

The Beacon

Cymdeithas Parc Bannau Brycheiniog
The Brecon Beacons Park Society

Winter 2013



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Cover Illustrations

Front: N.E. Face of Pen y Fan - Chris Barber MBE FRGS

Back: Llanthony Priory - Chris Barber MBE FRGS

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THE BRECON BEACONS PARK SOCIETY

The Park Society is an independent organisation for anyone who cares about and enjoys this very special landscape and environment.

Our ever-growing membership consists of people living both inside and outside the Park who wish to see its essential characteristics conserved or enhanced. They are people who wish to know more about its past, present and future.

Every week the Park Society stages at least two events which explore on foot these protected landscapes. The Park Society is simply the best way to learn more about The Brecon Beacons National Park.

For more information visit our website which contains any updates on *The Beacons Way* and application forms for joining the Society.

www.breconbeaconsparksociety.org

MEMBERSHIP

Subscription rates are:

Annual Individual	£15
Annual under 18	8
Annual Family	22
Life Individual (under 65)	225
Life (65 and over)	150
Life Family (under 65)	330
Life (Family 65 and over)	220

Annual Membership runs for 12 months from January each year (up to 15 months for members joining after 1st October).

THE BEACONS WAY

The Beacons Way is a 100 mile walking trail through some of the most varied and beautiful upland landscapes in Great Britain. Designed by members of the Park Society, for experienced walkers, it can be completed over eight consecutive days or explored as a series of linear walks. The route, mainly through open country, has very little lane or road walking.

A brand new edition of *The Beacons Way* guidebook is now available at £9.99 from local bookshops and Tourist Information Centres. Alternatively contact Bloreng Books at : 01873 856114.

EDITORIAL

For a long time I have wanted to improve the quality of *The Beacon* by producing it in full colour and I was pleased when the Executive Committee recently agreed to provide the extra funding to make this possible. Hopefully, as a result of the change, more members will be interested in writing articles, now that they will be illustrated with colour pictures.



We have certainly had some fine writing in this issue of *The Beacon*. Sue Lane's article "The Good, The Bad and the Valleys" gives us a real insight into how the landscape influences the lives of its people and vice versa.

Gareth Morgans's article about Bwlch highlights its geographical importance through the ages, while Artur Jones covers the important "Inns of Bwlch".

Geoff Williams' "Checklist for Walkleaders" shows a great deal of common sense as well as common courtesy, which is so typical of Geoff who is a true gent. John Collins has written a detailed and interesting personal account of completing The Big Blacks Challenge event.

Malcolm Phillips has told the story of the book *On The Black Hill* highlighting the romantic and inspirational nature of this area to writers and artists over the centuries. Fortunately it remains unspoiled and continues to inspire modern writers and artists.

My article "What's in a Name" demonstrates how names can tell such vivid stories which bring a place to life in every sense of the word. We live in organic landscapes and the names often highlight this fact.

Anne's little piece "Equinox" is certainly very topical and helps us to see "the wood from the trees" at this time of the year.

Last year was the 200th anniversary of the completion of the Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal and I find it interesting to ponder on what is significant about the year 2013. Well, for a start it is the 50th anniversary of The Three Peaks Trial, a 20 mile Challenge Walk (which I started all those years ago), based on Abergavenny and involving the ascent of Blorenge, Sugar Loaf and Skirrid Fawr.

It is also the 50th anniversary of the Queen's first visit to the Brecon Beacons National Park, when in June 1963 she came to Abergavenny and then went on to open the new army camp at Cwrt y Gollen.

This year is quite special for the Brecon Beacons Park Society for it "comes of age", having been formed 21 years ago, and it continues to go from strength to strength.

Chris Barber
Editor

A FEW WORDS FROM THE CHAIR

Firstly I would like to wish all of my fellow Society members a happy New Year. We have had a very busy and, I believe, successful second half of the year. Here are a few highlights:



Guided Walks and Events

The Guided Walks Programme, continues apace and despite the poor weather it has been very well received by our members. The Events Programme has provided us all with many interesting talks ranging from Archaeology of the Black Mountains to the tales of the young Welsh Everest climber, Tori James. We have some interesting people in the Society who have done some remarkable things or have interesting areas of expertise. Plans are afoot to have some talks from such members in future programmes. I believe I will be kicking off this series of talks in the Spring Programme.

The Campaign for National Parks (CNP)

For the last year the three Welsh National Park Societies have been working in close collaboration on improving CNP's operations in Wales. To that end I gave a presentation to the CNP Council in March where we proposed creating CNP Cymru. This would be a quasi-autonomous arm of CNP which would determine what CNP's activities in Wales should be and monitor their implementation. We have agreed terms of reference for CNP Cymru with the CNP Board of Trustees, closed down its predecessor, the Welsh Advisory Committee, and set a date for the inaugural meeting of CNP Cymru.

The Alliance of Welsh National Park Societies (AWNPS)

As the next step in the collaboration between the three Welsh National Park Societies we have formed the Alliance of Welsh National Park Societies. This is a loose and very low budget association of the Societies for mutual support and work load sharing and gives us a joint voice for expressing our views (when they coincide). I guess I blinked at some point as I am its first chair.

The Campaign for the Protection of Rural Wales (CPRW)

The Society was invited to participate in the creation of the new Brecon and Radnor branch of CPRW. In the spirit of co-operation between organisations with similar views I attended the inaugural meeting, blinked again and ended up on the committee.

The Brecon Beacons Dark Sky Initiative

After over two years of effort by Society members, Park staff, volunteers, and partners we have submitted an application to the International Dark-Sky Association (IDA) for the status of International Dark Sky Reserve for the Brecon Beacons National Park. We expect to hear the outcome in February. Fingers crossed.

So in summary, much good work is being carried out, and many varied and interesting challenges lie ahead.

Jim Wilson

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE VALLEYS

- GEOLOGY IN THE DOCK?

Sue Lane

You may have seen the television series on 'The Great British Countryside' (BBC 2), which considered the fundamental influence of geology on landscapes and rivers. There is no clearer example of this than South Wales, with the deprived valleys to the south bordered by the beautiful Brecon Beacons National Park to the north. I was born and bred in the South Wales valleys, at the head of the Ebbw valley to be precise, and this great divide between 'valley' and 'countryside' was etched on to my brain from my earliest memories. For me it was a fact of life, static, pre-ordained by nature. From childhood our usual weekend treat was to escape the valleys and go 'down the country', 'down' being the geologically determined language. It was a journey to a different world, from the barren and often windswept moonscape of the coal tips, the black soil, and virtually treeless and 'birdless' landscape, to the soft pastures of rich red soil, abundant wildlife, and tree-lined rivers. Large though the effect of these contrasting geologies was for someone growing up in the 1950s, it fades into insignificance compared to the effect it had on those lives that came before. Immortalised in the writings of Richard Llewellyn and Alexander Cordell, the devastating effect of the South Wales geology on people's lives and landscapes has been well documented.

But wait a minute. Let's just re-wind that. Arthur Gray-Jones in his book *A History of Ebbw Vale* (1970. p.22), paints a very pleasant almost idyllic picture of the Ebbw valley on the eve of the industrial revolution. Ebbw Vale .. was a pleasant, remote, well-wooded upland valley. There were good pastures on the hillsides and cornfields along the bottom of the valley. ...

Archdeacon Coxe, touring Monmouthshire in 1798, was reminded of Alpine scenery as he climbed over Bwlch y garn and made his way down Carn-y-cefn southwards [the north eastern ridge of the valley]:

'The Beacon mountain slopes are thickly clothed with underwood and occasionally tufted with hanging groves of oak, beech, ash and elder, the wild raspberry twining in the thickets, and the ground overspread with the wild strawberry.'

Also, referring to an account by Reverend Edmund Jones in 1779, Gray-Jones indicates that although the valley was not very fertile especially at its

more barren northern end, there were not many poor, the diet was good, and 'the air was wholesome and the inhabitants healthy'. So the South Wales valleys started from a fairly level playing field when it came to beautiful landscapes and healthy lives. It appears geology dealt it a fateful blow. The question arises, what if the outcrops of iron ore, limestone, and coal were not found in the South Wales valleys but the area that is now the Brecon Beacons National Park? Imagine the great influx of people there that occurred in the valleys, the rapid erection of row after row of miners' cottages, the widespread scarring of the landscape by waste products. That now could be the area of dereliction and deprivation, and the 'alpine' south could now be 'The Valleys National Park'.

