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Dyffryn Hafren – Disgrifiad cryno

Dyma ddyffryn afon o bwys, a phrif goridor trafniadaeth y Canolbarth ar gyfer ffyrdd, rheilffyrdd ac, ar un adeg, camlas. Mae'n cynnwys erwau breision y gorlifdir, llethrau'r

dyffryn, a threfi ymledol y Drenewydd a'r Trallwng. Ynghyd â'r ffyrdd a'r rheilffordd, mae'r trefi hyn yn ynysoedd o dwrw a phrysurdeb yng nghanol tirweddau ehangach, gwledig a chyffredinol ddistawach tua'r gogledd a'r de ohonynt. Ceir tref lai Llanidloes ymhellach i fyny'r afon, sydd gyda'r Trallwng yn nodedig eu trefluniau hanesyddol. Gellid mordwyo Hafren i fyny at y Trallwng, ac oddi yno yr allforid mwnau a phren. Bu Llanidloes a'r Drenewydd hwy ill dwy'n drefi gwehyddu pwysig yn y 19eg ganrif. Mae yn yr ardal fryngaerau, caer Rufeinig, a chestyll Cymreig ac Eingl-normanaid.

Llechfeini, cerrig clai a cherrig llaid Silwraidd yw sylfaen y fro, gyda thywodfeini Silwraidd tua phen gogleddol yr ardal hon. Lluniwyd y dyffryn eang gan rewlifoedd. Heddiw, mae llwybr dolennog Hafren, afon hwyaf Ynys Prydain, yn derbyn dyfroedd aml i afon lai o fewn yr ardal hon.

Tir pori isel, a phorfeydd brwynog gwlyb, cysylltiedig â'r afon, sydd yma fwyaf, gydag ambell i goetir llydanddail a gwlyb. Mae yma amrywiaeth helaeth o gynefinoedd adar a phlanhigion. Mae llethrau'r dyffryn yn aml yn eithaf coediog, gyda choed collddail a phlanhigfeydd conwydd, gan greu ymdeimlad o gyfyngiad.

Summary description

This is major river valley and mid-Wales transport corridor for road, rail, and once canal. The area includes the rich farmland of the flood plain as well as valley sides. It includes the expanding towns of Welshpool and Newtown. Together with the road and rail route, the these towns create localised areas of noise and activity amidst the wider, generally quiet and rural landscapes adjacent to the north and south. A further and smaller town, Llanidloes, lies further up river, which together with Welshpool are noted for their historic townscapes. Welshpool lay at the navigable head of the Severn, and exported ore and timber. Llanidloes and Newtown were both important 19th century textile towns. The area includes hill forts, a Roman fort, Welsh and Anglo-Norman castles.

The area has Silurian slate, shale and mudstone bedrock, with Silurian Sandstones evident to the northern end of the character area. The broad vale was shaped by glacial action. Today the meandering course of the River Severn, (the longest in Britain) receives waters from a number of lesser rivers within this character area.

Land cover is predominantly lowland pastoral farmland and wetland rush pasture associated with the river, and is occasionally interspersed with broadleaf and wet woodland. There is a rich diversity of avian and flora habitats. The valley sides are often well wooded, with both deciduous woodland and coniferous plantation evident, giving a sense of containment.

Key Characteristics

Major river valley – of the mature Severn within Wales, gently meandering across a flood plain, constrained by sometimes steeply rising hillsides. A number of tributaries join the Severn in this area.

Bedrock - geology is predominantly Silurian slate, shale and mudstone, with sandstones evident to the northern end of the area.

Soils – rich alluvial farmland on the flood plain with seasonally wet silty soils overlaying river alluvium. Silty soils overlaying the Silurian sandstones and seasonally wet silty soils on the shales and mudstones.

Valley floor - Lowland pastoral farm land interspersed with woodlands, also with wetland rush pasture associated with the course of the Severn. Woodlands are mainly broad-

leafed and include some wet woodland .
Valley sides - often well wooded, with both deciduous and coniferous plantation evident. A sense of containment is created by the wooded valley sides and their relationship with the adjoining upland areas.
Valley settlement pattern - Settlement pattern relates to this strategic importance with nucleated valley floor settlements having grown up around former military sites, for example, at Caersws.
Forts, castles, historic defences - include prehistoric encampments, parts of Offa's Dyke, the Roman fort complex at Caersws and a number of Medieval castles, of which Dolforwyn is a good example indicating the past strategic importance of the valley. Powys Castle by Welshpool and its extensive parklands are well known visitor attractions today.
Expanding light industrial town of Newtown – a regional hub of activity, historically enabled by the Shropshire Union Canal and the Cambrian Railway but today being a regional centre.
Tranquil rural setting versus busy roads and towns - much of the valley has an otherwise tranquil and pastoral character, although this is punctuated by the influence of the main valley floor settlements of Llanidloes, Newtown and Welshpoolm and the A470, A 483 and A 489 roads.

