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Rhos – Disgrifiad cryno

Yn gymharol anhysbys i dwristiaid, mae cefn gwlad tonnog y cantref hwn yn dirwedd ddeniadol, annirnad ei hapêl. Prin yw ei boblogaeth, ond fe'i croesir gan rwydwaith o ffyrdd cefn gwlad culion, gydag ambell i bentref cnewyllog o dai cerrig gwyngalchog â thoi llechi, neu aneddiadau llawr dyffryn fel Llanfair Talhaearn a Llangernyw. Mae llawer o'r fro'n eithaf bryniog, ond ceir sawl dyffryn, hefyd. Yn hanesyddol, dyma fagwrfa ysgrifenwyr a beirdd o bwys, fel Twm o'r Nant, y bardd a'r anterliwtiwr, a'r athrylith anwadal hwnnw,

Robert Roberts, y ‘Sgolor Mawr’. Yma hefyd cafwyd gweddillion y Cymro cyntaf, fu’n byw mewn ogof ym Mhontnewydd yng ngwaelodion Dyffryn Elwy tua 225,000 o flynyddoedd yn ôl. Ywen mynwent Llangernyw yw un o’r pethau byw hynaf yn y byd. Mae’r ardal yn gadarnle i’r Gymraeg.

Summary description

Comparatively little known by tourists, this is nevertheless a subtly appealing and attractive rural landscape of rolling and undulating countryside. It is sparsely settled, but is traversed by a network of narrow rural lanes and interspersed only occasionally with compact, nucleated villages of stone, slate and white-washed render, or by valley-floor settlement such as Llanfair Talhaiarn and Llangernyw. Much of the area has a character verging on upland, yet the Rhos Hills include some lowland valleys. Historically the area nurtured some important writers and poets, such as Twm o’r Nant, the poet and writer of interludes, and the erratic genius Robert Roberts ‘Sgolor Mawr’. Within this area lived the first attested Welsh man, in a cave at Pontnewydd in the Lower Elwy Valley, around 225,000 years ago. The yew tree in Llangernyw churchyard is one of the oldest living things in the world. This area remains strongly Welsh in speech.

Key Characteristics
Rural inland foothills and valleys - that rise to the adjacent Denbigh Moors to the south.
Bedrock geology - is composed primarily of Silurian sandstone and argillaceous rock of the Ludlow and Wenlock Series, in addition to small areas of Carboniferous limestone and areas of slaty mudstone and siltstone.
Extensive drift deposits - glacial till overlays the solid geology giving rise to the undulating land form of the area.
River valleys and flood plains - river alluvium and fluvio-glacial river terrace deposits are present.
An undulating land form - comprising a series of ridges and valleys associated with the river catchment, including the Cledwen and the Aled. A range in grades of slope.
Soils - well drained fine loamy/silty typical brown earth soils, with seasonally wet silty soils over shale in the river valleys.
Sheep grazed pasture – predominant land cover
Occasional woodlands - often occurring on the river valley slopes, for example on the Clywedog and the Ystrad, and running up riverside slopes.
Mixed field patterns - often geometric but varies widely in scale, from small to large size fields. A denser network of mixed hedgerows with more trees in sheltered valleys, running up to sparse, windswept hedges and fences occupying areas of former moorland.
Archaeology - a number of sites occupy the more elevated parts of the area, including Neolithic burial chambers, Bronze Age round barrows and cairns, and Iron Age hillforts such as Mynydd Y Gaer. The Pontnewydd Cave is internationally renowned for evidence of the earliest known humans in Wales.
Sparsely settled - affording rural peace and tranquillity, with wide views from the higher points and a sense of intimacy and enclosure in the valleys close by.

Visual and Sensory profile

This quiet pastoral landscape of rolling hills and valleys lies between the better-known areas of the Conwy Valley, the Vale of Clwyd, the Denbigh Moors and the restless coastal strip to the north. The land rises gradually to the south with the Denbigh Moors acting as a bleak southern skyline from the higher vantage points.