So, of course, it was not the valleys' geology in itself that caused the revolution in landscape and lives, but its exploitation. But was the outcome of the two different geologies inevitable nevertheless? There might still be something in this view that in the end our lives and landscapes are determined by geology. Let's step back again. Gray-Jones begins his book with an extract from *The Times*, October 2, 1919, in which a journalist describes, in a very positive manner, his journey up Clydach gorge to Brynmawr and on to the Ebbw Vale. Gray-Jones gives the following dismissive response:

'Although this is a striking and picturesque paragraph, distance had lent enchantment in his view. For 'the old grey church with its hamlet' was a cheap and ugly building, built in 1842 by a tight-fisted ironmaster, Crawshay Bailey, as his contribution to the welfare of the men, women and children through whose labours he had made a fortune ... There is no romance about this 'relic of a former life' (p.9).



Crawshay Bailey

Not all owners were as ruthless as Crawshay Bailey, and in the Preface of this book Gray-Jones refers to the 'genuine concern' the first main (Quaker) employers at Ebbw Vale had for the welfare of their workers. Unfortunately, the track record of industrial management has often fallen far short of genuine concern for labourers and landscapes alike. The BBC 2 series 'The Story of Wales' presented by Huw Edwards gives a graphic portrayal of the ruinous effect of industrial management on a great section of the earlier rural life and countryside of Wales. It highlights the sharp contrast between the opulent lifestyle of the wealthy unscrupulous managers and the extreme hardships, poverty and struggles of their oppressed workers. We are not just talking about 18th and 19th century managers either.



Ebbw Vale Steelworks a few years before demolition - Chris Barber

The following exchange between retired quarryman Derek Jones who worked in the Dinorwic slate quarry in the 1950s, and actor-comedian Richard Wilson, and the latter's dry and incredulous response, I believe sums up the meanness and oppression that has prevailed ('Britain's Best Drives', BBC 4):

RW: Was it a dangerous job?

DJ: Oh yes, quite dangerous, there were many accidents.

RW: [And it would appear some of the dangers may have been due to the quarrymen trying to cut costs and when you discover why, it's hardly surprising.]

DJ: You had to pay for everything. You had to pay for your powder, and fuse wire, even all your tools you had to pay for.

RW: What, the company sold it to you?

DJ: Oh yes. (incredulous laughter from both.)

And when you wanted your tools sharpening you took them to the smithy and you had to pay him even. You even had to pay for the rope the quarrymen were hanging from. Aye.

RW: (stunned and disdainful silence)

DJ: Because it cost so much for the fuse wire people tried to make a short cut sometimes, and it was very dangerous, if they could have got away with using a shorter fuse it would have meant there would be more for the next time.

RW: It's surprising they paid you at all really, isn't it?

I accept that the exploitation of a mineral resource must lead to changes in lives and landscapes. Our sad history, however, is that in general the latter changes were also exploitative. Imagine again how different it might have been if a greater and fairer fraction of the huge wealth produced in the valleys had been put towards the labourers and their environment? People's lives could have been less hard, the housing could have been less gruesome, and the effect on the landscape could have been less devastating. The appearance of the valleys would be quite different now for sure, and the division between the beauty of the National Park and the 'beast' of the valleys might have been avoided. In theory a more gradual and natural merging between the two geologies could have been maintained, as of old.

In the introduction to his book with Michael Blackmore, *Portraits of the Past* (1996), Chris Barber effectively sums up the good, the bad, and the ugly of this momentous era:

'Today it is fascinating to study the birth of our modern industrial society with its associated evils of exploitation and social deprivation ... The Industrial Revolution was a period of inventive genius that led to fascinating technical development and rapid growth in population and prosperity for the entrepreneurs.

The so-called industrial valleys of South East Wales now have a diversified economy with the development of light industries .. but unfortunately unemployment is still a major problem in such towns as Tredegar, Ebbw Vale and Blaenafon.

The Valleys landscape has changed considerably with virtually every tip removed or re-shaped and landscaped. Large areas of sub-standard housing have also been replaced or renovated to meet present day standards and one is never far from attractive countryside with sweeping views.

Living in Llanfoist, beneath the looming bulk of the Blorengie I first began to take a special interest in the county's industrial heritage after walking impressive routes such as Hill's Tramroad ... Then one day I found myself imagining the characters in Alexander Cordell's moving novel *Rape of the Fair Country*, walking these same paths. I began to hear the sounds of horse-drawn trams, the roar of furnaces and the whine of the rolling mill at Garnddyrys.

Gradually the idea came to me to write a walking guide ... I took many photographs of present day scenes .. but soon came to the conclusion that what I really needed to bring it to life was a set of reconstruction drawings to portray sites as they

looked in the nineteenth century. It was then that I decided to contact Michael Blackmore ...' (p.10).



Ebbw Vale Steelworks - Reconstruction drawing by Michael Blackmore

The idea of using reconstruction drawings was indeed inspired and Michael Blackmore's beautiful drawings vividly bring the past to life. In his drawing of the Ebbw Vale Steelworks on p.55, although he gives a hint of the valley's former charm, I believe he also conveys the fragility of the landscape up against the remorseless outpourings and demands of industry. Despite the improvements that Chris Barber refers to, perceptions of the valleys can still be very negative. I have heard a fellow walker compare a scene to Switzerland, but that was in the Llanthony Valley. I have never heard a similar comparison on the occasional walk in the valleys. On a beautiful summer day in 2002 the Cheltenham Rambling club did a circular walk from Nantyglo, down the eastern ridge of the Ebbw (Fawr) valley on the outward stage, and returning from Aberbeeg via the Sirhowy trail on the western side of the valley. On the later stage as we approached the Domen above Ebbw Vale I turned back to look down the valley towards Manmoel, and there I glimpsed an alpine scene. Unknown to me at the time it was the same view described above by Archdeacon Cox, only from the other side of the valley. I am not sure whether the group perceived the beauty - they were too far ahead for me to point it out and I did not see them look back at the scene. Maybe their expectations would have prevented them from seeing it?

The enduring memory of the walk by the group, however, was of the squalour that met us when we descended down into Ebbw Vale. It was indeed dismal, like a shanty town, a ghost town. I had not returned there for many years, and it did not fit at all with my memories of a bustling town

whose character rose above the dirt of industry. This scene was shocking for me and understandably it confirmed the group's expectations of the ugly valleys. Over recent months, however, a number of walkers in the BBPS have remarked on how the valleys are improving. It is sad that many picturesque scenes have been buried forever, but heartening that what remains is regenerating to echo some of the valley's former glory.

Gray-Jones cites two main casualties of the industrial revolution. It's first casualty was the beauty of the valley (p. 35); and later he quotes the following poignant and evocative note made in the diary of Walter Davies, after journeying in 1802 for the Board of Agriculture from Crickhowell up Clydach Gorge through Beaufort towards Sirhowy (p.69):

'Farewell beautiful Cwm Clydach, welcome dreariness, filth and wealth.'

The second casualty was the wellbeing of the individual.

'... the tragic failure of the Industrial Revolution: it promoted industry but failed to promote the happiness and freedom of the individual.' (p.68).

Writing at a time of healthy employment in Ebbw Vale in the 1960s, Gray-Jones concludes that although much was lost during the 19th Century, 'much more was eventually gained in terms of human freedom and social responsibility' (p.69). His positive outlook for the future (Epilogue) was based on the good industrial relations of the then state-owned steelworks (similar to successful German industry today), and the belief that the previous ruthlessness of autocratic ironmasters and coalowners is inappropriate for prosperous modern industry and could never return. Unfortunately his optimism was not borne out. He no doubt would be devastated that the district has become an area of social deprivation now that national government and big industry have dealt their final blows.

Undoubtedly geology fundamentally influences our landscapes and lives, and the exploitation of mineral resources inevitably brings about further changes. But where there is exploitation of people and the places where they live, so that the activity changes them beyond all recognition, undermines them, harms them, there I believe a line should be drawn under the influence of geology. When it comes to the bad and the ugly of landscapes and lives, therefore, geology I believe is off of hook - not guilty.

FOCUS ON BWLCH

Having received two articles relating to this village, it seems appropriate to make Bwlch a special feature in this issue of 'The Beacon'. Bwlch (pronounced boolch) is one of those small villages that one tends to pass through on the way to Abergavenny, Brecon or Talgarth, without stopping unless of course you are on foot following the Beacons Way.

The word bwlch means 'gap' in the Welsh language and is used in many place names throughout Wales. In this instance the picturesque village of Bwlch is situated 656 feet above sea level on a col between Buckland Hill and Cefn Moel, where the present day A40 road now runs, between Brecon and Crickhowell in Powys, southern Wales.

