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Cymoedd Gwendraeth – Disgrifiad cryno

Dyma fro bryniau tonnog, cefnau a dyffrynnoedd bychain rhwng glannau Tywi, Cymoedd y De a'r Mynydd Du, i'r gorllewin o Fannau Brycheiniog. Er ei ffurf anghymesur, mae ei daeareg yn ei huno. Mae'r rhan sy'n tueddu tua'r gogledd-ddwyrain o fewn Parc Cenedlaethol Bannau Brycheiniog, ac yn ddistaw ac yn wledig o'i chymharu â chorff y fro, lle ceir rhagor o bobl a lle bu cloddio mawr am lo a charreg galch. O ganlyniad, mae'r ardal wedi datblygu patrwm anheddu llinellog neu strimynnog gwahanredol ar hyd ffordd. Heddiw, mae datblygiad diweddar ystadau preswyl a diwydiannol yn torri ar y patrwm strimynnog, ond eto'n canolbwyntio'r datblygu newydd o gwmpas aneddiadau a chroesfannau ffordd blaenorol.

Mae'r cefn gwlad yn wrthgyferbyniad llwyr, gyda rhwydwaith gymhleth o gaeau cymesur, bychain wedi'u hamgylchynu gan wrychoedd uchel, toreithiog a choedlannau bychain. Mae pridd yn y dyffrynnoedd, sy'n llawn dŵr yn y gaeaf, yn cynnal porfeydd brwynog o ansawdd amaethyddol gwael, tra defnyddiwyd pridd llwyd bras a phridd tywod llawer o'r Ardal Cymeriad yn borfeydd defaid a gwartheg godro. Mae tiroedd sylweddol wedi'u hadennill, bellach, o'r hen chwareli a chloddfeydd, a gellir gweld pa rai yw'r caeau a adenillwyd oherwydd eu cynllun symlach, llai aeddfed, er gwaethaf cynnwys lleiniau o goetir newydd. Mae craig a chastell carreg galch trawiadol Carreg Cennen yn nodweddu canol y fro, ychydig o fewn ffin y Parc Cenedlaethol.

Summary description

This is an area of rolling hills, ridges and minor valleys, comprising the area between the coastal and valley parts of the Tywi, the South Wales Valleys and the Black Mountain part of the Brecon Beacons. Despite its pear-shape, the area is unified through its geology. That part running north-east is within the Brecon Beacons National Park and is quiet and rural compared to the more heavily settled main area. The main area has been heavily mined for coal and quarried for limestone. In consequence, this part of the area has developed a distinctive linear or ribbon pattern of settlement along roads. Today, modern residential and industrial estate development breaks the ribbon pattern but nevertheless focuses new development around existing settlements and road crossings.

The countryside setting contrasts entirely, being a complex network of small geometric fields surrounded by lush, high hedgerows and small copses. Seasonally waterlogged soils in the valleys support rushy grazing of poor agricultural quality while well drained coarse loamy and sandy soils across much of the character area are used for sheep and dairy pasture. Significant areas have now been reclaimed from former quarries and mines and the somewhat simpler and less mature restoration field layouts can be picked out, despite the inclusion of new woodland planting belts. The spectacular limestone crag and castle of Carreg Cennen is a landmark feature in the middle area, just into the National Park.

Key Characteristics
Coal, limestone and old red sandstone – with distinct ridges, fault aligned valleys and features.
Boulder clay – to considerable depth in places
Small valleys with minor streams - cross the landscape, feeding the Gwendraeth, Lougher and Tywi rivers.
Exposed land on the limestone and sandstone ridges - common grazed
Patchwork of medium sized pasture fields enclosed by thick hedges.
Mining and quarrying industrial remains – some now reclaimed but many quarries still visible, and old limekilns and C19th century coal mining settlements.
Linear settlements - linked by a network of roads. Modern suburban and industrial development is spreading along roads in places and at nodes.
The end of the M4 - The A48 and western extent of the M4 introduce constant noise and a feeling of a landscape that is travelled through by a large number of people.
Carreg Cennin Castle – landmark historic ruined castle on prominent limestone cliff
Turlough – feature possibly the only example of this karstic seasonal ground water-fed lake feature in the UK, Pant y Llyn, located at Carmel near Llandybie.
Quiet, tranquil, rural part within National Park – though linked geologically, the NE finger lies within the Brecon Beacons National Park and is much quieter and not

Visual and Sensory profile

This lowland area marks a transition between the urban and industrialised landscapes of Swansea and the Valleys to the east, and rural Carmarthenshire and estuaries to the west. As if to emphasise the change, it is also the western limit of the M4 motorway from London. On closer inspection the area bears the scars of quarrying, mining and associated reclamation. It carries a legacy of many linear settlements along the criss-cross network of roads. The ribbon of development emphasises the extent of settlement for road travellers through these affected areas.

