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## Dyffryn Gwy a Choed Gwent – disgrifiad cryno

Yma ceir ceunant afon mwyaf a hwyaf Cymru. Cydnabuwyd ei dirwedd brydferth, ddarluniadwy ers canrifoedd, gan (ymhlith eraill) artistiaid fel Gilpin a Turner. Heddiw rheolir yr ardal megis Ardal o Brydferthwch Naturiol Eithriadol, ynghyd â rhannau eraill o'r ceunant ar ochr Lloegr i'r ffin, sy'n mynd trwy'r Ardal Cymeriad.

Ynghyd â Choed Gwent cyfagos, yn ne-ddwyrain y fro, a Choed y Ddena yn Lloegr tua'r dwyrain. Mae'r ardal yn enwog ei choedwigoedd eang, sy'n denu ymwelwyr sydd am gerdded yn y coed a mwynhau'r golygfeydd trawiadol. Mae gweithgareddau awyr agored

yn boblogaidd, fel y mae gyrru drwy'r dirwedd brydferth, teithiau cychod, a llwybrau beicio ar hyd y ceunant. Mae'r ardal o fewn cyrraedd cyfleus trefi a dinasoedd cyfagos, fel Caerdydd a Bryste. Mae nifer sylweddol y coedlannau collddail o werth ecolegol mawr, ac y mae Gwy ei hun hefyd o bwys ecolegol mawr. Mae grym y llanw'n ymestyn i fyny'r ceunant am sawl milltir, ac o ganlyniad ceir glannau mwdlyd, serth, nodweddiadol.

Mae tywodfeini a tharenni gwahanredol, sy'n gogwyddo tua'r de-ddwyrain, yn diffinio'r ardal, ond yn de mae carreg galch yn arddangos hafn gul dolennau eang yr afon, gyda chlogwyni dramatig uwchlaw Cas-gwent.

Yn ddiwylliannol, mae Gwy, o Drefynwy i Gas-gwent, wedi dwyn cryn fudd dros amser. Trafnidiaeth gychod; coredau dal pysgod; ysbrydoliaeth ar gyfer cysyniad Gilpin o'r "Pictwresg" a barddoniaeth Ramantaidd Wordsworth; y ffin wladol â Lloegr; sawl tirwedd a pharc cynlluniedig, ysblennydd; ac ased hamddena ar gyfer genweirio a chanwïo. Darparodd y ceunant lwybr de-gogledd cyfleus ar gyfer ffyrdd a rheilffyrdd, hefyd.

Ar glogwyni uchel Cas-gwent y codwyd castell Carreg Normanaidd cyntaf Cymru, ac ychydig uwchlaw dewiswyd rhimyn o orlifdir gan y Sistersiaid ar gyfer eu habaty neilltuedig yn Nhyndyrn. Darparodd yr afon fodd allforio eu gwlan a'u hŷd i lawr i borthladd Cas-gwent, a fferi ar eu daliadau ehangach yn Fforest y Ddena.

Mae Coed Gwent, i'r gorllewin o geunant Gwy, yn darren amlwg, a cheir yno bant a elwir "Cobblers Plain", hefyd. Er â llawer o'r un nodweddion â cheunant Gwy, ceir i'r de o Goed Gwent gyltwaith o aneddiadau bychain a fu â diwydiant malu ffyniannus.

## Summary description

The area contains the largest and longest river gorge in Wales. It's beautiful, picturesque scenery has been recognised for hundreds of years, including by artists such as Gilpin and Turner. Today the area is managed as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty together with other parts of the gorge on the English side of the border, whose line cuts through the character area.

Together with the adjacent Wentwood forest in the south-west of the area and the Forest of Dean in England to the east, the region is widely known for its extensive woodland cover, and draws in visitors for scenic woodland walks with picturesque vistas. Outdoor pursuits are popular, as are scenic drives, boat rides, and cycle rides along the gorge. It is conveniently reached from nearby towns and cities such as Cardiff and Bristol. The considerable numbers of deciduous woodland areas are of high ecological value and the River Wye itself is also very important ecologically. Its tidal range extends up the gorge for a number of miles and results in characteristic steeply sloping mud banks.

