loaf Mountain are both particularly prominent. Elsewhere there are quiet 'B' roads and very narrow lanes

with high, dense hedges that link small historic, nucleated villages, hamlets and scattered, but often, quite substantial farmhouses.

The villages and hamlets have a distinctive vernacular style in Old Red Sandstone and whitewashed cottages with slate roofs. In open country, whitewashed farmhouses stand out against the green backdrop of pastured fields and woodlands. Multi-coloured rendered houses are a particular feature of the larger settlements such as Usk. Modern expansion at Pontypool to the west and also at some of the smaller, historic settlements create visible distractions in this otherwise, overwhelmingly rural landscape.



Looking towards The Black Mountains (Sugar Loaf, left) from near Llanvihangel Gobion

© John Briggs



The lower Vale of Usk from the lower slopes by Wentwood Forest © John Briggs



Rolling rural landscape with lush hedgerows – looking north from near Wentwood Forest
© John Briggs



The river flood plain meadows near Usk © John Briggs



Ysgryd Fawr forms a hill landmark in northerly views from many parts of the Vale of Usk, and a westerly landmark together with the greater backdrop of The Black Mountains from the Vales of Trothy and Monnow. © John Briggs



Near Llanover Pencroesoped © John Briggs

Geological Landscape influences

The underlying geology of this area largely comprises Silurian argillaceous mudstones and shales surrounded by Old Red Sandstone from the earlier, Lower Devonian period. These rocks were later folded during the Carboniferous period, and subsequently much faulted as, for example, along the northern margin of the area, where the course of the Monnow valley between Alltyrynys and Monmouth Cap is strongly controlled by the east north east-striking Neath Disturbance, a large fault zone which probably lies above a major fracture in basement rocks deep below.

Much of the present-day landscape of the Central Monmouthshire and adjacent areas is a product of several episodes of ice-sheet glaciation that occurred during the Quaternary Period. However, most of the landforms and glacial deposits preserved in the area were produced during the last, Late Devensian glaciation which is thought to have reached its maximum extent around 20,000 years ago. During this period, ice sheets from the high ground of Central Wales and the Brecon Beacons spread eastwards across the area whilst faster-moving glacier ice occupied the Usk valley. In Central Monmouthshire, the eastern limit of this ice sheet follows a sinuous trace from Pontypool towards Raglan and north towards Llantilio Crossenny, and thence towards Llanvihangel Crucorney. The effect of this glaciation was to create a wide range of glacially-derived landforms as the glaciers and ice-sheets retreated.

Much of the area is now drained by the southward flowing Usk and its many tributaries, to create a landscape of gently rolling hills and valleys. Morainic drift and boulder clay from the retreating ice masses are found throughout the area, along with fertile river alluvium deposits within the Usk floodplain.

Landscape Habitats influences

Geology has produced mainly well-drained, coarse loamy and sandy soils surrounded by finer silty soils over the shales, silts and sandstones. The area largely consists of low-lying, gently rolling farmland with much of the land being dominated by agriculturally improved livestock-grazed grassland, bounded by hedgerows, particularly on the more fertile soils associated with the floodplains. Such has been the intensive nature of farming that the area has a relatively limited extent of semi-natural or ecologically rich habitats. However it does have many species-rich hedgerows, small woodland copses and areas of less improved grassland scattered throughout the area. As the agricultural land in this area overlies relatively well draining soils, there is a scarcity of marshy grassland/rush pasture in this landscape.

Small woodland copses and areas of more substantial woodland are present throughout the landscape, either following watercourses or clothing slopes/hill tops. There are noticeable concentrations of deciduous woodland on the Usk floodplain and along tributaries of the Monnow, as well as fairly small coniferous woodland blocks on areas of higher ground, particularly in the east of the area. The woodlands are of variable ecological note, although some, like Gaer House Woods SSSI, are of considerable importance.

The River Usk SAC and SSSI is of great ecological significance for its populations of protected fish species, otters and valuable habitats. Llandegfedd Reservoir SSSI is an extensive freshwater body important for wintering wildfowl.

