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Bannau Brycheiniog a'r Mynyddoedd Duon – Disgrifiad cryno

Dyma fynyddoedd uchaf de Prydain, yn codi at 886m ym Mhen-y-fan. Mae'r gweundiroedd eang, llyfnion, agored yn ymgodi'n gefnau graddol, rhwng pa rai ceir dyffrynnoedd dyfnion, serth sy'n arwain at fylchau uchel yn y bryniau. O'r Hen Dywodfaen Coch y gwnaed y Bannau eu hunain, craig gymharol feddal a dreuliwyd ac a hogwyd gan rew i ffurfio llethrau cyson, union, llyfnion. Llethrau sy'n disgyn yn sydyn ac yn ddramatig, gan ffurfio'r amlinellau serth sydd mor nodweddiadol o'r bryniau hyn, ac yn gwrthgyferbynnu â'r dirwedd amaethyddol ffrwythlon a amgaewyd â gwrychoedd yng ngwaelodion y dyffrynnoedd dyfnach.

Yn las hyd eu copaon yn yr haf, mae'r mynyddoedd hyn yn enwog drwy'r gwledydd, ac yn gymaint delwedd eiconig o fryniau cefn gwlad de Cymru ag yw Eryri ar gyfer y gogledd. Mae'r ardal gyfan o fewn Parc Cenedlaethol Bannau Brycheiniog, ac yn gyrchfan boblogaidd ar gyfer twristiaid a cherddwyr. Maen nhw'n mwynhau tirwedd ddramatig y bryniau, y dyffrynnoedd ffrwythlon, gleision, pictiwresg, amgaeedig, a'r gwrthgyferbyniad cyffredinol â'r llawr gwlad cyfagos neu ardaloedd diwydiannol tua'r de a'r dwyrain.

Mae'r prif ddyffryn, Dyffryn Gwy, gwahanu Bannau Brycheiniog rhag y Mynyddoedd duon yn y dwyrain. Yma, mae'r tir yn gyfres o gefnau de-gogledd trwsgl, yn fwyaf amlwg felly ar hyd ffin Cymru â Lloegr, lle ceir rhan o lwybr hir Clawdd Offa.

Mae'r cymeriad yn amrywio, gydag ardaloedd gweundir agored, cefnen lefn, dyffryn a charreg galch clasurol. Mae'r olaf yn cynnwys tir y rhaedrau yng nghyffiniau Ystradfellte, lle mae sawl hafn ddofn, goedion yn cyfeirio dŵr i lawr i Gwm Nedd. Mae ogofeydd Dan-yr-ogof ar agor i'r cyhoedd.

Summary description

This is the highest range of mountains in southern Britain, rising to Pen y fan at 886m. The vast swathes of smooth, unenclosed moorland rise up gentle ridges, between which run deeply cut valleys that terminate in high mountain passes. The Beacons themselves are made up of Old Red Sandstones, a relatively soft rock that has weathered and been sharpened by ice to create consistent, simple, smooth-sided slopes, falling abruptly and dramatically from ridges to provide the sharp outlines that are so characteristic, and which contrast with the lush, hedged, enclosed farmed landscapes of the deeper valleys.

Green to their summits in summer, these mountains are internationally renowned and provide an iconic image for rural upland South Wales akin to that of Snowdonia in the north. All of the area lies within Brecon Beacons National Park and is a popular destination for walkers and tourists to enjoy the dramatic upland scenery, the picturesque, lush green enclosed valleys, and generally the contrast to the adjacent lowland or industrial areas to the east and south.

The principle valley of the Usk, separates the central Beacons from the Black Mountains to the east. Here, the high country runs in a series of lumbering north–south ridges, most emphatically along the Wales - England border, delineated by a section of the long-distance Offa's Dyke Footpath.

The character varies, with distinct open moorland, smooth ridge, valley and classic limestone areas. The latter includes an area famous as 'Waterfalls Country', centred around Ystradfellte, where a number of deep, wooded, river gorges issue down into the Neath Valley. There are show caves at Dan-yr-Ogof.

Key Characteristics
The highest mountains in South Wales - distinctive flat-topped mountains and a prominent escarpment of Devonian Old Red Sandstone, with smaller bands of Carboniferous Limestone and Millstone Grit in the south.
Heavily glaciated – classic upland cirque formations, ridges, glacial lakes and moraines, over-deepened and 'U' shaped valleys.
The source of a number of rivers - Four major rivers, the Usk, Neath, Tawe and Aman, flow generally south through the landscape, fed by fast flowing streams and waterfalls from the surrounding uplands.
Numerous reservoirs - have been created forming notable landscape features.
Rough moorland habitats - open, exposed, mainly sheep grazed, some commons.
Classic limestone scenery – to lower parts to the south including clints, grykes and caves, the best examples in South Wales, waterfalls, stone walls and buildings. However there are also a number of old limestone quarries and associated remnant infrastructure.
Strong field pattern with many small fields - pasture enclosed by stone walls at higher altitudes and in limestone areas but thick hedgerows elsewhere and in the valley

