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Penrhyn Gŵyr – Disgrifiad cryno

Mae Penrhyn Gŵyr yn ymestyn i'r môr o ymyl gorllewinol ardal drefol ehangach Abertawe. Golyga ei ddaearog fod ynddo amrywiaeth ysblennydd o olygfeydd o fewn ardal gymharol fechan, o olygfeydd carreg galch Pen Pyrrod, Three Cliffs Bay ac Oxwich Bay yng nglannau'r de i halwyndiroedd a thwyni tywod y gogledd. Mae trumiau tywodfaen yn nodweddu asgwrn cefn y penrhyn, gan gynnwys y man uchaf, Cefn Bryn: a cheir yno diroedd comin eang.

Canlyniad y golygfeydd eithriadol a'r traethau tywodlyd, euraidd wrth droed y clogwyni yw bod yr ardal yn denu ymwelwyr yn eu miloedd. Gall y priffyrdd fod yn brysur, wrth i bobl heidio at y traethau mwyaf golygfaol. Mae pwysau twristiaeth wedi newid y cymeriad diwylliannol. Dyma'r AHNE gyntaf a ddynodwyd yn y Deyrnas Unedig ym 1956, ac y mae'r glannau wedi'u dynodi'n Arfordir Treftadaeth, hefyd.

Erys yr ardal yn un wledig iawn. Mae'r trumiau'n ffurfio cyfres o rostiroedd uchel, graddol, agored. Rheng y bryniau ceir tirwedd amaethyddol gymysg, yn amrywio o borfeydd bychain â gwrychoedd uchel i gaeau mwy, agored. Yn rhai mannau mae'r hen batrymau caeau lleiniog yn parhau, gyda thirwedd "Vile" Rhosili yn oroesiad eithriadol. Ar lannau mwy agored y gorllewin, ac ar dir uwch, mae traddodiad cloddiau pridd a charreg yn parhau, sy'n nodweddiadol o ardaloedd lle bo coed yn brin. Nodwedd hynod yw'r gyfres o ddyffrynnoedd bychain, serth, sy'n aml yn goediog, sydd â'u nentydd yn aberu ar hyd glannau'r de.

Mae cefn hir Cefn Bryn yn gwahanu'r gogledd a'r de. Bu i lannau'r gogledd, o Dre-gŵyr i Groffy, orffennol diwydiannol graddfa fechan, a adlewyrchir yng nghymeriad yr aneddiadau: Tre-gŵyr, Pen-clawdd a Chroffy, er enghraifft. Yno mae'r glannau yn halwyndir agored, gyda sianelau lleidiog yn llifo allan i aber Llŵchwr. Mae'r ardaloedd gorllewinol a deheuol ehangach yn bendant yn rhai amaethyddol, gyda ffermydd, ystadau maenorol a sawl pentref bychan. Mae eto gornelai tawel yn y dirwedd wledig hon, gydag aneddiadau hanesyddol o adeiladau gwyngalchog yn atgyfnerthu ymdeimlad traddodiadol o gymeriad bro. Mae yma helaethrwydd o weddillion archeolegol, gyda thystiolaeth nodedig o breswylad dynol ers miloedd lawer o flynyddoedd yn goroesi yn ogofeydd y glannau.

Summary description

Gower is a coastal peninsula starting at the western edge of greater urban Swansea. Its geology gives rise to a wide variety of scenery in a relatively small area - from the south coast's superb limestone scenery at Worm's Head, Three Cliff Bay and Oxwich Bay to the salt marshes and dune systems in the north. The most prominent inland features are the large areas of common, dominated by sandstone ridges including the high ground of Cefn Bryn. The outstanding scenery and golden sandy beaches backed by cliffs led to the area becoming an extremely popular tourist destination. Key roads can become busy and the most scenic beaches can become honey pots. Tourism pressures have changed the cultural character. It was the first AONB to be designated in the UK in 1956, while the coastline is also designated as Heritage Coast.

