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Dyffrynnoedd Irfon ac Ithon – Disgrifiad cryno

Dyma ddyffrynnoedd isel, tonnog yng nghanol y brynau. Gwy yw'r brif afon, sy'n cyrraedd ac yn gadael y fro trwy ddyffrynnoedd culach o lawr. Rhagnentydd iddi yw Irfon ac Ithon, sydd a'u dyffrynnoedd llawr gwlad yn diffinio hyd a lled yr ardal nodweddedd hon. Mae coedlannau'n gyffredin, yn bennaf yma ac acw hyd lethrau'r dyffrynnoedd ac ar hyd rhagnentydd. Mae hon yn dirwedd donnog amgaeddig o borfeydd gwartheg a defaid, gyda chlytwaith o gaeau bychain rhwng gwrychoedd drain gwynion a choed clawdd aeddfed.

Y mae'n ardal wledig gydag aneddiadau bychain. Â rheilffordd Calon Cymru trwyddi, o'r gogledd-ddwyrain i'r de-orllewin, ar hyd dyffrynnoedd Ithon ac Irfon, gyda rhai

gorsafoedd lleol iawn. Mewn gwrthgyferbyniad, mae'r ffyrdd yn arwain at Lanfair ym Muallt, cartref y Sioe Frenhinol fawr, flynyddol, boblogaidd, uchafbwynt y flwyddyn amaethyddol yng Nghymru, ac adeg bryd y mae'r ardal ehangach yn brysur tu hwnt.

Bu'r ardal yn enwog ei threfi ffynhonnau, ar un adeg, a'r enwocaf fu Llanfair ym Muallt, Llandrindod a Llanwrtyd. Mae'r i bob un ei chymeriad unigryw: Llandrindod yn neilltuol, am ei rhesi tai brics cochion, chwaethus, a'i pharciau trefol. Yn y degawdau diweddar mae Llanwrtyd, y lleiaf o'r tair hyn, wedi ennill poblogrwydd yn sgil chwaraeon awyr agored, gan gynnwys Cors-snorclo, Beicio Mynydd a'r ras 24 milltir Dyn-yn-erbyn-Ceffyl.

Summary description

This is an undulating lowland vale entirely surrounded by upland areas. The main river is the Wye, which enters and leaves the area in much narrower valleys. The tributary rivers, whose lowland vales define the extent of this character area, are the Irfon and Ithon. Woodlands are common, mostly small blocks along the valley sides and along tributaries. This is an enclosed, rolling landscape of pasture and sheep grazing with a patchwork of small fields enclosed by hawthorn hedges and mature hedgerow trees.

This is a rural area with small settlements. The Heart of Wales railway passes through, NE-SW, along the Ithon and Irfon vales, with very local stations. In contrast the roads focus on Builth Wells, the home of the very large and popular annual Royal Welsh Show, the highlight of Welsh agricultural calendars, during which the greater hinterland becomes extremely busy.

The area was known historically for its Spa towns, the three best-known being Builth Wells, Llandindrod Wells and Llanwrtyd Wells. Each has a distinctive character, Llandindrod notably for its elegant red-brick terraced houses and town parks, and in recent decades Llanwrtyd (the smallest of these three) has become popular through outdoor sports including Bog-Snorkelling, Mountain Biking and a 24-mile Man-versus-Horse race.

Key Characteristics
Undulating lowland vale surrounded by adjacent upland areas - Silurian shales, siltstones and mudstones, with a band of older, Ordovician shales of the Llanvirn Series to the west, shaped by a south east flowing glacier, alluvial deposits found along the Wye.
Crossed by the gently flowing River Wye –flowing into the area from the north-west and out in the south-east. Joined by tributaries flowing along the vale, the Rivers Ithon and Irfon. Alluvial deposits associated. The A470 road also crosses following the Wye.
Some blocks of coniferous forestry.
Patchwork of medium sized, regular fields – pastures with sheep and dairy
Thick hawthorn hedges and hedgerow trees.
Riparian (riverside) habitats , including the River Ithon - valued for key wetland habitats and species e.g. submerged aquatic plants, fringing woodland and populations of otter.
Archaeology - Roman fort at Castell Collen, the Roman marching camps on Llandrindod Common and prehistoric ritual monuments.
Spa towns - The area is famous for its spa towns, which first developed in the late 18th century. Llanwrtyd, Llandrindod and Builth Wells are the largest settlements.
Smaller villages and hamlets - located at river crossing points or along transport routes.
Rural, inland, sheltered, quiet - reasonably tranquil away from main roads and towns, with views to the surrounding remote uplands which frame the area.
Royal Welsh Show – Wales's national agricultural show is held at Builth Wells.