The plateau from Tumble to Ammanford has areas of former opencast and tips, appearing grey with sparse regeneration of scrub and is set amongst impoverished rushy pastures and holly-rich hedges. The broad valley of the Gwendraeth Fawr also retains the scars of coal working. A large area of opencast is still apparent, plus many older tips gradually blending with the pattern of small irregular fields and woods. The former mining villages occupy the lower slopes, with terraces of brick housing. The thick hedgerows and small or medium sized rectangular-shaped fields are notable. However simpler restoration field layouts and immature vegetation characterise former quarried or mined areas, despite the inclusion of new woodland planting belts. A number of large quarry sites have not been filled, providing locally spectacular features where visible, some containing water and naturally colonising vegetation.

In contrast the long NE finger of this area has a very rural feel, with rolling hills, ridges and minor valleys, with strong field patterns in a series of parallel rolling ridge and valley corrugations. It is sandwiched between the Tywi valley and the looming, brooding, contrasting and distinctively profiled Black Mountain, to which there are many views. All of the NE finger is within the Brecon Beacons National Park and much of it is off the beaten track and is quiet, intimate, and in minor valleys with small scale hedge-bounded fields, almost secret. Copses, streams and winding lanes link the scattered farms and hamlets reinforcing the rural image. There is plenty of woodland on the low ridges and steeper sides, both native deciduous and coniferous.

A small limestone ridge marks the edge of the industrial part of the area, beyond which is Gwendraeth Fach, but arriving holiday travellers will be looking further west. Nevertheless in this gentle green valley and its neighbours are small old villages, scattered farms, mixed farmland, woods and large hedges. The National Botanic Garden of Wales, with its futuristic domed glasshouse, is set within this landscape which captures the essence of soft productively green rural Wales. To the east of the Gwendraeth Fawr valley the higher rounded hills overlook Llanelli and the Bristol Channel in the distance, with the two masts on Mynydd Sylen standing high. This part also has not been disturbed by industry, and towards the coast the valleys are narrow and wooded. This is the hinterland of the Llanelli limit of the conurbation where urban pressures such as fly-tipping become evident.

Some development is out of character with the scale and style of settlements. The largest example is at Cross Hands on the main A48 dual carriageway which dissects the area from Carmarthen and meets the M4 at Pont Abraham. This out-of-town site now shares many of the characteristics of developments at motorway junctions, with supermarkets, business and retail parks on either side of the A48. Constant traffic means parts of the area are noisy, giving the impression of a landscape through which people travel rather than linger.



Cross Hands (left, with A48 road) and Penygroes (top) showing patterns of ribbon settlement amidst small-scale fieldscapes with lush, thick hedgerows. Note also the newer, simpler, reclaimed opencast quarrying landscapes on the right hand side. © Getmapping



Pontyrates, showing the lush fieldscapes and linear settlement. © Richard Kelly



Pontyrates linear settlement amidst a lowland rolling landscape © Richard Kelly



Rolling fieldscapes near Trapp, north of Ammanford © John Briggs



Fieldscapes between the Black Mountain (viewing point) and the Tywi Valley (distance)
© John Briggs



Carreg Cennen Castle, prominent and defensibly sited on a limestone outcrop © John Briggs

Geological Landscape influences

The area extends from north of Llandovery to near the coast where the two Gwendraeth rivers (Fawr and Fach) flow into Carmarthen Bay in the neighbouring character area. The NE part of the area rises to nearly 400m and forms the foothills and lower slopes of Mynydd Du (Black Mountain), although the highest point is at Trichrug (415m) east of Llandeilo. In the southern part, prominent ridges flank the Gwendraeth Fawr Valley and rise to between 200-300m. The southern part of the area includes almost the entire length of the Gwendraeth Fach and most of the Gwendraeth Fawr, both draining in a SW direction. The central part of the area near Ammanford contains River Loughor, draining from the slopes of Mynydd Du and running southwards, and a short section of the Afon Amman, which flows westwards to join the Afon Tawe. The northern part of the area includes the rivers Cennen, Sawdde and Gwydderig which flow south-westwards before turning northwards to join the Tywi.