The area remains very rural. The ridges form a series of gentle, open, heath-covered 'downs'. Between the hills there is a mixed agricultural landscape varying from small pastures enclosed with high hedges to larger open fields. In some areas, old strip field patterns remain, with the 'Vile' landscape at Rhossili being exceptional in its survival. In the more exposed western coastal and higher ground, the tradition of stone-faced earth hedge banks remains. This is typical in areas where there are few trees. A notable feature is the series of small but steep-sided and often wooded valleys, whose streams issue along the south coast.

The long spine ridge of Cefn Bryn separates north and south areas. The northern coast from Gowerton to Crofty had a small-scale industrial past, reflected in the character of their settlements, for example Gowerton, Penclawdd and Crofty. There the coast is open salt marsh, with muddy channels running out into the Burry inlet. This is the extensive and ecologically important estuary of the River Loughor. The larger southern and western areas are distinctly agricultural with farmsteads, manor estates and a number of small villages. There are still peaceful corners in this rural landscape, with historic settlements of whitewashed buildings reinforcing a traditional sense of place. The area is exceptionally rich in archaeology with remarkable evidence of human occupation over millennia surviving in coastal caves.

Key Characteristics
Coastal peninsula - with exposed cliffs and sandy bays to the south and west and sheltered estuary with saltmarsh to the north. The neck of the peninsula is defined by the edge of the built up area of greater Swansea.
Carboniferous Limestone plateau – but intersected by the prominent Cefn Bryn ridge of old red sandstone. Millstone Grit separates coal measures to the NE.
Limestone cliffs and raised beaches – to the south on an exposed coast, with ESE-trending rocky headlands.
Sandy bays – on the south coast, popular for recreation and very scenic, e.g. Three Cliffs Bay – with a stream issuing across the sand and a natural arch on the cliff.
Mud flats and salt marsh – extensive areas in the Burry (Lougher) estuary to the north
Sand dunes – to the west, and long, open undeveloped beaches
Open heath and common especially on long, low hills across the spine of the area.
Narrow, twisting, small limestone valleys - often wooded, and emerging on the south coast. Some sections are dry (see geological influences), others have streams.
‘Vile’ Field system – medieval / post-medieval relict open strip field system and traditional boundaries, tracks and paths, Rhossili. Many long, thin or irregular shaped fields elsewhere, clusters of small fields, some larger improved ones.
Hedgebanks – stone-faced earth field enclosures in windswept areas and thicker hedgerows in sheltered valleys and further east.
Archaeology - with features dating from most phases of prehistory and history, from the Upper Palaeolithic period to the recent past. Notably at Paviland Cave, one of the most significant sites in Britain, radiocarbon dated remains 28,000BP.
Woodlands – a focus of sheltered valleys as well as plantations on Parc-le-Breos and areas closer to Swansea. Some mixed and coniferous plantations occur on the Millstone Grit areas. Broadleaved and mixed woodlands fringe streams and occupy some slopes in the east.
Commons – extensive and important for their dry and wet lowland heath habitats and as strongholds for populations of the southern damselfly and marsh fritillary.
Scattered settlements – clustered around Medieval churches or castles, linked by a network of often rural roads. Settlements abutting open commons. Retains rural, traditional character – in contrast to the immediately adjacent greater Swansea.
Very scenic - the area became Britain’s first AONB in 1956. A number of iconic, ‘voted best’ views, including Rhossili Bay, Three Cliffs Bay and Worms Head.
Tourism and recreation - traffic and the close proximity of Swansea bring large number of visitors. Honey pots result by popular beaches.
Swansea Airport - lies amidst flat heath land to the east, however in recent years use has just been for light aircraft.