Visual and Sensory Profile

The area has gentle rolling countryside around the vales of the Wye and its tributaries of the Ithon to the north and the Irfon to the south. It is a spacious basin of rolling hills and valleys with small to medium-sized and often irregularly shaped pastures. In a few places fields there are arable fields, reinforcing the lowland feel. Yet being inland spring can be later than with coastal counterparts and at certain stages before trees are fully in leaf the comparative effect can be noticeable. Nevertheless, large hedges numerous hedgerow trees and mixed woodlands give the area a lush and sheltered feel in summer.

A particular feature of the area are the rivers, whose winding courses, are in broad shallow valleys, often away from public access and are often lined by trees or strips of woodland on the steeper valley sides, for example as seen in the Newbridge-on-Wye area with the Rivers Wye and Ithon. The area contrasts with its enclosing upland backdrop, which is visible in most places and is noticeable at field gates and brows of hills, where these higher hills frame the area.

The area is also generally very quiet, except for main roads, the settlements and countryside events, notably the Royal Welsh Show at Builth Wells. During the Show the rising rural landscape setting offers an appropriate as well as an appealing backdrop for the showground. Getting to Builth Wells brings many visitors to the area and during the Show, in July each year, nearby hillsides and fields, sometimes a couple of miles distant, can become overspill car or caravan parks. The area is one of those passed through on the long north-south Wales journey on the A470 road, as it follows the Wye Valley. The more enclosed and spectacular upland sections both up and down river from this area are likely to be remembered more vividly.



Newbridge-on-Wye, and the Wye and Ithin rivers, showing hedgerows and strips of woodland in association. Note also the wider pattern of irregularly shaped fields, woodland copses and hedgerow trees. © Getmapping



Looking into the Cambrian Mountains from the village of Beulah © John Briggs



River Irfon, Llangannarch Wells © John Briggs



General countryside setting near Builth Wells. © Bronwen Thomas



From gold course near Builth Wells, looking across the area and showing Epynt rising to the south (left). © Bronwen Thomas

Geological Landscape influences

The bedrock geology of this character area is defined primarily by Silurian shales, siltstones and mudstones from the Llandovery Series. A smaller band of older dark-grey Llanvirn shales from the Ordovician System is exposed in the northwest. These rocks were carved and scoured by the south-east movement of ice during the last Ice Age to create a 'basin' comprising gently undulating river valley plain and hill landscape between 150 and 330m AOD, framed by the upland landscapes of the Cambrian Mountains to the west, Radnorshire Uplands to the north and east, and the Epynt plateau to the south. The course of the River Wye and its tributaries are defining features – alluvial deposits are present alongside the course of the Wye north of Builth Wells.

The underlying rocks give rise to fine silty and clayey soils that are waterlogged in places, particularly on the lower slopes and floodplain areas; whilst in the western part of the character area the fine soils are well drained and shallow.

The area comprises an NE-trending tract of undulating, generally low-lying ground, transected by the River Wye and two of its major tributaries, namely the Afon Irfon and Afon Ithon. To the north of the area lies the dissected upland plateau of the Cambrian Mountains, to the south is the steep escarpment of Mynydd Epynt and to the east lies hilly ground forming the southern part of Radnorshire Hills.

Today, the main rivers and their tributaries follow an entrenched, meandering course, locally flowing through shallow gorges flanked by narrow and discontinuous tracts of alluvium. In addition to the terraces and meander belts, a wide range of fluvial landforms is present including abandoned paleochannels and bars.

Landscape Habitats influences

The landscape is a rolling and undulating patchwork of small fields, enclosed by hawthorn hedges and mature hedgerow trees, largely used for pasture and sheep grazing. There is largely improved land in the valley floor, woodlands on the steeper slopes and semi-natural pastures on some of the hill tops. Many traditional agricultural practices have been maintained, leading to the survival of many interesting and diverse hay meadows, now protected under agri-environment agreements. Because of the high rainfall, upland hay meadows are not cut until late in the summer, well into July, meaning that key hay meadow plants are able to flower and set seed before cutting.

Much of the grassland is wet and difficult to work, and good examples of wet meadows have survived, now protected as SSSI. Tyncoed Pasture is an area of fen-meadow, dominated by purple moor-grass, but with an important grassland flora including whorled caraway, a declining species internationally but common in parts of Wales. Other remnants of a formerly more common semi-natural vegetation have survived in wet hollows. Aberithon and Bedw Turbaries are basin mires at the mouth of the Ithon river, cut for peat until around 50 years ago, now partially flooded and supporting a range of vegetation from open water to willow carr. The diverse wetland flora includes uncommon species such as lesser bladderwort and bogbean, with a lichen flora known from only a few similar sites in England and Wales. Cors y Llyn, another basin mire, contains one of the finest examples of a floating raft of vegetation over a former lake surface in Britain. It supports a range of vegetation types from wet heath and mire through dry heath and acid grassland to willow carr. The rivers themselves form key habitats. The Wye, Irfon and Ithon are all protected as SSSI and SAC, and are home to important populations of otter, Atlantic salmon and specialised aquatic plants such as water crowfoot.