Sandstones and distinctive SE-inclined escarpments define the area but give way to limestone in the southern reaches, exposing with the incision of the widely meandering river gorge with dramatic cliffs above Chepstow.

Culturally, the Wye from Monmouth to Chepstow has provided a number of benefits over time: boat transport, weirs for fish traps, inspiration for Gilpin's concept of the Picturesque and Wordsworth's Romantic verse, territorial boundary with England, setting for a number of splendid designed landscapes and parks, a leisure asset, rod-fishing and canoeing. The gorge also provided a convenient alignment for north-south road and rail lines.

The high cliffs at Chepstow became the setting of the first Norman, stone-built castle, while upstream a narrow flood plain was chosen by the Cistercians for their secluded abbey at Tintern. The river provided the means for their wool and corn exports downstream to the port of Chepstow, and a ferry to their larger holdings in the Forest of Dean.

Wentwood, to the west of the Wye gorge presents a prominent escarpment together with the enclosed bowl known as Cobblers Plain. Although it shares many characteristics with the land cover of the Wye gorge, it is different in that the area south of Wentwood contains a patchwork of small settlements that arose historically around a milling industry.

Key Characteristics
<b>Geology</b> – defines the area, with Devonian sandstones and Carboniferous Limestone; the latter forming the dramatic gorge.
<b>The deeply incised river gorge</b> - meandering course of the Wye initially formed when the river flowed in an area of low relief, however, falling sea levels during the Quaternary period caused its channel to become 'fossilised' and incised into a gorge.
<b>The Wye Valley woodlands</b> - cover much of the valley sides are protected because of the diversity of native and rare tree species, making the area one of the most important sites for woodland nature conservation in Britain.
<b>Sheep and dairy pasture</b> – is the main agricultural use, but with some cereal cropping on more fertile and better drained soils.
<b>Large conifer blocks</b> - characterise the higher ground in the west (Wentwood).
<b>Fields are mainly enclosed by hedgerows</b> - and are a combination of regular Parliamentary Enclosures on higher ground and earlier, irregular fields on slopes.
<b>This border area has a rich archaeological heritage</b> - including prehistoric funerary and defensive sites, the 12th century Cistercian abbey at Tintern, and remains from 16th to 19th centuries iron smelting industries.
<b>Hamlets and villages are located in the valleys</b> -along roads or the Wye. The principal settlements serving the area are the historic towns of Chepstow and Monmouth.
<b>The spectacular scenery of the Wye gorge</b> - has long inspired visitors, artists and writers, including William Gilpin, the 18th century progenitor of the Picturesque movement.
<b>The area largely retains its rural and tranquil character</b> - although town and settlement edge expansion detracts from this in places.
<b>Long views are afforded from the higher ground</b> , where possible (due to woodland cover) and forested slopes act as a backcloth to the levels to the south.

## Visual and Sensory profile

This dramatic wooded mosaic, hill and valley landscape forms a highly distinctive, rural, south eastern edge to Wales. It falls neatly into three parts: the Wye valley and gorge as the best known and most distinctive; the forested plateau and hills above, and the agricultural lowlands and Wentwood to the south west. The Wye in its lower reaches is remarkable as it winds its sinuous course through a narrow, steep sided valley which then dramatically reconfigures into a spectacular limestone gorge to the south.

This drama is emphasised by the highly wooded nature of the valley sides, which provide additional enclosure and height. Superb vistas are possible both along and into the valley, with the occasional small, lush green hedged pasture in the valley floor contrasting with the textured valley sides and the deceptively smooth surface of the deep and powerful Wye.

The scenic attraction of the valley is further enhanced by the historic settlements which lie along its course, most notably, Tintern Abbey. At Chepstow, the castle occupies a dominant position overlooking the tidal river, while the historic town bridge with its white-painted ironwork, is also a distinctive feature 'shoe-horned' by topography, the A466 winds its way along the valley crossing the river at a number of points, but not significantly diminishing its tranquillity. Monmouth presents as a fine historic market town with its notably wide high street and castle, however, the busy A40 has severed its historic relationship with the Wye, while commercial and housing expansion further detract in places.

