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## Dyffryn Clwyd – Disgrifiad cryno

Mae'r dyffryn llydan, ffrwythlon hwn yn ymestyn o Lanelidan yn y de i Lanelwy yn y gogledd, a rhwng Bryniau Clwyd yn y dwyrain a Mynydd Hiraethog yn y gorllewin. Clwyd a'i rhagnentydd, fel Clywedog, Chwiler ac Elwy, sy'n draenio'r dyffryn. Arferai Dyffryn Clwyd â bod yn un o ytiroedd mwyaf cynhyrchiol Cymru, oherwydd ei ffrwythlondeb a'i hinsawdd gymedrol. Mae'n gyforiog, hefyd, o olygfeydd godidog, hanes, archeoleg a gwaddol o adeiladau golygus. Mae'r ardal yn cynnwys tair tref hanesyddol sef Llanelwy gyda'i chadeirlan, a Dinbych a Rhuthun a'u cestyll.

Ardal wledig ac amaethyddol yw hon, gan fwyaf, gyda'i chlytwaith cymysg o borfeydd a chaeau âr wedi'u hamgáu a gwrychoedd aeddfed, twt. Mae llawer o goed gwrychoedd ac, ym mannau, coed parciau hefyd. Y canlyniad yw tirwedd sy'n ein hatgoffa o wastadeddau ffrwythlon llawer ehangach Swydd Gaerllion yn y dwyrain.

Dyma ardal enedigol, neu gartref, enwogion fel William Morgan, a gyfieithodd y Beibl i'r Gymraeg; Syr John Salesbury, cyfaill a noddwr i William Shakespeare; Twm o'r Nant, yr anterliwtiwr; Thomas Gee, y cyhoeddwr; H. M. Stanley, yr anturiaethwr, a Kate Roberts, y nofelydd.

### Summary description

This broad, fertile valley extends from Llanelidan in the south to St Asaph in the north, is bounded by the abruptly rising Clwydian Range of hills to the east, and by the gently rising landscape of Rhos Hills to the west. It is drained by the Clwyd and its tributaries, including the Clywedog, Wheeler and Elwy. Traditionally one of the great granaries of Wales, the sheltered and comparatively mild climate of the Vale of Clwyd is also an area rich in scenic beauty, in history, in archaeology and its legacy of fine buildings. The area includes the three historic towns of St Asaph, with its cathedral, and Denbigh and Ruthin, both of which are associated with castles.

The area is largely rural and agricultural, whose patchwork of mixed pastures and arable fields are enclosed with mature and often well-managed hedgerows. There are many hedgerow trees and in places parkland trees too. It results in a landscape reminiscent of those much larger fertile lowlands further east in Cheshire.

The area is rich associations with notable people, including: William Morgan, translator of the Bible into Welsh; Sir John Salusbery, friend and patron of William Shakespeare; Twm o'r Nant the satirist; Thomas Gee, the publisher; Humphrey Llwyd the cartographer; H.M. Stanley the explorer and Kate Roberts the novelist.

Key Characteristics
<b>A broad agricultural vale</b> - between adjacent upland areas.
<b>Distinctive line of hills forming the eastern boundary</b> , also forming an upland-lowland boundary, following a geological fault line.
<b>Limestone and sandstone</b> - predominantly Permo-Triassic sandstone but localised areas of Carboniferous Limestone.
<b>Undulating fringe either side of vale</b> - being deposits of fluvio-glacial drift and till.
<b>Flood plain</b> - river alluvium marks the extents of the broad, flat floodplain..
<b>Arable and pasture, well managed hedges</b>
<b>Many hedgerow and parkland trees and some woodland blocks</b> – and of ecological importance, some Alder woodland, swamp and rush pasture and some ash-wych elm

dominated woodland.
<b>Castles and towns</b> – reflects historic strategic importance of main three towns of Denbigh and Ruthin and ecclesiastical importance of St Asaph cathedral.
<b>Rural</b> - dispersed, scattered farms, settlement confined to small villages and hamlets and the three towns.
<b>Prosperity</b> – enduring through history based on agriculture
<b>Many cultural associations with people</b> - a richness and diversity including William Morgan, the translator of the Bible into Welsh and the Victorian explorer H M Stanley.

## Visual and Sensory profile

The gentle, open bowl of the Vale of Clwyd contrasts distinctively with the steep hillsides and ridge of the adjacent Clwydian Range of hills to the east. Their line of smooth, rounded heather-clad summits forms a distinctive setting for the Vale, providing a strong sense of visual containment and separation from other lowland areas around Deeside further east. For the most part, the vale itself is rural, lowland, and a farmed landscape with a patchwork mix of arable and pasture. As with many Welsh landscapes, there is a strong field pattern formed by numerous hedgerows. Many are well managed and include numerous hedgerow trees and occasionally parkland trees, resulting in a greater sense of woodland cover than the Ordnance Survey map suggests. The pattern is revealed in panorama from the adjacent Clwydian Range.