Historic Landscape influences

This large area has a varied distribution of archaeological sites and monuments dating back to the prehistoric period. Strategically located Iron Age hillforts on summit tops overlook the Usk valley and accentuate the topography. The richness of the agricultural land led to successive 'colonisations' and the sequence of Roman, Early Christian, Norman and Marcher Lordship control created what could almost be regarded as self-contained buffer state between the Wye and the western uplands, and the Monnow and Wentwood.

The Medieval period had the most widespread influence on the present-day landscape through the proliferation of mediaeval castles and fortified manors. These include White, Grosmont, Skenfrith, Raglan, Usk, Abergavenny, Oldcastle and Llanvihangel Crucorney castles, Penyclawdd Court at the foot of the Black Mountains close to the entrance to the Vale of Ewias; and, in the east, Newcastle, Dingestow and Monmouth castles. Built by Marcher Lords to protect their landholdings, some remain in descendants' hands, along with the monastic landholdings acquired by the emerging Welsh gentry after the Dissolution of the monasteries in the mid-16th century.

In large tracts of the area it is possible to discern former monastic holdings from place names, for example, Trellech Grange, former granges associated with Abbey Dore (itself beyond the county boundary), Llangua Priory and Grace Dieu. The wealth of these holdings has bequeathed on the landscape very high number of historic parks and gardens, mostly distributed in the area north of the A40, and dating from various periods, though predominantly 18th and 19th centuries.

Medieval churches with distinctive stone crosses are particularly associated with this area and are widely distributed. Small villages are often centred around the area's medieval churches, many based on Early Christian clasau and llanau, in a nucleated pattern.

The key settlements of Abergavenny and Usk have early origins still manifest in the plan and topography of the towns, and in some key buildings (castle, church or priory). Both thrived during the C16th to C19th leaving each with a varied legacy of building ages and styles. Abergavenny has distinctive suburbs of later 19th and 20th century character. Grosmont also has early origins associated with a church and castle. Raglan is a significant nucleated settlement, which has expanded from its original village core with sizeable 20th century development.

Cultural Landscape influences

The area 's inherited territorial unity, born of successive and concerted 'colonisations' of its rich agricultural lands, remains the most dominant cultural influence in the present landscape, with settlements, landholdings and communications adhering to earlier patterns and distributions. Such continuity is a more English than Welsh phenomenon and in a modern context, with its close proximity to Cardiff for which many settlements have become commuter dormitories, the area would make a worthy Welsh 'Home County'.

This duality of influences is reflected in place names, with the Welsh prefix 'llan' (Llantilio, Llanfihangel, Llanddewi, Llangattock etc.) coexisting alongside a strong sprinkling of English place names (Crossway, Maypole, Cross Ash, Caggle Street, Great Campston etc.). Towards the west of the area, however, there is a discernible emphasis on place names of Welsh origins, for example, Penbidwal, Pantygelli, Pandy, Wern-gifford, Pwll Mair, which may reflect the fact that the less fertile western lands were less desirable than the more fertile and productive lands in the east where more place names are of English derivation.

The mix of cultural influences is also reflected to a degree in the extent to which Roman Catholicism survived in Monmouthshire because of the influence of leading recusant landowners, even during the Commonwealth, when many houses kept priests and fashioned their own chapels and priest-holes to hide their chaplains in emergency. The proliferation of chapels of various denominations are a more visible declaration of faith, and evidence of a cultural shift in the 17th century. The first Dissenters chapel was founded in 1639 at Llanvaches, and the oldest Baptist chapel in Wales was built at Govilon in 1695 after the first Baptist group was established in Abergavenny in 1652. The Quakers also built a meeting house at Llanvihangel-Ystum-Llywern, and the Methodists a chapel at Earlswood in 1791.

Monmouthshire is not short of associations with comparatively famous writers, beginning with Geoffrey of Monmouth, Giraldus Cambrensis and Adam of Usk in the medieval period. Many later poets, including Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Robert Southey, Walter Savage Landor, William Wordsworth, William Makepeace Thackeray and Thomas Churchyard, enthused over the beauties of the area. Indeed who with such a mind could not be inspired by the prospect of Cobblers Plain from the escarpment of Wentwood, with its scattered farms, twisting lanes, and 'timeless' rural idyll? Of the famous people associated with the area, Lord and Lady Llanover, the Beaufort family of Raglan Castle who frequently played host to King Charles I (and notably during the Civil War), and Henry V are possibly the most prominent.