To the west and north west, the undulating hills of the Trellech plateau are enclosed by large areas of primarily coniferous plantations, although these are mixed with deciduous trees in places. Small-scale, pastoral fields with dense hedges and hedgerow trees appear to be carved out of these larger wooded areas and often are associated with small dispersed settlements and farmsteads.

To the south west, the extensive forestry plantations at Wentwood and Chepstow Park Woods cover and dominate the high points and form a strong backcloth to the lower areas to the south. They are also highly visible to westbound travellers on the Severn Bridges, signalling a distinct change in character from the gentler landscapes of England. Wide views are also possible from certain points in the forests although, generally, the maturing trees give a strong sense of enclosure to visitors, who use the area for informal recreation. There are limited felling programmes to open up views again.

To the south lies the agricultural landscape of the lowlands. The lower sandstone foot hills and valleys have small, nucleated historic settlements linked by narrow lanes. There is some modern housing, but most retain their original character. Fields are medium-scale lush, enclosed landscape with mature hedges with hedgerow trees and small woodlands. There are a few small, former commons of rough grassland and bracken, which provide additional texture and character to some of the hillsides, Gray Hill being a particularly distinctive example. Views to the south across the Severn estuary are still possible in places.

Further south still, very gently undulating limestone lowlands are dominated by arable farmland with woodland belts and historic settlements along the A48, originally the line of the Roman road to Caerleon just outside the area. Modern settlement expansion is again in evidence, but with less detriment to original character in the northern areas furthest away from the Severn crossing. The M4 and M48 to the south create a noisy southern edge to the area, but their impact is reduced by land form and vegetation.



River Wye at Monmouth © John Briggs



Iconic image of Tintern Abbey, set in a sheltered location in the gorge. © John Briggs



The wide meanders of the lower gorge, with limestone cliffs from Eagles Nest. © John Briggs



Chepstow Castle, set on a defensive position on limestone cliffs overlooking the steep muddy banks of the Wye estuary. © John Briggs



Woods west near Chepstow race course and long views out across the Severn Estuary © John Briggs



The area of Cobblers Plain, looking south from Llanvair Discoed © John Briggs



Wentwood Reservoir with characteristic wooded ridges of the Wentwood Forest © John Briggs



Dominant woodland cover with a small patchwork of pastures, Wye Valley © John Briggs



River Wye and linear settlement along the valley road, Tinterm Parva. © John Briggs

## Geological Landscape influences

The area is dominated by the lowermost reach of the River Wye, the fifth longest river in Britain, which becomes confluent with the River Severn at Chepstow. In the northern part of the area the ground rises up to elevations of 306m on the Trellech Plateau at Beacon Hill and lower elevations on Gaer Fawr north of St Arvans; farther south on the gently undulating hills and ridges of the Gwent Border Hills in Chepstow Park Wood and nearby on Gaer Hill, whilst in Wentwood the ground reaches elevations of up to 309m. The Wye is confluent with several eastward-flowing tributaries, including the River Trothy, whilst the ground north of the M4 is cut by southward-flowing streams, many of which drain towards the Gwent Levels.

The bedrock geology is dominated by rocks ranging from Lower Devonian to Lower Carboniferous and record sedimentation in both terrestrial and marine environments. Dark

red and grey sandstones of the Lower Devonian Brownstones Formation rest conformably on an underlying sequence of sandstones and marls and form an escarpment which extends north-eastwards from Cat's Ash to Monmouth. These deposits form the bedrock of Wentwood and Trellech Plateau, and are unconformably overlain by red and yellow sandstones and conglomerates of the Upper Devonian Tintern Sandstone Group. This group crops out from Penallt in the north, to the vicinity of Chapel Hill in the south and underlies the right bank plateau through which the Wye is cut, including the high ground at Beacon Hill. The Carboniferous Limestone conformably overlies the Upper Devonian sandstones and forms a second escarpment which extends north-east from east of Parc Seymour to St Arvans. An isolated outlier of Lower Limestone Shales is preserved in the hangingwall of a fault north-east of Hoop. The Carboniferous sequence comprises a range of different lithologies including shale, sandstone, oolitic limestone and dolomite, the latter having been extensively quarried in the area.