bottoms, with improved pasture fields found on the lower valley slopes.
Large conifer blocks - cover some valley side slopes in certain areas.
Bio- and geodiversity - large parts are designated. Features include arctic-alpine cliff flora and species-rich limestone grasslands.
Tourism - the Brecon Beacons National Park symbolises the iconic beauty of South Wales and attracts thousands of visitors each year.
Scattered, small settlements – confined to valleys; overall the area is sparsely settled.
Highly tranquil - The windswept uplands display little intrusion of modern forms. High points afford panoramic views across the area and far beyond. The area is recognised for its dark skies.

Visual and Sensory profile

This is an area of great contrast, varying from the high, treeless Old Red Sandstone summits to deep, narrow, tree-filled valleys on the adjoining Carboniferous Limestone and Millstone Grit areas. The dramatic sandstone and limestone uplands are open, windswept landscapes with distinctive mountain and escarpment profiles. Views and vistas are constantly influenced by the interplay of light and weather, with the mountains often shrouded in cloud and mist, creating an air of mystery and the unknown when viewed from the more settled valleys below. Coloured rendered houses and white washed stone farm buildings stand out against the often bleak and muted backdrop of the moorland. The flat sandstone mountain tops and steep escarpments stand in contrast to the wide curving scree slopes and narrow valleys below, affording panoramic views across the landscape and beyond, including to the Severn Estuary on a clear day. Large coniferous plantations, often with abrupt straight edges, disrupt the flowing lines of the open moorland.

The Beacons' uniformity is sharply interrupted along its southern boundary where rural Wales encounters the former industrial valleys of South Wales. This emphatic 'Great Divide' is determined by geology, for it is the meeting place of Old Red Sandstones and three bands of younger rock: limestone, Millstone Grit and Coal Measures. In pure landscape terms, it is the limestone, along with bands of Millstone Grit, that makes the biggest impact as it creates a claustrophobic environment completely at odds with the open spaces and large skies of the mountains to the north.

The close proximity of the heavily populated South Wales Valleys area to the south and the English Midlands to the east means the area is a popular day trip and weekend destination, causing an ingress of people, vehicles, colour and bustle into an otherwise tranquil landscape. The A40 and A470 trunk roads add a degree of visual and noise intrusion, although this is confined to the narrow valleys through which they traverse.



Skirrid from the Usk Valley west of Abergavenny © John Briggs



Bannau Sir Gaer ridge and Llyn Fan Fach © Richard Mears at BBNPA



Cribyn from Fan y Big © Richard Mears at BBNPA



Over-grown hedgerows and field patterns on lower slopes providing shelter and enclosing pastures © Bronwen Thomas



Talybont Reservoir, looking north, showing extensive forestry. © Richard Mears at BBNPA



One of the valleys in the Black Mountains, by Tretower Court. ©Richard Mears at BBNPA



The road north of Capel-y-ffin, in the Black Mountains © John Briggs



One of the unfenced, open mountain road passes © John Briggs



View east from Pen-y-wern in the Black Mountains ©LUC

Geological Landscape influences

The predominant geology of the Brecon Beacons and Black Mountains area is Devonian Old Red Sandstone. Distinctive flat mountain tops of resistant layers of rock and steep, north-facing cliffs and escarpments give the landscape its unique character. Outcrops of later, Carboniferous Limestone and Millstone Grit mark the southern edge of the Old Red Sandstone, forming thin bands which extend horizontally across the southern edge of the area. The south western fringes of the Beacons, known as 'Waterfall Country,' display all the classic text-book limestone characteristics – craggy, deep valleys, wooded gorges, caves, pot holes and spectacular water falls where tough bands of Millstone Grit have been exposed within stream beds.

The rich and varied geodiversity of the western part of the area is internationally recognised as a European Geopark since 2005, while the Brecon Beacons SAC and SSSI includes significant glacial features, including moraine deposits that reflect the glacial history of the area. The varied geology of the Mynydd Du SSSI, includes the best British examples of debris flows on the Old Red Sandstone.

The sandstone forms four distinct blocks of mountains which are cut through by major river valleys (Black Mountains in the east; the central Brecon Beacons; Forest Fawr and Mynydd Du in the far west). Snow and ice collected on the steep north facing escarpments of these blocks during the Quaternary Ice Age, developing into glaciers, which carved out the valleys of the Usk, Neath, Tawe and Aman. Rocks were deposited along the sides and bottoms of valleys or scattered across the upland landscape. Corries (or cwms) across the escarpments are now often filled with lakes, such as Llyn y Fan Fawr and Llyn y Fan Fach.