The underlying bedrock ranges from Ordovician to Carboniferous. Silurian rocks crop out in a continuous band from the coast at Ferryside to beyond Llandovery. Old Red Sandstone (ORS) and the 'red beds' occur as a thick sequence of mudstones, siltstones, sandstones and conglomerates and occurs in a band from near Ferryside at the coast, through Llandovery to Mynydd Myddfai and the flanks of Mynydd Du in the north.

Overlying the ORS is Carboniferous Limestone, being part of the 'North Crop' of the South Wales Coalfield and forming part of the ridge that extends from Mynydd y Garreg, through Mynydd Cerrig and Carmel and on towards Mynydd Du. The spectacular Carreg Cennen Castle sits on an outlier of Carboniferous limestone which is preserved as a sliver between two branches of a major fault system. Overlying the limestone is a band of silica-rich

sandstones (Millstone Grit), which forms the ridge between Mynydd y Garreg and Carmel. The overlying units in the Carboniferous sequence belong to the Coal Measures and underlie almost the entire length of the Gwendraeth Fawr from Cefneithin to the coast. These form the eastern part of the South Wales Coalfield. These coal-bearing rocks have been historically important in the Gwendraeth Valley and the Ammanford area, in particular for high-quality anthracite. The coal-bearing units are interspersed with sandstones which include the Pennant Sandstone Formation, which forms the high ground of Mynydd Penbre, Mynydd Sylen and Tumble, and the bluish-grey sandstone is also used as a building stone in the area, for example in the long terraces of Tumble and other coal mining villages.

The strata is strongly controlled by the geological structure which gives the area the NE-SW 'grain' with a series of almost parallel, deep-seated long-lived NE-SW-striking faults transecting the area. The orientation of the Gwendraeth Fach between Porthyrhyd to Llandyfaelog follows the Carreg Cennen Disturbance. The South Wales Coalfield is also transected by a dense network of steep, NNW-striking 'cross-faults'.

During the last glaciation, the ice had its maximum southern limit being marked only a short distance away on Gower and in Carmarthen Bay. Local ice movement was probably south to south-west, with ice flowing from the Mynydd Du which was to the north-east of the area. Much of the landscape, excluding the steeper slopes and crags, is covered with till (boulder clay). Locally, there are sands and gravels deposited by melt water streams. Considerable thicknesses of glacial sediment blanket the landscape in places.

The area includes a rare karstic feature situated on the Carboniferous limestone. At Carmel near Llandybie there is an unusual lake (called a turlough) which is a seasonal lake with no inflow or outflow, only fed by groundwater. When underground water levels are high the lake fills up, usually during autumn and winter. During the summer, groundwater levels do not reach the surface and the lake disappears completely. This is possibly the only lake of its kind known in the UK.

The geological diversity of the area is represented within numerous SSSI which include features ranging from Silurian/Devonian fossils (chordata), non-marine Devonian, Ludlow, Wenlock, Llandovery and Namurian rock sequences to modern geomorphological features such as the Pant y Llyn turlough.

Landscape Habitats influences

The underlying geology and quarry remains have left an interesting habitat legacy in the area. Coal-mining has resulted in a number of small abandoned mining tips, now slowly becoming colonised by shrubs and trees, with greenness replacing what was once very active industrial activity. Many former coal mining sites have been restored as community woodlands and country parks. More recent mining activity has taken the form of opencast mining, especially around Llandybie.

The limestone has been extensively quarried in the past. Cernydd Carmel is an area of old quarry workings that is now protected, along with some ancient woodlands as SSSI and SAC. The site includes a seasonal lake or turlough, the only known example in mainland Britain, formed within a former glacial channel and fed by groundwater from within the limestone ridge. The Carmel woodlands include native ravine woodlands, of international importance, in a number of different blocks, all ash dominated, but ecologically different, and separated by neutral grasslands.

Elsewhere is an undulating landscape of hills and troughs, with wet clayey soils in the lower areas. It is an agricultural landscape of wet pastures, of low productivity and difficult to work, the home of the 'Rhos' meadows, wet pastures dominated by purple moor-grass, forming small blocks of semi-natural rough grazings within the generally improved agricultural landscape. Rhos Cefn Bryn, part of the Gwernedd Pembre SSSI is a remnant of old rhos pasture, with a diverse flora including bog asphodel and bog myrtle, and home to an important population of marsh fritillary butterflies, as well as adder and common lizard.

Some of the hollows and troughs have developed into interesting bog habitats. Llyn Llech Owain, near Gorslas is a small glacial lake surrounded by basin mire, with some conifer planting in the wet heath, now a country park. Small areas of woodland are extensive over the area, with native oak woodlands, associated with the limestone outcrops and steep slopes, wet woodlands in the river valleys and small areas of conifer planting on wet ground.