The geological structure of the area is relatively simple. Sequences that form the escarpments are mainly inclined gently towards the south-east at between 5-20°, except in the vicinity of some faults where anomalous dips occur. South of Monmouth the Devonian succession is cut by a network of dominantly NW- and WNW-striking faults. In the south-west, the eastern flank of Wentwood is defined by the N-striking Llanvair Fault which can be traced southwards into the Carboniferous sequence east of Llanvaches. Elsewhere along the Carboniferous outcrop fault orientations are very variable, ranging from E-W, to NW-SE and NE-SW.

Between Monmouth and Chepstow, the modern River Wye occupies a spectacular, deeply-incised meandering gorge. A remarkable feature of the reach is that although the gorge is entrenched to a depth of up to 200m, its meandering course displays no relationship to the geological structure, although it is likely that incision was enhanced by joint systems in the Palaeozoic bedrock. Impressive examples of tight loops occur at Chepstow, east of St Arvans and at Tintern, although perhaps the best known is at Symonds Yat, just beyond the northern limit of the area. It is believed that the River Wye was originally a mature stream which meandered over a wide floodplain but that a combination of sea level fall during intervals of Quaternary glaciation and crustal uplift caused episodes of prolonged channel down-cutting. Phases in the evolution of the gorge are recorded by four river terraces, the highest being at elevations of between 50-55m, and the presence of two abandoned, high level meanders on the left flank at Newland and Bigsweir. The rapidity with which the down-cutting occurred, as well as its relatively recent age, is reflected by the sharpness of the gorge sides. Finally, the presence of a buried channel, the base of which lies at a depth of about 20m below sea level, has been proven by boreholes sunk into estuarine alluvium near the Wye-Severn confluence, and testifies to previous lower sea levels. Landslips form a locally important element of the Wye landscape, having been identified below Wynd Cliff and Black Cliff. They were probably generated by failure of mudstone units within the Carboniferous Lower Limestone Shales under loading by the overlying Lower Dolomite.

## Landscape Habitats influences

By far, the most defining feature of the area is woodland. There are extents throughout the wider agricultural landscape with areas of deciduous, mixed and coniferous plantation all being well represented. A considerable number of the deciduous woodland areas are of high ecological value with SSSI designations at Caer Llan Wood, Croes Robert Wood, Gaer Wood, Penarth Brook Woodlands, Park House Wood, Parc Seymour Woods, Penhow Woods and Coombe Valley Woods. Although not of great size, the woodland is

well distributed throughout the landscape and relatively well connected to each other. There are, however, some more substantial wooded areas: the coniferous plantations of Chepstow Park Wood and Wentwood are both of considerable size and, despite being coniferous plantations, have considerable ecological value, with Wentwood being particularly notable for a number of rare/protected species that it supports.

The most important woodlands are those that flank the Wye, with much of the deciduous woodland at areas such as Cleddon Shoots, Graig Woods, Lady Park Woods, Fiddler's Elbow, Livox Wood, Lord's Grove, Harper's Grove and Lower Hael Wood all forming part of the Wye Valley Woodlands SAC and SSSIs (and in some cases NNRs). These woodlands overlaying limestone are rare/valuable habitats in their own right and also support a wide range of flora and fauna including protected species and being particularly notable for a number of rare tree species including large-leaved lime and several species of whitebeam. The River Wye SAC and SSSI is of great ecological significance in relation to its population of protected fish species, otters and valuable habitats.

Away from the Wye gorge, the area is characterised by low-lying, gently rolling farmland with much of the land being dominated by agriculturally improved, livestock grassland bounded by hedgerows together with a significant element of arable farming on more fertile soils. This agricultural land overlies relatively well draining brown earth soils and, as a consequence, there is a noticeable scarcity of marshy grassland/rush pasture.

There is, however, a noticeable component of more ecologically valuable grassland with semi-improved/unimproved species rich pastures present in a number of locations, the most significant of these being at Dinham Meadows, Brockwell's Meadow, Rectory Meadow, Lower Nex Meadows, Barbadoes Hill Meadows and Pentwyn Farm Grasslands (all SSSIs), as well as a considerable number of other, generally smaller, SINC sites. A number of other habitats are noteworthy, particularly the wetland habitats at Cleddon Bog and Llwyn-y-Celyn Wetland, both of which are SSSIs.