Such a narrow defile would have been an ideal place for an ambush and one can imagine Romans and Normans pausing before proceeding through it in order to take stock of the situation and prepare for a possible attack.

This location is rich in historical connections for there is a prehistoric standing stone in a field close to the A40, a short distance to the west is the hill of Allt yr Esgair which is crossed by a Roman road. In Norman times the pass of Bwlch was guarded by the now much ruined Blaenllynfi Castle.

During the 18th and 19th centuries Bwlch was on the turnpike road from London to Carmarthen and Fishguard. The present day village shop was originally a toll house and there were gates on the main road and also on the road to Llangorse. The village became a favourite stopping point for stagecoaches to change horses and for weary travellers to spend the night and this explains why there were once so many inns in Bwlch.

Many of the houses in Bwlch have panoramic views of the south-western flanks of the Black Mountains, or towards the Brecon Beacons to the south and west. The Beacons Way long distance footpath passes through Bwlch.



View from Bwlch towards the Sugar Loaf - Chris Barber

BWLCH WITH A DIFFERENCE

Gareth Morgan

‘Bwlch with altitude’, ‘Bwlch with magnitude’ and ‘Bwlch with fortitude’ are now well established walks in our region. (HYPERLINK <http://www.bwlchwalks.co.uk/> www.bwlchwalks.co.uk) Yet there is still scope to design new Bwlch walks using the plethora of bridleways and underused footpaths that frequent the village environs. One of these new walk experiences took the shape of a circular walk for this year's Crickhowell Walking Festival: Walk 62 – a Gareth Morgan walk, accompanied by Terry Nicholas (backmarker) and Will Davies (CADW), also advised by Alan Bowring (geology) and Arthur Jones (Bwlch village). The walk is explained here and is worth trying by yourself !

Start at the ‘forest clearing’ in Buckland Bwlch forest (Talybont Forest) – Forestry Commission plantation, started 1935 after the break up of Buckland Estate. NGR SO144218. It's probably always been an area of woodland within The Great Forest of Blaenllynfi from 1207, (devolved from Brecon), a hunting territory and game reserve. Leaving the ‘forest’ behind, we cross over the open access land of Buckland Hill, a spectacular view of the ancient district of Ystrad Yw unfolds NGR SO136209 dominated by Myarth hill in the foreground, regarded as an Iron Age hillfort, (probably an ancient donkey yard) and The Sugar Loaf in the distance, all forming part of The Usk valley. Lots of big round bales of bracken were seen on the hill: very valuable when the straw price is too high. (A big fire here at the time of writing - our drought has caused great dangers in Spring 2012).

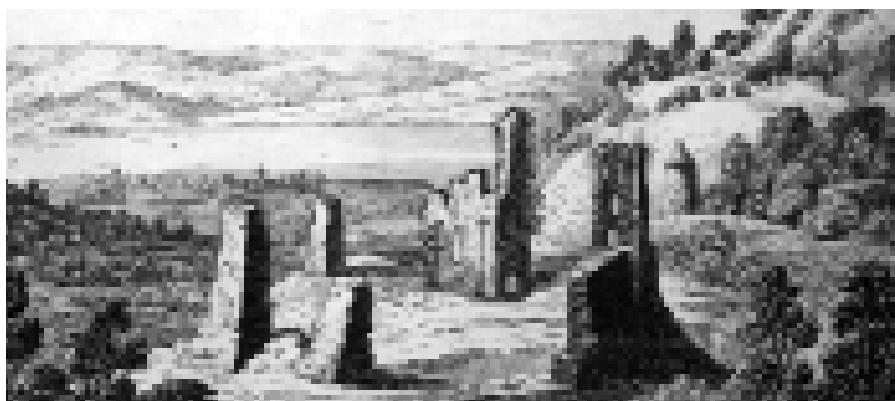
We then descend to Bwlch village centre, ‘The Cutting’ of Bwlch pass representing a fault line between the brownstones (more red) of Buckland Hill and the more erosion resistant Senni Beds (more blue) of Cefn Moel. Ascending the unclassified road toward the next open access land, Tremynfa disused quarry is a good point for a drinks break NGR SO159223. Sporadic quarrying took place till about 1970; specialist building stone was afforded; Bwlch stone was well noted locally, especially for the quoins of a house.

Now we walk over Cefn Moel common, again part of The Duke of Beaufort's Estate, and intersect with the ridgeway of The Beacons Way at NGR SO160224. Here we encounter a valuable escape route from The Beacons Way, using it ourselves to cross farmland, enter a bridleway near Pen yr heol las ruined farmstead, and subsequently join the B4560 Bwlch-Llangorse road.



The Cutting at Bwlch was widened in the late 1990s - Chris Barber

On our return to central Bwlch we find time to explore the ruins of Castell Blaenllynfi the one time centre of a great marcher lordship to which Crickhowell was originally answerable. It was the centre of The FitzHerbert Barony, Peter FitzHerbert signing The Magna Carta in 1215. There was a lot of fighting at Blaenllynfi and the castle was only a 'working castle' for about 100 years.



Old engraving of Castell Blaenllynfi

It's worth pausing to consider the landscape too: for several hundreds of years Afon Llynfi drained 'glacial lake Llangors' southwards to the River Usk; retreat northward of the Wye valley glacier allowed normal flow to be resumed to The River Wye; yet a pronounced landscape feature remains showing the long lost flow channel near Glan pant corner on the western approach to Bwlch. Alan Bowring suggests we search for film reconstructions here.



Penuel Calvinistic Methodist Chapel - Chris Barber

On our walk day – Friday 2nd March – we then returned to Penuel Chapel for refreshments. The chapel took a long time to build and was completed around 1817, a Calvinistic Methodist chapel based on The Trefecca System. Large social gatherings have for long been held here, especially after the building of the vestry in 1889. Soon this last bastion of a Gladstonite era will be no more as the chapel is now up for sale from October. Who knows? Someone may fancy it as a 'Beacons Way Centre'! NGR SO149220.

Returning to our 'forest clearing' start point, we come to the end of an entertaining two boot walk, exploring the 'disunited village seated on an eminence' (Ogilby 1675) called Bwlch.

THE INNS OF BWLCH

Artur Jones

Only one public house remains in Bwlch village today – *The New Inn* – a well known watering hole on ‘The Beacons Way’. The late Arthur Jones JP recalls this one and many more too . How useful *The Boot* would have been in the modern day !

The New Inn was called *The Star* until 1845. Until then it was a one storey house with steps leading down from the road.

The Morning Star was established at the time of the name change, and was well established by 1855. This house was a parcel receiving office for GWR buses. Both *The New Inn* and *The Morning Star* once had petrol filling stations.

The Bwlch Inn (Portcullice Inn) was the most important inn; here it was that the coaches stopped for refreshments and to pick up passengers. There were steps leading down to the house from the main road, and there were two front entrances, one on the Brecon road and one on the Llangorse road. A good deal of land was attached to the inn and there were large buildings at the rear for the accommodation of horses and corn. This is now the site of Bwlch Village Hall. Building stone from here was used to rebuild Llanfellte farmhouse.



The New Inn



The old Morning Star Inn

Nearby *The Red Lion* stood where Pant-yr-eos is today, last kept by a coachman at Buckland and owned by Mr Gwynne Holford who raised it from a one storey building to its present height.

The Farmers Arms was the most substantial of our modern public houses, on the western side of Bwlch pass in the parish of Llansantffread. Originally it was a smallholding known as Dan-y-Bwlch and remained a dwelling house up to 1856.



The Farmers Arms is now a private house - Chris Barber

The Boot was situated next to Middle Shop (one time Central Stores – shop – now lapsed). The publican was a shoemaker called Matthew Price who employed as many as six men. It is said that he lost his licence by allowing The Chartists to hold a meeting in his house.

Another inn, the licence of which has long lapsed, existed where Anchor House stands today (adjacent to The New Inn). The name can not be ascertained, but was said to be named after a king. It was probably still running when Bwlch Cutting was made 1824-1826.



The old Boot Inn - Chris Barber

LEADERSHIP OF GUIDED WALKS

WHAT IS IT AND IS IT CAPABLE OF BEING TAUGHT?

Geoff Williams

This item is **not intended** for those who have led parties of walkers but for those who are thinking of leading.