The Limestone and sandstone ridges comprise unenclosed common land characterised by bracken, heather, and rock exposures. Fields across the area are small to medium sized and often irregularly shaped, mainly enclosed by high, thick hedgerows or lines of woodland. Blocks of mixed and coniferous plantation are a feature of many hill slopes.

Mynydd Llangyndeyrn itself is one of the few remaining larger semi-natural areas left in SW Wales, a mosaic of grassland, heath, mire and rock, protected as common land and SSSI, and only lightly grazed. It has breeding populations of curlew, stonechat and grasshopper warbler.

Historic Landscape influences

The Gwendraeth Vales have a fascinating wealth of historic and archaeological evidence that tells the story of centuries of human settlement and exploitation. The earliest visible features include a cluster of prehistoric standing stones, chambered tombs and round barrows overlooking the Gwendraeth Fawr Valley north of Pontyberem. The Romans established the camp of Alabum on Llandovery's Llanfair Hill, and Roman roads run west to Carmarthen, north to the gold mines at Dolaucothi and south-east to Brecon.

In the mediaeval period the Normans built a number of defensive castles, often located strategically above watercourses. A particularly fine example of a medieval stone castle is Carreg Cennen, which crowns a remote high crag overlooking the river Cennen far below. Built in 1300 as an English outpost by one of Edward I's barons on the site of an earlier Welsh stronghold, its core is a high walled, strongly towered enclosure, protected by a succession of pits, drawbridges and gatehouses. Despite efforts by Yorkists to destroy it during the War of the Roses in the 15th century, its prominent remains are today a successful visitor attraction.

The limestone of the ridge has probably been quarried since the 17th century, with relic limekilns and quarries being distinctive features of the area. The economic importance of limestone quarrying declined from the late C19th following farmers switching from lime to artificial fertiliser.

The rich coal seams found within the Gwendraeth Fawr valley were mined extensively in the C19th, with key mining settlements developing at Ammanford, Pontyberem and Cross

Hands. Records indicate that mining was established as early as 1540, but the coal mines are now all closed. As there was little effective transport to their holdings further inland, mine owners built a number of canals to the sea. These were superseded by railways, and the Burry Port and Gwendraeth Valley Railway ran largely on the route of a canal built by Thomas Kymer. The railway company was absorbed by the Great Western Railway in 1922. Most of the track was lifted by 2005. A harbour was built at Burry Port in the south of the character area, and the small town was developed from c. 1850 with the coming of the railways. It is now a key location on the Millennium Coastal Path from Bynea near Llanelli to Pembrey Burrows.

The town of Ammanford (called Cross Inn before 1880 because it was a coaching stop at a cross roads) owes its existence to coal mining and tinplate. It combines an industrial past with still being a livestock market town. The hinterland of Ammanford, with its outlying villages, was a key centre to serve the mining villages located to the west. (The town itself lies within the adjacent character area on the banks of the River Loughor).

Today, linear settlement is concentrated in the valleys; often at stream crossing points or stretching along roads. White wash or render farm buildings and dwellings with grey slate roofs form the traditional vernacular style, linked by a network of rural roads. Former mining settlements of C19th terraced housing characterise the Pontyberem area, rising steeply up the northern slopes of the Gwendraeth valley.

Cultural Landscape influences

The foothills of Mynydd Myddfai and Black Mountain in the east are nationally recognised as part of a wider landscape of outstanding historic interest. Historic legendary associations with the Lady of Llyn y Fan and the Physicians of Myddfai contain references to 12th century farms that still exist.

Many former coal mining sites have been restored as community woodlands or Country Parks, such as Mynydd Mayer. As such, much evidence of the once thriving coal industry has now been disguised within today's landscape, although distinctive rows of miners' terraces are particularly characteristic features of the settlements in the valley.

The incidence of Welsh speaking in the character area is high. Menter Cwm Gwendraeth based at Pontyberem was the first community Welsh language initiative – unsurprisingly as 80% of the village's inhabitants are recorded in the 2001 Census as speaking the language.

The small mining villages in the character area are renowned for having produced a significant number of gifted rugby players, leading to comedian Max Boyce's song about the area being a 'fly half factory'.

The most recent development is the Ffos Las Racecourse, the first to be developed in Wales for many decades, on a disused open-cast site near Pontyberem.

There is a sense of recovery from decline in the Fawr Vale, with the creation of a new racecourse on the former open cast site at Ffos Las and some new build housing – as elsewhere in Wales, of a style and planned form alien to the vernacular. That said, communities are vibrant in respect of the national game, having produced many international rugby players.