The majority of rivers flow to the north and east towards the Vale of Clwyd. The valleys of the Elwy, Aled, Cledwen and Ystrad with their steep sides and narrow valley floors form enclosed and intimate landscapes in their own right. Fringing some of the valleys (in particular the Elwy) are a series of distinctive rounded, open hills with bracken and small rock outcrops on the upper slopes giving way to moorland heath on the tops. These form natural focal points and present a contrast in the otherwise, gently rolling, green landscape.

The majority of the small, rural, nucleated settlements are situated within the valleys and joined by a sparse network of main roads, although not generally busy, tend to reduce tranquillity locally. The general settlement pattern, however, is of widely scattered, small rural farmsteads stewarding the land. Occasional parklands such as at Dol Wen provide a contrast with its formal valley floor location and water features enhanced by the backdrop of steep forested hills to the south.

Deciduous woodland clothes the steep valley sides in many places, adding a sense of drama and enclosure. There are also occasional small copses, however, there are rectilinear coniferous forestry plantations west of Hafodunos Hall, near Llangernyw, which together with the backcloth of Eryri to the west, create an appreciably singular character. From these western hills and ridges, more open to the north, Eryri is widely visible.



Moorland fringes with woods running up stream valleys. Denbigh Moors beyond. © John Briggs



A quiet, rural, undeveloped area, mainly with pasture. Sparse settlement. © John Briggs



Llansannan, one of the small nucleated villages tucked into sheltered valleys. © John Briggs



A number of higher rounded hills and small areas of moorland occur within the Rhos Hills area, of which the distant example in this view is east of Llansannan. © John Briggs

Geological Landscape influences

This is an area of undulating land form that forms the foothills of the Denbigh Moors to the south. The highest point reaches 420m, but there are a number of lower hills – Moel Tywysog, Moelfre Uchaf, Mwdwl Eithin and Foel Gasyth. The bedrock geology consists

predominantly of Silurian sedimentary rocks; the sequence is dominated by turbidites, a rock type consisting of repetitive sequences of sandstones, siltstones and mudstones, which were deposited by turbid currents at the edge of a once ancient sea in the area. In the east of the area, there are faulted blocks of Lower Carboniferous limestone, which form the western side of the Vale of Clwyd. This area of limestone underlies the higher parts of Denbigh, including around the castle, and forms a ridge which extends to the coast at Abergele. At Pontnewydd, the Afon Elwy has cut a deep gorge in the limestone creating prominent cliffs which dominate the valley sides.

The area's landscape has been radically re-shaped by several episodes of glaciation and was influenced by Welsh ice sheets moving from the south and west, and by Irish Sea ice sheets from the north. The greater part of the area is, therefore, covered by till (boulder clay) deposited from the retreating Welsh ice sheets, with till from the Irish Sea ice sheets blanketing the eastern slopes alongside the Vale of Clwyd. Major swarms of drumlins (ice-moulded mounds of sediment) contribute towards the undulating, 'basket of eggs' character of the area east of Eglwysbach, around Llansannan, and between Llanefydd and Llanrhaidr. The drumlins vary in size, but are commonly about 400m long and 150m wide, and between 3 to 30m in height. The orientation of these landforms provides important information about the directions of ice movement across the region. Caves found along the limestone crop were occupied and used by humans and animals at various times in the later parts of the Quaternary 'Ice Ages'. Human and animal bones, stone tools and other artefacts provide vital evidence for changing climatic and environmental conditions.

A further important influence on the area is fluvial or river processes, whereby a number of streams and rivers dissect the area, contributing to its undulating topography. Rivers such as the Caledfryn, the Aled and the Derfyn flow southwards off the Denbigh Moors to form tributaries of the Elwy which itself joins the Clwyd north of St Asaph.