Woodland is a common feature, mostly small blocks along the valley sides of the rivers and tributaries. The Ithon Valley woods is a good example of semi-natural mixed broadleaved ancient woodland, predominantly sessile oak, but with a diverse and rich woodland tree and ground flora, including uncommon species such as broad-leaved helleborine and, by the river, water avens. There are small blocks of coniferous woodland, with the Garth Bank forest providing one of the more prominent examples.

There are areas of semi-natural habitat remaining on higher ground. Dol y Fan hill at 380m is the highest point, with bracken and gorse clad pasture on the steeper slopes where agricultural improvements have been less successful.

Llanelwedd Rocks is an area of natural outcrop and old quarry exposure near Builth Wells, that has developed an unusual and very diverse steppe-heath habitat, characterised by unusual and uncommon plant species such as maiden pink and annual knawel. It also supports a diverse butterfly population, including the grayling, now very rare in Mid-Wales.

Historic Landscape influences

The three spa towns are key settlements. Builth has its origins in Roman times, and was later fortified by Philip de Braose, a Norman Lord, who built a timber motte and bailey at a crossing point of the river Wye. Edward I replaced this with a stone castle in 1277 and, although both have long since all but disappeared, a small market town grew up in their shadow. Legend has it that during the Black Death, people outside the town left food on the banks of a stream, whilst the inhabitants threw money to pay for it. To this day, the stream is called 'The Money Brook'. Most of the building stock dates from the 19th century, the town having been rebuilt previously after a fire in 1691.

Llanwrtyd Wells, said to be the smallest town in Britain, spreads itself out in a wide valley. It became a watering place in the late 18th century and, although the wells have long since closed, there are still small hotels and chapels of the period. The other spa towns are now quiet for most of the year but Llanwrtyd Wells is better known today for its annual World Bog-Snorkelling Championships and other outdoor pursuits that take place in the hills.

The healing properties of the many saline, chalybeate and sulphur wells have been known for many centuries. Although the memory of the numerous spas lives on, most of them are now sadly derelict and the sites all but forgotten. They therefore play hardly any part in today's landscape although it is possible to come across small enterprises rotting away in hidden corners, both within this area and beyond in the Radnorshire Hills and the Wye valley. Other spas remain the exclusive property of country hotels.

Llandrindod Wells and Llanwrtyd Wells are late C19th, the former in particular is a very good example of a resort town which grew very rapidly at this time, almost entirely in distinctive red brick, in contrast to the greater mix of materials which characterise both Builth and the surrounding settlements. The legacy of the heyday of the spas remains most apparent at Llandrindod Wells. Red-brick and wrought-iron mansions and terraces are laid out with manicured public gardens. It was designed with wealthy invalids in mind and built to be elegant, but in reality is incongruously urban in its rural setting.

The area includes two major routes, the A470 and A 483, which have also influenced the location and nature of settlement. At Builth Wells, where the A470 and A483 cross, the Royal Welsh Showground is especially busy for a week each August when it becomes the social focus for rural Wales and there is a much business and activity with agricultural and visitor traffic converging from all directions. The Heart of Wales railway that brought so many visitors in late Victorian times still runs through, linking between the south west of Wales and the English Midlands.

Cultural Landscape influences

The area has a particularly strong link with the final death throes of Welsh independence. In the village of Cilmeri there stands an eloquent and evocative monument to Llywelyn ap Gruffydd (Llywelyn the Last), killed here in 1282. Accounts of his death are confused, though some accounts say that he was betrayed by the townspeople of Builth, who turned him from their gates, leaving him to be captured at Cilmeri, four miles away. Even into the 20th century, a nickname for the people of Builth was bradwyr Buallt ('Builth traitors'), and it is perhaps to lay this part of their history at rest that there is now, in the centre of the town, a recently completed 1000 feet square mural depicting the last days of Llywelyn.

The area's tourist trade grew from the discovery of saline and sulphur health springs – according to tradition it was the rector of Llangammarch, Theophilus Evans, who first made the discovery, thereby curing himself of scurvy. Evans was the author of *Drych y Prif Oesoedd*, a glorification of the Welsh nation, and defender of the Anglican church; by refusing to recommend his curate William Williams Pantycelyn for ordination to the priesthood he drove the young man to the Methodists and perhaps to his fame as hymn-writer. A more secular song is the rugby club favourite, *Sospan fach* (little saucepan), composed by Llanelli tinsplate-workers on holiday in Llanwrtyd Wells, where at one time weekly eisteddfodau were organised.