The interplay of smaller scale fields bounded by hedgerows, watercourse trees and blocks of wet woodland creates a more intimate scale of landscape in the mid Vale area. In parts of the upper Vale a series of low but craggy limestone ridges and woodlands also creates a more intimate sense of enclosure. Fields rise up the lower slopes of the Clwydian Range, where there are many small farms and villages, and where open views across the Vale are common. The scale of the rivers in the Vale, notably the Clwyd, are comparatively small and gentle, suggesting we should view the Vale as a lowland area rather than just a river valley.

The local limestone, together with surviving black and white, half timbered buildings, interspersed with some red brick, gives the Vale a warmer and more prosperous feel than the more challenging environments to the west. Of the main towns, Ruthin and Denbigh are dominated by their castles and St Asaph by its cathedral, each of which is built on a small hill. All three towns now have areas of modern expansion extending beyond their historic cores. The A55 Expressway crosses the area near St Asaph and combined with new developments in its vicinity, this forms the least tranquil part of the area.



The River Clwyd at St. Asaph. A slow flowing river that occasionally floods the surrounding meadows. © John Briggs



Moel Fammau in the adjacent Clwydian Range, which forms the distinctive eastern backdrop for the Vale, and a visual distinction between lowland and upland character. © John Briggs



The Vale of Clwyd as seen from the Clwydian Range at Clwyd Gate, with Ruthin in the middle distance, and land rising up westwards to the Rhos Hills beyond. © John Briggs



View across the Vale of Clwyd from the Clwydian Hills at Caergwrle, towards Denbigh and the Rhos Hills beyond. © John Briggs

## Geological Landscape influences

The oldest rocks in the area are Carboniferous Limestones which outcrop at the southern end of the Vale near Graigfechan and Pwll Glas. They also occur as faulted blocks on the western side at Llanfwrog and Denbigh, and as smaller slithers on the eastern side at Llanbedr Dyffryn Clwyd, Llangwyfan, Bodfari and Tremeirchion. The limestone forms higher ground often with steep crags such as near Denbigh and at Eyarth Rocks, with limestone pavements having developed at the later site and at Graigfechan. The bedrock geology of this area, however, is dominated by Permo-Triassic sandstone, originally deposited as massive dunes in hot arid conditions some 200 million years ago. Although most of the sandstone is covered by later, Quaternary (Ice Age) deposits, exposures can be seen in various road cuttings along the Vale. The distinctive red sandstone can also be seen in the building stones used around Ruthin.

Geological faults have also played a part in the formation of the Vale's landscape. The predominantly flat valley floor is flanked by faults which have helped to create an asymmetrical valley between the steep slopes of the Clwydian Range to the east and more gentle slopes of the Denbigh Moors to the west. The eastern, Vale of Clwyd Fault, extends from the Wheeler valley in the north to Pentre Coch in the south and separates the younger, softer sandstones of the valley floor from the harder Silurian mudstones of the Clwydian Range.

During the last two million years, the area's landscape was radically re-shaped by several episodes of glaciation, with the northern end of the area forming a zone of interaction between Welsh ice and Irish Sea ice. There is evidence that the later managed to push as far south as Trefnant, where the series of low hills between Trefnant and Bodfari are thought to be remnants of morainic debris left by the Irish Sea ice sheet as it retreated. Landscape features also associated with this period include a series of fan- or lobe-shaped sand and gravel bodies present along the western side of the Vale, which may be outwash fans fed from meltwater streams draining the Clwydian Range. Elsewhere, glacial features

such as terraces with associated kettle holes, for example, on the sides of the Clywedog Gorge, make a subtle impact on the landscape.

## Landscape Habitats influences

The more productive parts of this fertile area are distinguished by large fields and well trimmed hedges. Along the course of the Clwyd, in some of the wetter areas, there are wet woodlands, swamp and rush pasture creating areas of more diversity. Llwyn SSSI, south of Denbigh is one such, where drainage is impeded and soils are mostly of peat, of interest for its alder woodland and associated swamp, mire and rush pasture. The woodland is predominantly alder, but with ash and field maple where a succession to drier conditions is occurring. There is a dense shrub layer and diverse wet woodland ground flora, including meadowsweet-wild angelica mire. The sheltered watercourses in the site afford lying-up areas for otter.