Landscape Habitats influences

The name Rhos ('heath' or 'moor') reflects what were once extensive semi-natural rough grazings in the area, now limited to small remnants of heath and moor on the hills and in patches of wetter land. Areas of wet land and small natural lakes remain. Chwythlyn is a small mesotrophic lake in the west of the area, showing a gradation of habitats from open water through reedbeds to willow and alder carr. Reed buntings breed in the reeds and there is a varied duck population in winter. Llyn Ty'n y Llyn is a similar small lake with an extensive bog moss habitat forming a floating mat over the open water, enabling scrub encroachment

This agricultural landscape of small fields and woods is much influenced by the geology of sandstone and occasional limestone outcrops, creating sandy and loamy soils, occasionally calcareous in nature. The agricultural landscape is one of predominantly sheep-grazed pastures, set in a network of small fields, bounded by mature hedges and individual trees. Steeper slopes where improvements are difficult to manage and maintain are now often covered in gorse or bracken, creating both varied habitats and splashes of colour in the landscape across the seasons.

The landscape is well wooded, especially in the narrow valleys of the Elwy, Meirchion and small tributaries of the Conwy. The Elwy valley north of Henllan, is of interest for its caves, semi-natural broadleaved woodland, its rare flowering plant assemblage and its scarce bryophytes. The woodland is mainly ash and oak, with a hazel understorey, but, based on limestone, has an important wooded limestone pavement with an area of calcareous

grassland adjoining. Coed Llys Aled near Llansannan, is a good example of mixed broadleaved woodland developing on acid soils, with sessile oak and rowan predominant, and a diverse ground flora including oak fern, rare in North Wales, and sweet cicely. Other extensive valley-side woodlands occur in the valleys of the Clywedog and Nant Mawr, just north of Ruthin. There are few conifer plantations in this character area, notably at Wenlli in the south-west and Coed Bryndansi in the north-west

Historic Landscape influences

Despite its name, the area as a whole was made up of some good corn-growing land and some good pasture and meadowland. Its prosperity is reflected in a number of historic parklands and landed estates, which developed from Medieval settlements. These include the 17th century estate of Garthewin, with later additions and its associated estate buildings, lodges, cottages and terraces. Hafodunos Hall (built in 1861 by the Sandbach family) and its landscape setting, to the south of Rhos y Mawn is particularly notable. The estates sponsored the enclosure of the higher ground of the area, and the building of large courtyard farms. The area is also home to some small nucleated villages. Llanfair Talhaiarn is the largest, a picturesque location adjacent to the Elwy, built around a small village square. Henllan boasts a small castle.

The Elwy Valley is the location of Pontnewydd Cave, internationally renowned as the source of the oldest known human remains in Wales. Early Neanderthal bone and teeth fragments found there have been scientifically dated and prove that the cave was in use about a quarter of a million years ago. Further evidence of early archaeology in the area is provided by various prehistoric funerary and ritual monuments, with sites including the Neolithic chambered tomb at Tyddyn Bleiddyn, Cefn, round barrows and cairns on the higher summits, and the Iron Age hillfort at Mynydd y Gaer.

Cultural Landscape influences

This area nurtured some of the most remarkable men of modern Wales. Twm o'r Nant (1739-1810), the poet and writer of satirical interludes, was born, bred and married within this area. A later writer in a different tradition, but who took an equally acerbic view of his countrymen and in particular the rich and pompous, was Robert Roberts 'Sgolor Mawr' (1834-1885), clergyman, scholar, newspaperman, grammarian, alcoholic, who was born in Hafod Bach, Llangernyw and whose career included working as a tutor, a curate, a gold-digger at Ballarat, and as a journalist before returning home to die of drink and drug-addiction. His *Life and Opinions*, unpublished until after his death, is not only a remarkable portrait of 19th century Wales, but one of the most extraordinary of Victorian spiritual autobiographies. Another satirist was the architect-poet John Jones (Talhaiarn, 1810-1869), who was born and died (by his own hand) in the Harp Inn, Llanfair Talhaiarn; he worked on the Crystal Palace and on Rothschild's mansion at Mentone. The philosopher Sir Henry Jones (1852-1922) was also a son of Llangernyw; a lecturer variously at Aberystwyth, Bangor, St Andrew's and Glasgow, developing the interpretation of Hegel propounded by his own professor, Edward Caird, at Glasgow, whom he eventually succeeded. His birthplace is preserved as a museum.