CHECK LIST

1. **The only aim of the leader is to keep the party, each and every one, happy.**
2. To achieve that aim the leader must be: fit on the day of the walk, confident in his / her ability and must know the route, the weather and the conditions underfoot on the day.
3. Such confidence **must be communicated** to each member of the party right from the start when the leader will talk about the day, the route, the distance and the timings.
4. The route will be explored on a reconnaissance when the timings, the route, the alternatives and the places of interest in the countryside should be noted.
5. The leader should aim to talk with **all** members of the party and not necessarily to lead from the front during the whole day.
6. He/she should aim to walk at a speed that is slightly faster than the speed of the slowest members of the party (this is not always possible as some walkers will try to join a walk that is above their level of fitness or ability and the leader should recognise this and make allowances.
7. At the end of the walk comments on the day should be encouraged and the next walk publicised.
8. The only reward that a leader can expect is: a safe day, some expressions of thanks from members and a promise that members look forward to coming on the next walk that he/she leads.

Geoffrey Williams has been a walks leader for over 30 years in the UK and Europe. He is a former member of the Ramblers Leadership and Navigational panel, The Welsh Mountain Leaders Training Board Committee, the Welsh Sports Council Outdoor Pursuits Group, the Ordnance Survey Advisory panel and an honorary Life Member of CCPR.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR



The correspondence about leading walks continues!

Dear Editor,

I was surprised to find myself agreeing with some of R(Ben) Foord's letter defending walkers who go ahead of the leader (The Beacon, Summer 2012). As someone who grumbles at 'wayward' walkers when I have been struggling to keep up at the back, I expected to generally disagree with Mr Foord's views. However, although I disagree with some of his points, one or two of them I believe are indisputable. For example, his claim:

'There is no doubt that walking is most enjoyable at one's own natural pace, and can become frustrating at anything but that, so expect people to pass you at times.'

Equally of course, expect people whose 'natural pace' is slower to be behind you at times. It's not a competition. Later Mr Foord refers to a 'reasonable pace', but I think that gets us on to shaky and subjective ground, as do the terms 'steady pace' and 'relaxed pace' which appear at the front of the walks programme. I believe recent research has indicated that, other things being equal - general fitness level and stamina - one's pace of walking is genetically determined. Since Mr Foord is aware of the importance of a walker's 'natural pace', I expect he would agree with the following considerations :

1. Be considerate of the leader's plight to deal with people walking at different natural paces.
2. Be aware that not every leader can resist the pressure of fast pace walkers.
3. Be happy to make regular patient stops for the leader / group to catch up.
4. Be aware that walkers at the back are not necessarily less fit or have less stamina.

Not all the onus I believe is on fast walkers. In 2005 I went with four Cheltenham Club walkers for a holiday in Scotland. We were joined by other walkers, three of whom were seriously fit. Because of age and fitness discrepancy I did not expect to walk with the latter. However, although they could selfishly have gone off and done their own thing, they generally didn't. One of them who had done all the munros twice took on the role of leader. He showed what seemed a genuine care for everyone in the group, he was anxious for everybody to take part regardless of their speed of walking, and he was very encouraging. At times the group spread out, but I never felt any pressure to rush to catch up. The whole experience was one of inclusion and relaxation. Ironically, I ended up bagging slightly more munros than the faster Cheltenham walkers. I told the leader and the other 'serious' walkers that (because I was slow) I was considered a poor walker by the Cheltenham group, and on one holiday in the Lake District a Cheltenham leader had told someone (behind my back) that he did not think I was capable of climbing the mountains there. They just responded with laughter saying it was ridiculous. What a difference a leader can make! Some of the long-time leaders of the BBPS have very similar qualities to this 'inclusive' leader. But are they on the decrease? Is the club's philosophy becoming: 'survival of the fastest'?

Two moderate BBPS walks I did this year suggest maybe. They both set off at a fast pace. Someone dropped out early on in both walks, one being new to the club. Some of the others who continued expressed disquiet about the speed. One was a new member. She was still in employment (so not old), she had walked for many years both privately and in groups, and done many walking holidays. I believe therefore she was an experienced and fit walker. She said she had chosen this as her first walk with the club as it had given plenty of time in the programme and she would be well within her capabilities. She was amazed at the pace. If this was a moderate walk then what, she wondered, were the energetic and strenuous walks like!? For both walks the main focus of the leaders seemed to be on the faster walkers and I believe they were both quite oblivious of the struggles some people had keeping up during the day. Surely 'exclusive' leadership of this kind, particularly on walks classed as moderate in the programme, potentially risk undermining membership levels?

Care, tolerance and respect are I believe desirable in everyone involved in group walking. However, in my personal experience, they are essential qualities for a leader.

Sue Lane

Dear Editor,

I found Ben foord's comments in the last issue of *The Beacon* very helpful, both in its content and its light and humorous touch. Unfortunately I found your addition to the discussion less helpful. John Jackson, who you quoted, was Chief Instructor at Plas y Brenin from 1957 to 1959, and then Director from 1960 to 1976. As a member of the party which would have attempted Everest had Tenzing and Hillary not succeeded he deserves our respect, but there are two more recent authorities.

Eric Langmuir, in *Mountaineering and Leadership* (latest edition was 1995) says 'there is no best position for the leader of a party. It may be at the front, at the back or in the middle. The position adopted will depend on the circumstances prevailing at the time. Normally, of course, the leader will be in front, having appointed the next most experienced member of the party to bring up the rear.'

Hillwalking, the official handbook of the Mountain Leader and Walking Group Leader schemes, published in 2003, says 'the leader's physical positioning within the party will vary depending on leadership style and terrain. Autocratic leaders usually position themselves at the front of the party, whilst a democratic style involves the leader circulating amongst the group.'

Walk leaders meet periodically, to discuss issues which have concerned us, and have an annual session in the hills with Allan Gibbs, our technical adviser. I am sure we will continue to discuss this, and if there is such a thing as a final word, please do not expect it too soon!

Yours sincerely

Clive Eiles

Dear Editor,

I would like to take issue with the comment 'This is Wales Mr Coxe not England!' in the article on Llanfihangel Court. Monmouthshire was administratively part of England until 1830 and William Coxe was writing in 1801 in his *Tours of Monmouthshire* about his descent from the Skirrid, so I would think it was probably considered to be part of England at that time. I don't think it was all those many years ago when it was always known as 'Wales and Monmouthshire'.

Ann Payne

THE STATUS OF MONMOUTHSHIRE ?

Chris Barber

Following Ann Payne's comment regarding 'Wales and Monmouthshire', I decided to look into the matter in some detail and found the following statements particularly relevant to this long standing controversy.

The Laws in Wales Act 1535 integrated Wales directly into the English legal system and the '**Lordships Marchers within the said Country or Dominion of Wales**' were allocated to existing and new shires. Some lordships were **annexed to existing counties in England**, and some were annexed to existing counties in Wales, with the remainder being divided up into **new counties, one of which was Monmouthshire**.

Although the original Act of 1535 specifically includes Monmouthshire as being in the 'Country or Dominion of Wales,' the **Laws in Wales Act 1542** enumerates the Welsh counties as twelve in number, excluding Monmouthshire from the count.

Neither Act refers to Monmouthshire as being an English county; indeed no Act of Parliament states that Monmouthshire has been removed from Wales and added to England. However, Monmouthshire was made directly responsible to the courts of Westminster rather than falling under the Court of Great Sessions in Wales.

Matters were further confused in the late 17th century when under Charles II, Monmouthshire was added to the Oxford circuit of the English Assizes and following this it gradually came to be regarded as an English county.

During the 19th century the question of the status of Monmouthshire arose in earnest, when some of the local gentry such as the Dukes of Beaufort established family seats in England, and many industrialists and others moved into Monmouthshire, particularly in the eastern part of the county. Some of these, and others with 'social aspirations', considered it essential to emphasise their 'Englishness'.

In 1862 George Borrow wrote: 'Monmouthshire is at present considered an English county, though certainly with little reason, for it not only stands on the western side of the Wye, but the names of almost all its parishes are Welsh, and many thousands of its population still speak the Welsh language.'

The distinction implied in the description 'Wales and Monmouthshire' was nurtured by elements of the Establishment and became increasingly accepted on the English side of the border and in central government, until the local Welsh residents more fully asserted themselves in the 20th century.



Colonel Robert Preston Sandeman, of Dan y Parc died on 27th April, 1932. His grave in Llanelly Churchyard is easily identified because perched on the top is the carved figure of a large white dog which always causes interest and questions from people seeing it for the first time. One often sees angels or doves carved on memorials, but a dog is certainly very unusual, so why?