Each sandstone mountain block displays differing features of 'whalebacked' or sharp ridges, steep scarps, or sweeping or gentle slopes in varying combinations reflecting the glacial impact upon the land form. The northern sandstone escarpment reaches an altitude of 886m at the summit of Pen y Fan, which is the highest point in southern Britain. The landscape's function as a water catchment is exploited in the large number of reservoirs serving the industries and populations of South Wales.

Landscape Habitats influences

The underlying sandstone geology has given rise to dark red loamy soils, which are poorly drained in places producing gley and podzolic soils. Loamy soils have developed over the Carboniferous Limestone and tend to be shallow in places, particularly on the slopes.

The mountain moorland habitats, including extensive areas of blanket bog, are under common land management, grazed by sheep, with some hardy cattle and Welsh Mountain ponies, while grouse are reared, nurtured and shot on the moorland of the Black Mountains. A geometric patchwork of enclosed pasture fields and mire on the lower valley slopes are used mainly for sheep rearing and dairying, bounded by dry stone walls, hedges or fences. Large blocks of coniferous plantation often clothe slopes and summits on the open moorland, whilst fingers of mixed broadleaved woodlands line valleys and watercourses.

There are a number of geological and biological habitats of national and international importance, with the Brecon Beacons SAC and SSSI covering several large upland sites across the area. These sites are particularly valued for cliff habitats that support nationally rare bryophyte species and arctic-alpine plants such as purple saxifrage. Habitats of value also include nutrient-rich flushes with herbs and sedges, along with flower-rich limestone pavements and grasslands.

The Beacons are noted for their reservoirs of which there are around 20. Many are now refuges for wildlife – the Talybont reservoir, for example, has become an important bird reserve. The Beacons' bird life is reasonably plentiful, with over 200 different species, most notably the red kite, the rare bird of prey that has made a startling comeback in these hills. Forest Fawr's shady, north-facing crags are home to rare arctic-alpine plants like purple saxifrage and roseroot, survivors from the last Ice Age.

Historic Landscape influences

This area, like much of Wales, has been shaped by recurrent episodes of human activity and intervention extending back over many thousands of years. The earliest visible features are Neolithic chambered tombs, with a notable example at Penywyrlod. Bronze Age funerary and ritual sites in the form of round and ring cairns are the most common features of the upland areas, often located on hill summits or ridges. Early settlement and agriculture is reflected in the remains of hut circles, field systems and other features, with notable concentrations found in the Hepste valley. Defensive Iron Age hillforts often command positions on higher ground with views over the valleys such as the Usk, while the Roman period saw the establishment of roads and marching camps, including the strategic, north-south highway, Sarn Helen.

Deserted Medieval settlements are found scattered throughout the landscape, generally favouring similar locations to the prehistoric period. The Norman and later Medieval periods saw the construction of a number of defensive castles, with fine examples at Tretower and Bronllys. Tretower Court originally dating to about 1300 is a fine example of a multi-period gentry house.

Lime production was a key industrial activity on Mynydd Du from the 17th to the mid 19th centuries when demand for lime as agricultural fertiliser diminished. A network of deeply rutted cart tracks ascends to quarry and kiln sites that are still visible in the landscape, such as at Herberts Quarry, though these are no longer worked. The Clydach Gorge in the south east of the area presents a compact microcosm of how natural resource exploitation and industrialization transformed the South Wales Valleys to the south. The Monmouthshire-Brecon Canal was once an important industrial waterway.

Cultural Landscape influences

The area contains the locus on the Black Mountain for the famous legends of the Lady of the Lake in Llyn y Fan Fach, ancestress of the hereditary Physicians of Myddfai. The farms recorded in the legends still exist and may thus be of 12th century date, since the legends recorded in the 14th century Red Book of Hergest link Rhiwallon the Physician to the court of the redoubtable and powerful Lord Rhys of Deheubarth.

Other famous people include Giraldus Cambrensis – chronicler, ecclesiastical politician, scourge of back-sliding churchmen, journalist, and gossip – who accompanied Archbishop Baldwin on the Journey Through Wales in 1188 to encourage recruits for the Crusades. Others associated with the Brecon Beacons National Park and the Vale of Ewias, where Llanthony Priory stands secluded, are the artist J.M.W. Turner, poets Robert Southey and Walter Savage Landor, Fred Hando, and Eric Gill the graphic artist and typeface designer.

Present day settlement remains thinly distributed throughout and confined in any concentration to the valleys. Of the major towns, Crickhowell is now very much a well-heeled dormitory, while Abergavenny is an important centre for commerce and markets. The predominant industry alongside agriculture is now tourism and leisure, with the towns, Carreg Cennen Castle, the Monmouthshire -Brecon Canal, the Brecon Beacons National Park Mountain Centre, Storeys Arms, Offa's Dyke Path and other trails such as the Usk Valley Walk and the National Cycle Network, each making a strong cultural contribution. The Beacons themselves attract thousands of walkers each year, and are icons for the natural beauty of southern Wales.