Visual and Sensory Profile

A long, broad, well defined river valley, whose sides are defined by the 200 metre contour, and for much of the length whose steep slopes provide a sense of containment reinforced by their wooded character. The valley was formed by glacial activity and contains both the meandering course of the Severn together with the confluence of other rivers including the Carno, Clywedog and Trannon. Indeed in the western area, around the Severn/Carno confluence, the valley opens into a gentle bowl or arena, with flat or rolling fields. Though well established with hedgerows in the main, and a number of hedgerow trees, this area forms a much more open landscape, visible from many more hills around, than the more enclosed valley downriver from Newtown. Similarly the lower reaches to the Severn in this area, near the confluence of the River Vrynwy, provides a transition zone between well defined valley and the open, lowland landscape of the Severn across the border in England.

The landscape has a patchwork character which is formed by the interplay of hedges, woodlands and farm buildings. The area includes lush lowland pasture interspersed with rush pasture on the floodplain, and some arable land, in addition to the areas of wet woodland and a network of fields bounded by hedgerows with trees. The hills in neighbouring area 18 (Shropshire Hills, part of) rise up from the valley taking the lush feel as well, notably Long Mountain valley sides. Yet unexpectedly at the mouth of the valley, where the river opens out of its contained path and into the open lowlands of England, the Breidden Hills, provide a dramatic contrast with a craggy, steep side more reminiscent of the uplands further west. Of course this provides an enticing landmark at the gateway to Wales.

The principal A483/A470 trunk roads largely follow the river plain, as does the famous Cambrian Coast Railway, and the old Shropshire and Montgomery Canal. The main roads and the two principle towns, Welshpool and Newtown, erode tranquillity and spread into the valley locally, but the overriding character and qualities for much of the Severn Valley remain as being rural and relatively unspoilt.



Above and below: the Severn Valley up river from Welshpool, showing the Powys Castle estate (and below the castle itself) from which key views across the area are famed.

© John Briggs



From the Severn Valley looking across to the slopes of Long Mountain, which define and enclose the area around Welshpool. © John Briggs



The lowland course of the meandering River Sever, near Buttington © John Briggs



Looking north towards Y Berwyn across the Sever / Vyrnwy confluence near Buttington.

© John Briggs



Showing new business park development on the outskirts of Welshpool, and the very mature, lush, green traditional landscape of pastures and hedgerows with trees. © John Briggs



Leighton church spire forms a prominent local landmark near Welshpool © John Briggs



The broad Severn / Vyrnwy confluence and extensive flood plain, looking north from Garreg Bank © John Briggs

Geological Landscape influences

The bedrock geology of the Severn Valley is dominated by NE-striking Ordovician and Silurian rocks which record an interval in the evolution of part of the Lower Palaeozoic Welsh Basin between about 455-420 million years ago. The oldest rocks are of Upper Ordovician (Caradoc Series) age, and these crop out in a belt extending southwards from the Breidden Hills towards the Forden area. In the former, mudstones have been intruded by a large, erosion-resistant body of dolerite, known to be at least 260m thick, which occupies much of the summit region of Breidden Hill. Many of these hard igneous lithologies have been exploited for rock, for example in the quarries at Criggion, Trewern, Middletown and Moel y Gofa. Elsewhere in the Severn Valley, the Ordovician strata are unconformably overlain by a succession of Silurian mudstone and siltstone formations which range in age from Llandovery to Ludlow. On and around the high ground of Long Mountain, various mudstone-dominated formations of Upper Silurian (Ludlow Series) age are preserved in the NE-trending Long Mountain Syncline.

The Severn Valley landscape has been strongly influenced by several phases of ice-sheet glaciations during the Quaternary Period, around 2.6 million years ago. The glacial landforms and deposits within the area are attributed to the last, Late Devensian glaciation, which reached its acme about 20,000 years ago, when much of the area was overrun by an ice sheet emanating from the Cambrian Mountains. During this phase the Severn Valley was occupied by faster-moving glacier ice which excavated an impressive, broad, U-shaped valley.

This reach is extremely important, as one of the most intensively studied river systems in Europe, and has been selected as a Geological Conservation Review (GCR) site. In addition to river terraces, the modern river displays a wide range of fluvial landforms including a braided reach, palaeochannels, gravel bars and meander loops which reflect the locally high degree of channel mobility. In contrast, the reach between Pool Quay and

Llandrinio is particularly stable, the channel having entrenched up to 6m into its floodplain, and exhibits a spectacular multi-looped meander, known as the 'Roundabout'.