The Colonel owned several dogs, but one was his particular favourite and it would seem that they were inseparable. On the day that the Colonel was buried his faithful dog followed his coffin all the way to the grave and when friends and mourners returned to their homes the dog stayed there for a long time afterwards.

Every day the canine mourner visited his master's grave and one morning after a cold wintry night of hard frost, the dog was found frozen stiff. He was then buried by the side of his master and the effigy was subsequently carved and placed on the tomb.

Chris Barber

COLONEL SANDEMAN'S DOG

A lonely mountain churchyard
Llanelly Church its name
Was once a home for one dear dog
Of fine and noble frame

He sat upon his master's grave
And pined the whole day long
He wouldn't leave his master's side
To him he did belong

He lay down on his grave so quiet
His place he would not leave
His loyalty it knew no bounds
He truly was bereaved

He wanted to be near him
In lifetime and in death
So still he lay above him
Until his dying breath

And now they lie together
Both man and dog beside
They never will be parted now
Whatever else betide

Anne Marie Barber

THE BIG BLACK MOUNTAINS CHALLENGE EVENT

John Collins

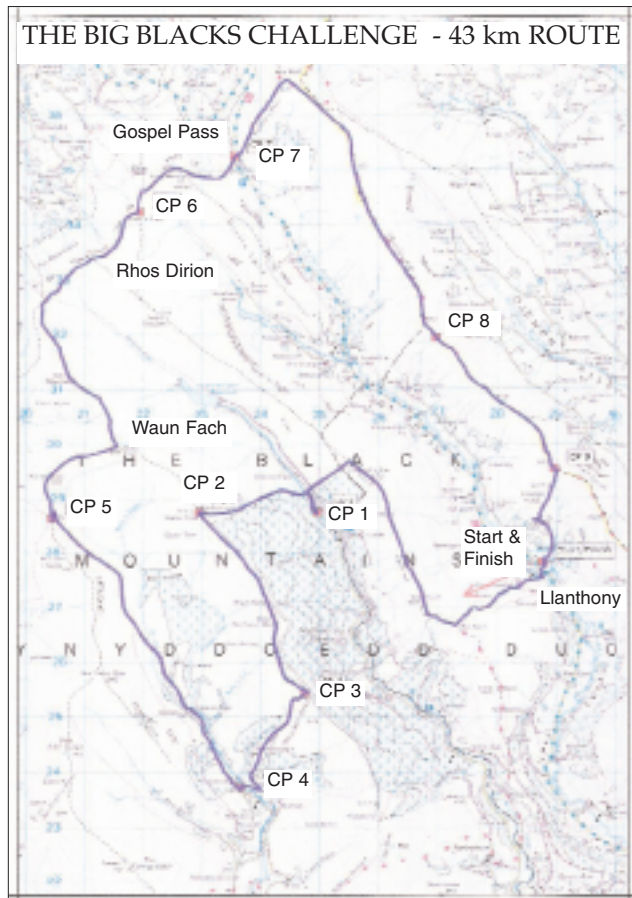
While on a seventeen-mile circular walk encompassing Hergest Ridge, near Kington, an acquaintance mentioned he was going to take part in the Longtown Mountain Rescue (LTMR) Challenge event. This event is organised annually to raise funds. They offer a choice of three routes around the Black Mountains, the longest being approximately 43km, the other options being 29km, and 16km. All of the routes start and finish at Llanthony Abbey, in the beautiful Vale of Ewyas.

Although I had driven cars and ridden motorcycles through this valley, the event was a good opportunity to walk in this area. I hastily sent a registration application to the organisers for the longest route. Ten days later, my registration number arrived by mail. The three routes were available to download as PDF documents from the LTMR website. Participants can change their mind on the day as to which route they register for, or even change when they reach certain checkpoints. My intention was to tackle the longest route, and so studiously transferred the route to my GPS navigator.

This year, principally because of moving house, my long distance walking fitness was shy of mileage. It would have been unwise of me to be confident of completing the long route within a reasonable time, and without suffering too much pain the following day or so. With only a couple of weeks before the event, I decided to walk Mortimer's Trail, which covers a distance of thirty miles. Conveniently, my new location is Shobdon, near Leominster, which naturally splits the trail into two sections. The first from Ludlow to Shobdon is distance of 22 miles, the second from Shobdon to Kington a distance of 14 miles. The additional mileage accounts for the loop in and out of Shobdon. With no more time, this walk, along with the previous Hergest Ridge circuit, was the extent of my "training" before the LTMR Challenge.

On the day of the event, the early morning was clear and bright, although the many days of rain had saturated the countryside. After a drive of seventy minutes to Llanthony Abbey, officials directed me to park in a field. After parking the car, trusting that it would be possible to get out of the field should it rain, the next step was to register in the marquee at 07:00 hours. As it was to be a strenuous walk, my choice of kit was light in weight, although including the essential safety items, and a pair of LEKI sticks.

The official start line was close to the marquee. The first steps were to walk down the drive, cross the road, and take a path that led to a footbridge over a stream, a number of stiles before ascending the north side of Cwm-bwchel.



Initially, the going was very muddy, but the path became rocky with increasing elevation. On reaching the summit of Bal Mawr at 607m, the route follows the ridge path in a northwesterly direction for approximately 2.7 kilometres. At this point, the route turns to the west and descends towards the Grwyne Fawr reservoir service road. The route hugs the north facing fencing of the Mynydd Du Forest. The first checkpoint was the other side of the service road. My choice of final descent to the road, or rather, to follow other walkers, was not good. It was very steep, slippery, and close to a barbed wire fence that was to provide a dangerous handrail. A smarter route would have been through the trees, before dropping down to the road. The checkpoint position was the other side of a small footbridge across a fast flowing stream. This bridge provided a natural gateway to the next section.

This was a good place to take a drink and nibble on an energy bar before moving on. The route doubled-backed along side the stream, and then made a steep ascent along side a gulley to the summit of Pen y Gadair Fawr (800m) and the ridge path. Although it is possible to make the ascent on either side of this gulley, the preferred route is on the north side. After crossing the fast flowing stream by carefully stepping across the wet rocks, the path ascends very steeply for a hundred metres or more. The gradient then eases, but remains steep to the summit, which is the location of the second checkpoint.

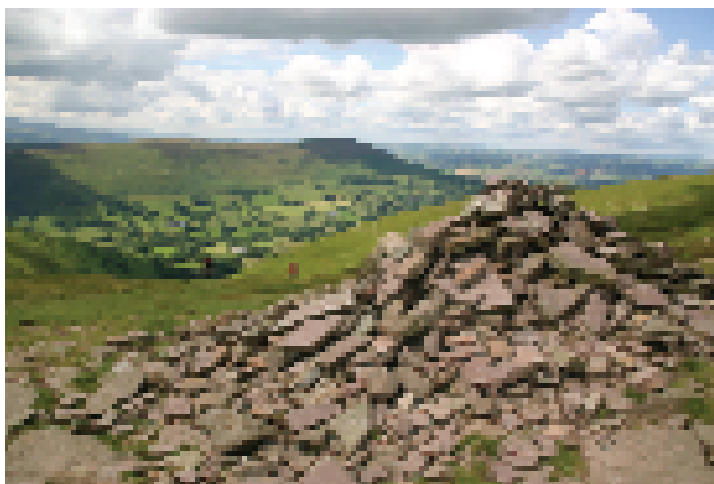
From this point, the route turns south and follows the ridge path to the next checkpoint. The path was very wet in parts with areas of eroded peat bogs that required either jumping over, or walking around. Felling of the trees in the Mynydd Du Forest area to the east had left an unsightly view. On reaching the third checkpoint, the path descends off the ridge in a westerly direction down the Pen Gwyllt March. Initially the path is very narrow through thick bracken. Careful foot placement was necessary to avoid unseen holes or tufts. In places, erosion has made the narrow path deep, making progress rather difficult. At this point, it was interesting to observe that no other walker was in sight, so it was reassuring to have previously entered the route into my Garmin GPS navigator. It was more a question of staying on route, rather than getting lost.

After crossing stiles and a service road, the path enters into woods following a boundary wall. On reaching the other side of the woods, and crossing a stile, the path passes over open fields in parallel to a boundary fence. It then joins a service road that led to the fourth checkpoint, which was a short distance from a tarmac road near Pentwyn Neuadd-fawr. Joining the tarmac road heading north was the beginning of the walk-in and ascent to the saddle between Mynydd Llysiau (662) and Pen Trumau (707m), the location of the fifth checkpoint.