The diversity of tree species, including rare large-leaved lime and several species of whitebeam, make the area one of the most important sites for woodland nature conservation in Britain. The cliffs support the only heronry in the lower Wye valley and the limestone caves are an important roost for a number of bat species.

## Historic Landscape influences

This disputed borderland territory has a rich archaeological legacy, reflecting its importance as a natural and political boundary and the significance of the Wye as a communication route. Patterns of settlement date back to prehistoric times, with Bronze Age round barrows, standing stones and Iron Age hillforts providing spectacular vantage points over the valley and its environs, particular examples of the later being Blackfield Wood camp above the Angidy valley, Llanmelin Woods camps and the Bulwarks promontory fort above Chepstow. In Wentwood, the walled remains of Caerwent, an extensive Romano-British vicus settlement or town are of particular note.

The Medieval period saw the development of castle boroughs at Monmouth and Chepstow, key strategic points in the conquest of Wales in the late 11th century. The iconic symbol of Cistercian faith and influence, Tintern Abbey, was built on the banks of the Wye in 1131. The grange lands extended far along the Trellech plateau. Today the preserved Medieval abbey is an outstanding example of Gothic architecture.

The area has been exploited for industry since the Roman period, with the valley woodlands assuring a ready supply of wood for charcoal burning. It became one of the most extensive concentrations of iron smelting sites in Britain. The remains of 16th century ironworks for wire making – which continued until 1880 – dominate the Angidy Valley, including blast furnaces, mills and early housing. Later, 18th century paper mills are also a feature of the Whitebrook valley further north. Below Wentwood, the many small streams through valleys led to settlements based on a small-scale milling industry.

The scenic attraction and economic wealth of the area attracted the development of substantial houses set within parkland, with C19th ornamental planting still featuring prominently in parts of the landscape, for example at Itton Court. Today, nucleated villages, hamlets and farmsteads nestle in the valleys with some hill settlements extending in a dispersed linear form along an historic and long-established network of rural roads. The local vernacular style is a mixture of local weathered sandstone and cream or white render. Occasional white cottages are visible amongst the trees on the steep valley sides.

Monmouth and Chepstow are the key towns that serve the area. Their historic character has, in places, been mixed with modern development, particularly around Monmouth. The historic common land of Chippenham, has been used successively as Medieval common grazing, racecourse and, most recently, playing fields, but it is now split by the A40 and encroached upon by car parks serving the town's retail and commercial centre. In contrast, the high-land area of The Kymin and Reddings Inclosure, with splendid views over the town and surrounding riverscape, remains relatively unspoiled.

## Cultural Landscape influences

This is an enclosed landscape, covered by the wooded high ground. Even the attractive Wye is hidden in its southern reaches by high cliffs. That, however, did not deter the Reverend William Gilpin, the late 18th century progenitor of the Picturesque movement, who was much influenced by the Wye. Tintern Abbey also provided artistic inspiration for J.M.W. Turner, who painted the site a number of times in the 1790s, and inspired the Romantic poets, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge as literary celebrators of Gilpin's visual appreciation of the Picturesque. An unusual aesthetic contrast today possibly, is the presence of Chepstow Racecourse on the western side of the outstanding, 'sublime' landscape of Piercefield House (now a roofless shell), which became one of the most celebrated Picturesque walks of the late 18th century.

Today, the Wye valley is a scenic leisure destination, from Chepstow Castle in the south, via Tintern Abbey and the tourism-dominated village of Tintern Parva, to the attractiveness of 18th to 19th centuries Monmouth High Street and the unique Monnow Bridge. Caerwent Roman town with its extant wall and carefully managed core, and the diminutive Penhow Castle perched above the A48 provide further features of interest to the modern tourist. The easy communications afforded by the M4 and A 48 mean that many of the historic villages south and east of Wentwood have become commuter dormitories.

Famous people associated with area include the 12th century historian Geoffrey of Monmouth, Henry V who was born in Monmouth Castle in 1387, and Charles Rolls of The Hendre, the pioneer developer of a motor car that has become a symbol of excellence and wealth. Admiral Lord Nelson's associations with Monmouth were short-lived and somewhat tenuous; however, his name has been adopted as an icon now consolidated by the naming of the Nelson Museum.