Limestone outcrops in the south of the Vale, forming a number of small brags and rocky areas. There is a notable area of limestone crags and associated calcareous grassland, heath and limestone pavement just south of Ruthin, centered around Eyarth, including the cluster of Cil y Groeslwyd SSSI sites and the Eyarth Rocks RIGS. Mixed broadleaved woodland is dominated by sessile oak, together with ash and wych elm. Yew is a conspicuous tree over much of the woodland. The ground layer within the woodland is very rich, reflecting the varied woodland structure, with bird's nest orchid and stinking hellebore. The associated limestone pavement is one of the best examples in Wales, supporting hound's tongue and fen moonwort.

Some of the landed estates are associated with woodland plantings, often in regular geometric blocks as shelterbelts and game cover, giving a generally wooded feel to an otherwise open and productive agricultural landscape.

## Historic Landscape influences

The fertility of the land has meant that the early history of the Vale has been shrouded by later land use and activity, however there are tantalising indications from recent archaeological excavations that the area was occupied during at least the Mesolithic, Bronze Age and Roman periods. In historic times, and in what had become a rich corn-growing land, the area's prosperity is reflected in some important early houses, several of which were the centres of large estates – Nantclwyd, Plas Heaton, Llanerch Hall, Brynbella and Plas Newydd, amongst others – and by the double-aisled churches for which the Vale is famous, at Ruthin, Llandyrnog, Llangynhafal, Llanfair Dyffryn Clwyd, Llanelidan and Llanynys,

Of the three towns, St Asaph is the smallest, dominated by its cathedral. The early origins of the settlement here are obscured by expansion and reconstruction in the 19th and 20th centuries. Denbigh is an important historic settlement, densely built up below the castle. Its continued importance as a regional centre is indicated in the many phases of its growth, and in its major town-houses. It also supported satellites in the form of a series of major country seats and substantial houses.

Ruthin's historic importance is marked by its urban buildings, with a long chronology from the 15th to the 19th centuries. It is the most westerly point in the United Kingdom where the concentration of half-timbered buildings can be seen to any advantage: it is the furthest reach of an architectural tradition which to the east reaches to the Pomerania region of

Central Europe. Half-timbering can also be seen in the surrounding countryside, along with houses of brick and the distinctive light stone of the Vale. There are smaller nucleated villages on the main through routes, and at the break of slope on the eastern side of the valley.

## Cultural Landscape influences

The Vale of Clwyd was described in the reign of Elizabeth I as 'The Vale that for wholsomeness, fruitfulness and pleasantness, excelleth'. Its surplus and prosperity led to a remarkable flowering of culture in this period particularly, of which the double-aisled churches are a reflection, as are the exquisite renaissance memorials of Llanfarchell near Denbigh. Bishop William Morgan (?1545-1604), who translated the Bible into Welsh, was for a while rector of Llanfarchell. The three historic towns of this region, Denbigh, Ruthin and St Asaph, were, along with the Conwy Valley, a nursery of the Reformation, where the Renaissance fused with the classical culture of Wales.

Secular culture also benefited from the Vale's wealth in this period, through the work of the merchant Richard Clough and of Humphrey Llwyd, MP for Denbigh, and cartographer, and the patronage of Sir John Salusbery of Lleweni, whose marriage to Ursula Halsall in 1586 is commemorated in Shakespeare's *The Phoenix and the Turtle*. Vale Street, Park Street and Myddle Lane at Denbigh may have been laid out by the Earl of Leicester, Elizabeth I's favourite, and a powerful figure in the Vale. Elis Pryse, his unpleasant local strong-man, was well-known for wearing his scarlet doctoral gown; until well into the 20th century his memory was so strong that naughty children were still being told that 'doctor coch' would come and get them. Ruthin's cultural heritage of late Medieval and early modern architecture is also significant as sign of the confidence and prosperity of the town.

The Vale of Clwyd is also associated with two very different literary figures of a later generation, Twm o'r Nant (1739-1810), timber haulier, stone-mason and writer of satirical interludes, who lived at Denbigh and is buried at Llanfarchell (though he is primarily associated with the adjacent Rhos Hills area to the west), and Thomas Gee, the radical publisher, who produced the *Traethodydd*, *Y Gwyddoniadur* and *Baner ac Amserau Cymru*. Gee provided the Welsh Victorian 'information revolution', as crucial in its day as digital technology and the internet in our own, and a Welsh Bible in the 16th century which gave the people of Wales the intellectual skills for an increasingly sophisticated age. Appropriately, *Gwasg Gee* was run in the 20th century by Kate Roberts (1891-1985), one of the major writers of Welsh fiction of the 20th century and a passionate Welsh nationalist. Though most of her novels and short stories are set in the slate-quarrying communities of Arfon, others describe the life of the Welsh middle class in towns such as Denbigh. A native of the area who chose not to stay at home but to travel far and wide was John Rowlands, also known as Henry Morton Stanley, soldier, explorer and author, who uttered the famous words, 'Dr Livingstone, I presume?' at Ujiji in 1871.