Although paved roads are not my favourite walking surface, they do make it easier to set a faster pace. However, just beyond the derelict Hermitage buildings, the road becomes a bridleway, which generally are associated with mud and a poor walking surface. The path was very wet and muddy, sometimes needing a detour up the banking. Once over the bridge that crosses the Grwyne Fechan, the wide grassy path was a long gradual ascent leading to the ridge. In the last hundred metres, a short steep path leads from the main path directly to the checkpoint. This was a grassy dry area, with superb views of Pen y Fan and the central Beacons to the west, making it ideal for a short refreshment break. Although the wind was rather cool, the sun was adding welcome warmth.



Macnamara's Track leads up to Check Point 5 - Chris Barber



Saddle between Mynydd Llysiau (662) and Pen Trumau - Chris Barber

After a drink, banana, and energy bar, it was time to move on. Stopping for longer, no matter how pleasant, brings the problem of stiffness that then takes a while to work off. The next section of the route was to prove very trying. After a short steep ascent to the summit of Pen Trumau (707m), it was then a gradually increasing gradient to ascend Wuan Fach (811m).

The ascent and particularly the descent proved to be a peat bog assault course. The trig point base on the summit of Wuan Fach was an island surrounded by a wide moat of waterlogged peat. Turning north and descending off the summit the route was a maze of waterlogged areas, and

deep gullies. For some, it was possible either to jump over, or walk through to save energy, but for others it was necessary to walk around. This was a most energy sapping section. Fortunately, the going became easier on the approach to the Pen Rhos Dirion ridge and then on towards Pen Rhos Dirion, the location of the sixth checkpoint.

Stopping only to register at the checkpoint, the next challenge was the ascent to the summit of Lord Hereford's Knob (690m). This ascent was very steep over the last hundred metres or so. From this summit, the descent to Gospel Valley road was easy walking on a gravel path. Although the gradient was steep on some sections, the path encouraged a faster walking pace. The location of the seventh checkpoint was across the road and up a steep bank.

This was also the start of the ascent to the trig point and summit of Hay Bluff. The initial gradient was steep, slowing down my pace, but eventually flattened along Ffynnon y Parc ridge towards the trig point. From here, the route turned south, ascending the ridge at 702m and joining the Offa's Dyke path. This section was a large area of water logged peak bog.

This was my first visit to Hay Bluff, and clearly, it is a very popular location for walkers, mountain bikers, and paragliders. There is little doubt that the number of people using the area have contributed to the problem of erosion. Without the large slabs of concrete that form a path across the waterlogged peat bog, it is hard to imagine how to cross it without the use of a coracle. The meandering path made it easy to maintain a good pace over otherwise impassable ground. Eventually, the slabs gave way to compacted road-stone material, which was also easy to walk on. It was now mid afternoon, but the elevation and visibility gave stunning views of the English countryside to the east.

At the eighth checkpoint, a few words of encouragement from the officials spurred me on along a seemingly never-ending path disappearing over the horizon. This image was probably why another walker had previously joked about the "yellow brick road". It was now clear to me what he meant. Although the distance seemed daunting, a mental check of how long this section would take to walk put it into perspective.

Finally, the penultimate checkpoint number nine is in sight. From this location at an elevation of 604m, it is only a couple of kilometres or so, to the finish at Llanthony Abbey. However, the route has a sting in its tail. The last section of the descent off Loxidge Tump is a very steep gradient. Weary leg muscles, large step-downs, and wet rocks are a combination that court a fall. It requires concentration, careful foot placement and for me, the support of walking sticks. At the end of this section, it was a pleasant relief to cross the finish line, hand in my check card, and enjoy a cup of tea and cake.

Although demanding, the walk was very enjoyable, made even more so by the near perfect weather conditions. The clear visibility throughout the day gave wonderful views around the Black Mountains to the west, north, and east. For me, it is tempting to repeat the Challenge next year, but this will depend on my fitness, and especially the weather. The experience of the event led me to review my day walking kit, and make slight improvements to reduce the total weight. My rucksack and footwear offer the most potential for weight reduction, in addition to a pair of lightweight non-adjustable walking sticks.

My Garmin GPS navigator recorded a distance of 46km, and a total ascent of 1804m. The organisers claim that 801 “competitors” took part in the event this year. They did not provide a breakdown of the numbers for each route. Incidentally, I prefer the term participants, because individuals with wide ranging abilities take part, and they choose the route that best suits them. It is very much a personal challenge, rather than a competition against other walkers.



View of Llanthony on descent from Loxidge Tump - Chris Barber

THE BIG BLACK MOUNTAINS CHALLENGE is an annual fund raising event (organised by Longtown Mountain Rescue Team) usually held in May. It consists of a choice of three testing walks/runs of 43 km, 29 km and 16 km, between them taking in 15 summits over 660m in the Black Mountains. In 2013 the event will take place on 18th May. (See www.longtownmrt.org/)

ON THE BLACK HILL WITH BRUCE CHATWIN

Malcolm Phillips

Bruce Chatwin's novel, *On the Black Hill*, was published in 1982. He was forty-two years old and had already written two books, one depicting the isolated lives of the inhabitants of Patagonia in South America (*In Patagonia*, 1977), the other about the life of an exiled slave trader on the coast of West Africa (*The Viceroy of Ouidah*, 1980). His third book, however, was to be very different. Somewhat irritated, he said, by being called a travel writer, he decided to write about people who never went out.



On the Black Hill tells the story of two farmers from the Welsh borders, twin brothers Benjamin and Lewis Jones who live their lives together in pastoral seclusion. They remain unmarried, unaffected by technological change, part of the hill-farming community of the last century. The writer depicts a landscape which is both real and imagined. Documentation is mixed with invention, actual historical episodes peopled with characters who never existed. Anecdotes and facts are combined, rearranged and reproduced in the area round Llanthony and the Ewyas Valley, the Black Mountains, Hay-on-Wye, the Radnor Hills. Anywhere between South Shropshire and Monmouthshire, it is all the same board said the author. The fictional market town of Rhulen could be Hay-on-Wye or Clun, Kington or Knighton. There is a 'Black Hill' on the eastern scarp of the Black Mountains along the ridge from the Cat's Back; but there are others on the OS maps.

Bruce Chatwin loved this distinctive area lying between England and Wales. The nine-year-old boy was taken west on a car journey by his father from their home in the Birmingham suburbs. Parked in a field in Radnorshire by a mountain stream, they woke the next morning surrounded by sheep. The teenage Marlborough schoolboy visited the Ewyas Valley on a cycling weekend. The young man returned some years later with his future wife. He stayed in Llanthony Priory when it was occupied by an Italian contessa. During his life as a writer, he often stayed with Tom Maschler, his publisher at Jonathan Cape, in his cottage near Llanthony. The Welsh border landscape was one of the emotional centres of Chatwin's life, his home in many ways. Once he almost bought a cottage near Hay-on-Wye.



The author completed much of the research and writing for *On the Black Hill* whilst staying in the area, in Cusop, in Clunton in south Shropshire and in Scethrog near Brecon. Walking in the Black Mountains was part of the writer's creative process. He dressed in khaki with ankle-length boots and neatly turned over fawn socks. On his back, a frameless rucksack of dark brown calfskin, custom-made by a saddler in Cirencester; in the pockets a moleskine notebook, a Mont Blanc fountain pen, Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and a pair of binoculars.

Bruce Chatwin's home was with his wife in the Ozleworth Valley in Gloucestershire but when he was writing, he would run off to work in the houses of his many friends. On occasion he would also rent small, urban rooms. The restless romantic was always looking for the perfect place to work, but when he thought he had found it, he became disillusioned and left for somewhere more desirable. Away from his own address came to be a condition of his writing anything; being at home meant writer's block.

Penelope Betjeman, wife of the Poet Laureate John Betjeman, was a great friend. She was one of the first people to be given the finished manuscript of *On the Black Hill*. She walked round in a daze all day after reading it, and was convinced it was going to be the greatest regional novel of the century, as good as anything written by Thomas Hardy. She lived in Cusop and helped Chatwin with his research. She introduced him to folk in Hay-on-Wye where Chatwin was a frequent visitor to the Blue Boar. He loved observing people and listening to the way they spoke. He was fascinated by the simplicity of nonconformist culture - one of the themes in the novel - often visiting a chapel in the town.