Landscape Habitats influences

The Severn meanders through this valley in a series of wide and sinuous curves, increasing in complexity downstream. The valley forms the floodplain, and the river is extremely liable to flood, regularly creating in winter large areas of flooded agricultural land, especially around and downstream of Welshpool.

Alongside the Severn for much of its length runs the Montgomery Canal, supporting aquatic, emergent and marginal plant communities of exceptional richness, including many species of pondweeds and duckweeds. The richness is because of the water chemistry, the slow moving nature of the water, and its, as yet undeveloped, nature for recreational use. The canal is protected as SSSI throughout its course in Wales.

The valley contains many interesting and varied habitats, associated with the river. including braided river habitats, as well as oxbows and cut-off sections of river created where the river has changed its course over the years, and forming interesting and valuable wetland and bog habitats. East of Newtown, Pwll Penarth is a series of lagoons adjacent to the Severn, formerly sewage works settling lagoons, now a Montgomery Wildlife Trust Reserve, with a diverse population of waterfowl and wading birds. Dolydd Hafren is another MWT Reserve in a braided and cut-off part of the Severn channel near Forden, creating an ever-changing series of wetland habitats, recently home to a number of spoonbills. Gungrog Flash near Welshpool is a transitional fen community, consisting of a small lake surrounded by species-rich marsh, containing the rare water violet. Granllyn pool near Guilsfield contains two water bodies in a glacial kettle hole, of interest for the largest known population of great crested newts in Montgomeryshire.

The valley of the Severn is limited to permanent pasture because of the high flood risk. Some of the woodland on the steeper valley sides is very diverse. Mochdre Dingles, formed in very steep ravines along the Hafod and Cwm y rhiwdre Brooks is an outstanding example of mixed deciduous woodland, dominated by sessile oak, with important populations of wych elm and field maple. There is a well-developed hazel shrub layer, and very diverse ground flora. Coedydd Llawr y Glyn, in the upper valley of the Afon Trannon, joining the Severn at Caersws, is a similar example of an outstanding sessile oak woodland, with a well-developed moss carpet ground flora, and many interesting lichens on the larger trees. Both woodlands contain a wide variety of woodland birds, including birds of prey, woodpeckers, pied flycatcher, redstart and wood warbler. There are some examples of veteran trees in the valley landscape, creating both interesting habitats and important visual and historical features in the landscape.

Historic Landscape influences

Welshpool and Newtown are both early towns, though the early origins of Welshpool are more easily detected in its surviving burgage structure and in its early buildings. Newtown is remarkable for the succession of new initiatives which justify its name - the medieval foundation, the early 19th century planned textile town of Pen y gloddfa, and the post-war new town development. Llanidloes also has early origins as a planned town. Some older buildings survive, but the town bears testament to its renewed importance in the 19th century, linked to the woollen industry. The prosperity of the valley is attested by its many early buildings and demesnes, several of which, consolidated by the 19th century, exerted

a considerable influence on the agricultural landscape and settlement pattern – notably Powis, Vaynor and Plas Dinam.

For some of its length, the river valley was also the corridor for the Montgomeryshire Canal and the railway. The former had a marked influence on the growth patterns of Welshpool and Newtown, and has its own distinctive canal-side settlements. The railway was also a significant factor in the pattern of settlement – the later 19th century growth of what was originally a Roman fort at Caersws is testimony to it.

Throughout the area, vernacular buildings survive in unbroken sequence from the 16th century; the use of materials shows a rough chronological development, in which timber-framing was superseded by brick, and in some areas, stone.

Cultural Landscape influences

This is where the English culture and character of the lower Severn valley reaches into Wales. It is both a contested area – witnessed in its forts and castles – and a place of trade and exchange, above all at the ‘Welsh pool’ at the head of the navigable river. As the Medieval settlements of Newtown and Llanidloes evolved into centres of textile production, the one became known as ‘the ‘Manchester of Wales’, and the other became famous for its Chartists. One famous local entrepreneur, David Davies, embodies the changes that took place in industrializing Victorian Wales. By developing the South Wales coal industry and its dock and rail network, the former ‘top sawyer’ of Llandinam could rub shoulders with the likes of the Earl of Powys. Another, better-known, business-person was Laura Ashley, whose firm was based in Carno and in Newtown, and whose empire remains an internationally-recognised brand. Well-known in Wales for many years was the bard Ceiriog, the Caersws station-master.

Others from this area achieved fame far from home in different ways. Robert Owen of Newtown, pioneer of Socialism and of the Co-operative Movement, with his planned ideal settlements at New Lanark and in Indiana, is the most famous. From Berriew (Aberriw) came Thomas Jones, evangelist of the Khasi hills, the Bryniau Khasia, in Bangladesh, where there are now more Calvinistic Methodists than in Wales.



The lower Severn Valley as it opens out into the Severn Vyrnwy confluence, near Buttington. © John Briggs