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It was Penelope Betjeman who introduced him to two bachelor brothers who lived on a neighbouring farm. Before the Second World War their mother had sent them to the fair at Hay-on-Wye to meet a couple of young ladies. The plan backfired. The brothers came home with crestfallen faces, never having seen girls in short skirts before, and it put them off the opposite sex for ever. The landlady of the Bull's Head at Craswall remembered a visit from the writer and his friend. On reading the book she was struck by the reference to the gathering of stray sheep into a paddock adjacent to the fictional Shepherd's Rest public house. The sheep pen was here at Craswall she thought.



The Bull's Head Inn at Craswall, as it looks today

Chatwin visited Penelope Betjeman's neighbours at a farm called the 'New House' on the eastern side of the Black Mountains. The building resembled the twins' house 'The Vision'; but the fictional house, the writer said, was just like any pre-war border farmhouse. It was an imaginative creation. 'The Rock', however, another homestead in the book, was modelled on an actual hillside smallholding.

Having helped with the research, Penelope Betjeman gave the finished manuscript to a friend, who managed to identify every character with someone she knew. And Penelope herself appears in the story, an exuberant visitor to the twins who exclaims at the top of her voice, 'Gosh! Cinnamon toast!'

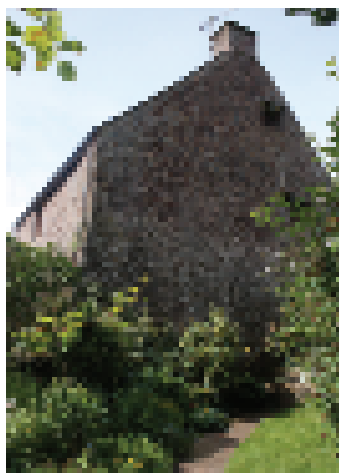
The first part of *On the Black Hill* was written at Cwm Hall in Clunton in the south Shropshire hills, home of Chatwin's friends Martin and Stella Wilkinson. He arrived there in the autumn of 1980 in an old Citroen Deux Chevaux with a bicycle strapped to the roof. He was given a room over the stable block and was at his desk each morning at seven o'clock, writing in longhand on yellow legal pads, surrounded by photocopies of the Hereford Times and large-scale OS maps. Above his desk he pinned a reproduction of The Broad and Narrow Path, a religious print which hung in 'The Vision' farmhouse. To Benjamin Lewis, haunted by its image, the road to Hell was the road to Hereford, the road to Heaven led up the Radnor Hills. After lunch Chatwin might go for a walk or go off on his bicycle to listen to stories in auction houses, pubs or antique shops, all part of his research.

A path from Cwm Hall leads through a gate to a Forestry Commission sign: BLACK HILL. Bruce Chatwin returned from one of his walks full of excitement. 'I've found my title!' This particular hill, however, does not fit his fictional landscape. He takes the name from the map but constructs his own topography.

A few months later, the first draft underway, the scene changed. Chatwin crossed the Atlantic and moved into an artists' colony called Yaddo in Saratoga Springs near New York. This community provided room and board to those artists who wanted the opportunity to work without interruption in a creative environment. He was there for six weeks, writing during the day, entertaining the women in the evening by reciting Shakespeare in his beautiful English voice. It felt strange, he said, to conjure up a vision of Radnor or Brecon outside New York, living between a racecourse and a suburban pine wood. Yet it was a help to be away from the setting he was writing about. Without access to any additional material, the story became a circular whole he thought.

He returned home and by the autumn he was back in the Brecon area, staying with another of his friends, Diana Melly, at The Tower in Scethrog in the valley of the River Usk. Diana was married to George Melly, the jazz

and blues singer and critic, a keen supporter of the Brecon Jazz Festival. The house had been built as a medieval watchtower. The visitor settled in, working in an upstairs room. In the evening he read his work aloud to his hostess to make sure it read smoothly. Sometimes he would bound down the stairs in the middle of the day to read out a passage he had just written, following Diana round the kitchen, pages fluttering whilst the apple chutney bubbled away on the stove. She was often doing things for Bruce, she remembered, and one day found herself sawing at the legs of a table which he had pronounced too high for composition.



The Tower, Scethrog - C. Barber

From The Tower they went out together, gathering material for the work. They even flew over the Welsh countryside in a four-seater aeroplane as the fictional twins do on their eightieth birthday. Chatwin consulted a farmer's old account books for details of agricultural prices. Another farmer at Llanfrynach told him stories about Radnorshire farming life and traditions. A character in the book (Merlin Evans) who tours the borders with his stallion (Spanker) and who, it was said, sired more illegitimate children than his stallion produced foals, was modelled on a real figure who used to walk his horse around the farms. Fictional Meg is also drawn from life, a middle-aged woman who slept on a heap of old mattresses on the floor by the fire. Over the flames hung a black kettle sometimes used to boil potatoes. When she went outside birds perched on her head. Chatwin liked her a lot, chopped logs for her and organised legal advice when her tenancy was threatened.

On the Black Hill is dedicated to Diana Melly in recognition of her friendship and the writer's stay in Scethrog Tower.

The first draft was finished. Chatwin left Powys and went to Tuscany, to revise and re-write, endless bits of shading and colouring as he called it. A copy of the manuscript was given to a professional researcher to spot inaccuracies and the book was made ready for publication. It came out in the autumn of 1982.

Bruce Chatwin wrote two more books, one about the aborigines in Australia (*The Songlines*, 1987), the other about an art collector in Czechoslovakia (Utz, 1988). There was also a collection of essays, travels and profiles from his life (What Am I Doing Here, 1988). *On the Black Hill* remains the only one of his books set in Britain.

Bruce Chatwin died in 1989.

CEFN-YR-YSTRAD LANDSCAPE

Robert Short

The summit of Cefn yr Ystrad is an outlier of the Central Beacons, it rises to over 2000ft (615 metres) and it provides a 360 degree panoramic view of the Brecon beacons National Park and the South Wales Valleys. This is wild country scarred with massive Limestone quarries and pitted with Sink Holes caused by the action of water draining off acid peat dissolving underlying Limestone, the caverns collapsing creating the funnel shaped holes. It is said that there are more of them concentrated in the Brecon Beacons National Park than any other area in the Country. They are still forming today. The small lake Llyn y Garn Fawr near the Chartist Cave has drained, initially into a small hole that is still developing into the shape of a sink hole.

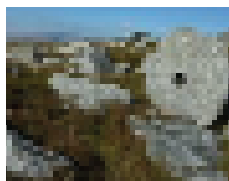
It has been described by Colin Adams in his Mountain Walkers Guide to Wales as a desolate moorland not to be attempted unless competent with map and compass. In this quiet area you can spend the day with only sheep and horses for company but its often used by the military on exercise, in my opinion a tougher challenge than the Beacons to the north where paths are severely eroded.

The limestone quarries of Cwar yr Ystrad and Cwar yr Hendre have created massive scars on the landscape that provides the Steel Plant at Ebbw Vale with the flux for making Iron and Steel over a period of 40 years. Now they lie abandoned it will take many more years for their scarsto heal.

Over thirty years of visiting the moorland I have traced the course of boundary stones that cross it from east to west and have rediscovered abandoned millstones and sheepfolds.



The Ogam Stone



old millstone

Recently my interest has been rekindled by a document I found on the web It is the result of an Archeology survey of part of the area. It gives the grid references and descriptions of different sites, it shows that in ancient times it was far from deserted. The details of web document are below:

RCAHM Wales Upland Initiative Cefn Yr Ystrad (North West)

Choose a fine day and good company to explore this fascinated landscape and you will be rewarded by sites dating from the Bronze Age to modern times. Piles of stones they may be but with a little imagination you can travel back in time. If you are lucky you may find a lost flint used by one of our forbears for scraping fat off skins.

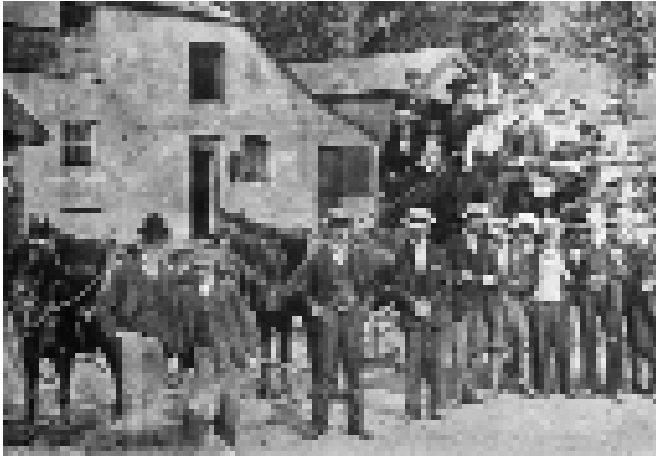
WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Chris Barber

I have always found the origin of place-names an interesting subject, particularly those found in the Brecon Beacons National Park, which is packed with so much history. It is so easy to just take names for granted, but when one bothers to do some research the history or traditions associated with these locations is very often quite fascinating.

I remember back in the 1970s, driving along the A470, and stopping to give a lift to a hitchhiker who spoke to me in a German accent and asked if I could drop him at the 'Army Stores'. This puzzled me for a few seconds and then I realised that he meant Storey Arms.

It was of course named after an old coaching inn which did not stand on the site of the present building, but further down the road at Pont ar Daf, named after a wealthy landowner called Anthony Mervin Storey. He later adopted his wife's name Maskelyne, and became a Justice of the Peace and Deputy Lieutenant of Breconshire.



The old Storey Arms Inn stood at Pont ar Daf

The inn was abandoned around 1897, when the Beacons Reservoir was completed. It was demolished by the Cardiff Water Board in 1924 and they built the present Storey Arms in 1936.

Part of the building was leased to the Youth Hostels Association and the other half was used as a transport cafe. The South Wales Region of the YHA were able to make the proud boast that this was the highest youth hostel in England and Wales, being 1,440 feet above sea level. In 1969 the lease ran

out and the building became an Outdoor Education Centre run by South Glamorgan Education Authority. In 1972 a replacement Youth Hostel was established at Llwyn-y-Celyn about two miles away, towards Brecon.

Fforest Coalpit, a hamlet behind the Sugar Loaf, is a name which many people find puzzling, for they expect to see evidence of a colliery there. However, the name is derived from the fact that charcoal burners used to operate in this location in the early years of the nineteenth century.

Tarren yr Esgob is a rocky escarpment looming above Capel y Ffin and the name means 'Bishop's Rock'. According to a local tale it commemorates a bishop, who was on his way to Llanthony from St David's. Hotly pursued by a wild band of Welshmen, he rode to the brink of the precipice and stopped. Seeing that there was no escape, and determined not to be captured, he urged his horse forward, and both the animal and rider were dashed to pieces on the rocks below.

Well, we can take that tale with a pinch of salt, but a more convincing one concerning another bishop relates to Pont Esgob ('Bishop's Bridge), near Fforest Coalpit. Spanning the river Grwyne, this was originally a packhorse bridge and its name commemorates the occasion on Thursday, March 10th, 1188, when Baldwin, the Archbishop of Canterbury passed this way. He was accompanied by Giraldus Cambrensis (Gerald of Wales), Archdeacon of Brecon, and they were on a preaching tour of Wales with the aim of persuading men to fight in the Third Crusade.

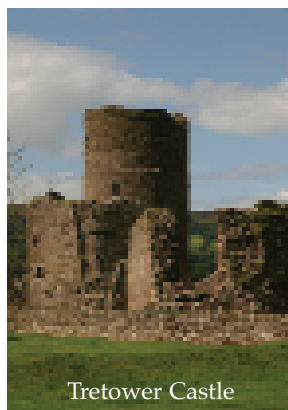


Pont Esgob ('Bishop's Bridge), near Fforest Coalpit

Tretower, to the west of Crickhowell, stands in the ancient mini kingdom of Ystradyw ('Vale of Yew Trees') or Stradewy in its English form and here once stood the fortified home of Genillin or Cenhillyn, Lord of Ystradyw and Prince of Powys. He was the only son of Rhys Goch, who ruled this area in the eleventh century. It is of interest that the name of Genllin is carved on the rim of the ancient font in Partrishow Church.

When the Usk Valley fell to the Norman invaders, their leader, Bernard de Neufmarche established himself at Brecon and one of his followers, Sir Miles Picard was rewarded for his assistance in the conquest of Brycheiniog with the gift of Ystradwy. Picard then established a castle at the place now known as Tretower (Tretwr).

Cwmdy is a small village in the Rhiangoll Valley, just north of Tretower and its name translates as 'Dark Valley', and this is probably a reference to the lateness of the morning sun to reach it round the shoulders of the hills. However, this name is a replacement for the ancient name of Llanfihangel Tref y Caerau which means St Michael's Church in the forts. Such an interesting name is explained by the fact that the village stands near the Roman Gaer on the Via Julia, a once important route which ran from Isca (Caerleon) to Maridunum (Carmarthen). In addition there are ramparts to be seen of even more ancient forts crowning the nearby hills of Pentir and Myarth.



Tretower Castle

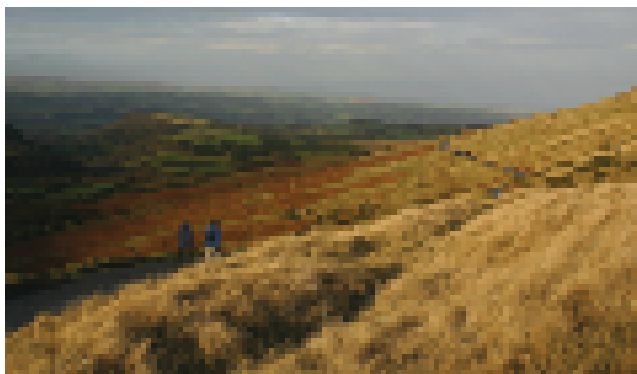


Cwmdy in the Rhiangoll Valley - Chris Barber

The Gospel Pass (1778 feet) at the head of the Llanthony Valley in the Black Mountains, threads its way between Twmpa and Hay Bluff and is known in Welsh as Bwlch yr Efengel ('Pass of the Evangelist'). An old tradition claims that St Peter and his brother apostle St Paul, came this way on a journey through Wales, spreading the message of Christianity to the pagan tribes.

The full version of this tale suggests that the two apostles originally set out on their Christian mission to Spain, but were driven off course by storms and finally made a landing on the northern coast of the Bristol Channel. They made their way up the Usk Valley to reach the Roman fort of Gobannium (Abergavenny) and then headed north through the Llanthony Valley to reach this pass. It is reputed that there they separated. St Paul headed west and St Peter went east until he came to Peterchurch in the Golden Valley. Here he consecrated an ancient well and established a simple church.

However, it is more likely that the pass was originally called Bwlch y Fan Cul ('The Pass of the narrow spot') and this name was altered to Bwlch yr Efengel to provide a more interesting story.



The Gospel Pass (1778 feet) is one of the highest roads in Wales - Chris Barber

I will finish with the name Llangorse which is a contraction of Llan-y-gors, meaning the church in the fen or marsh. The nearby lake which is the largest natural lake in South Wales is known in Welsh as Llyn Syfaddan (the 'standing water or lake') and there are many traditions associated with it. For example it was once believed that the waters of the River Llynfi which flows into and out of the lake, do not mix with those of the lake and that the fish from one never pass into the other.

There are several kinds of fish to be found in the lake including pike, roach, perch and eels of such extraordinary size that they have given rise to the proverb 'Cyhyd a llyswen Syffaddan' (as long as a Syffaddan eel).

EQUINOX

Anne Marie Barber

Well, here we are again at the start of another year; but when did the new year really start? Let's look back now to 21 December, the shortest day of the year, otherwise known as the winter equinox, when the daylight hours and the nighttime hours are equal.

Over the millenia mankind has observed that the sun rises in the sky. He has seen that the height of the sun changes every day of the year. Man has been dependent on it for food, light, and heat. Naturally enough the Romans had their god of agriculture or vegetation called Saturn.

In the depths of the winter the Romans could see that suddenly the sun started to rise higher in the sky, which marked the end of the winter (winter equinox) and the beginning or rebirth of life. They celebrated this fact by decorating their homes with evergreens such as holly, ivy, and mistletoe, and by feasting; this practice was known as Saturnalia.

So it is that we today who may feel a little depressed at this time by the still long nights and short days, should remember that actually the summer starts on 22 December! and we should therefore celebrate!

The fact that our Christmas Day was almost simultaneous with the celebrations of Saturnalia is of course not a mere coincidence. The Christians wanted to celebrate the birth of Jesus and the fact that the people were already celebrating at the midwinter festival made it an ideal choice of time for celebrating the nativity.

The wonder of evergreen is the fact that it does not die in the winter. It is a continuous presence for us, which can enhance and enliven an otherwise barren and grey landscape. So we have a lot to be cheerful about at this time of year after all! Of course the Christian religion likes the idea of everlasting life, so the evergreen christmas decorations ties in very well for all concerned.