Visual and Sensory profile

The overriding visual image is that of an area of outstanding natural beauty. It’s varied coastline is a principle defining feature and gives rise to a number of iconic ‘voted best’ views. The change in character between the adjacent developed, urban edge of greater Swansea to the east, and the tranquil, unspoilt, rural, remoter western end of Gower is remarkable. In particular, Rhossili Down slopes smoothly down to the vast empty sandy beach of Rhossili Bay. The beach is backed by dunes. To the north end of the bay the headland of Burry Holme is a visual feature. To the south end of the bay Worms Head forms a thin, strangely profiled peninsula at low tide, becoming an island at high tide. At Three Cliffs Bay the semi-enclosed sandy beach is framed by rocky headlands and a

stream issues across the sand and past a natural rock arch on the cliff. There are many other examples of outstanding scenic coastal places too. The close proximity of Swansea and the numbers of tourists lead to busy honey pots forming in popular places, with many people enjoying beach recreation, walking and surfing.

Inland the countryside is gentle compared to the drama of the main upland areas of Wales. However there is a very appealing, intimate relationship of patterns field boundaries, land use and settlements, to topography. The heaths emphasise the hills (or 'downs'), which are important features of the peninsula. These hills offer wide views from the South Wales valleys to the Exmoor hills. As with the Gwendraeth Vales to the north, the Gower marks the transition from industrial and urban Wales to the east and an open, rural Wales to the west. Gower provides a compact taste of the west without a long drive from Swansea.

Settlements of whitewashed buildings are linked by a network of minor roads, fringed by high, flower rich verges. Woodland areas to the east and the high road verges create a sense of enclosure.

This combination of exceptional scenic qualities led to the Gower becoming Britain's first AONB in 1956. In addition, its coastline is designated as a Heritage Coast. The sense of place is one of a relaxed society in an unspoilt and well-protected landscape. However its popularity with visitors can result in congestion along the roads and narrow lanes during peak season. On occasions this erodes the peaceful and remote qualities of the area, while the extensive static caravan and chalet parks at Llangennith, Wern-halog, Kennexstone, Llanddewi, Horton and Port Eynon and Caswell Bay, and the numerous summer camping sites, add visible distractions that increase awareness of busyness. Swansea Airport, the main A 4118, Sketty to Port Eynon road and golf courses at Fairwood, Langland, Clyne and Pennard, are further modern features impinging on the area's otherwise historic ambience, while night-time light pollution from Swansea affects the eastern edge of the area.



Worms head, limestone cliffs and raised beach. © John Briggs



Rhossili Bay from Rhossili Down © John Briggs



Sweeping open fields between Cefn Bryn (Reynoldston) and Rhossili Down open hills ©
Crown Copyright (2011) Visit Wales, all right reserved



Near Mewslade looking towards Worms head. Crown Copyright (2012) Visit Wales, all right reserved



Reynoldston, showing the close relationship of the village to Cefn Bryn 'down'. © Getmapping



Llandewi with Rhossili Down in the background. © John Briggs



Salt marsh near Pen-clawdd © LUC



Cereal fields north of Port Eynon © LUC



Cattle grazing, Fairwood Common © LUC

Geological Landscape influences

This coastal peninsula shows a close relationship between topography, the shape of the coastline and geology. It reflects rock type and structure including folds and faults. The exception is along the northern coast where depositional landforms of sand spits, sand dunes and saltmarsh partly obscure the underlying geology.

The highest ground is formed by Rhossili Down and Llanmadoc Hill in the west, and the prominent ridge of Cefn Bryn, trending WNW-ESE through the central area of the peninsula. The summits of these hills are at c.180m. There are possible remnants of other plateau surfaces at lower levels, but most of the landscape has been very heavily modified and dissected by glacial and periglacial processes and rivers, and the whole area has also been bevelled by the passage of ice. Along the south coast of the peninsula, the former existence of a plateau surface at 60m can be easily discerned from numerous viewpoints. These plateau surfaces are thought to represent marine erosion surfaces similar to, but much more extensive than, the modern wave-cut platforms, that resulted from relatively long periods of constant sea level, interspersed with periodic uplift. The marine planation occurred towards the end of the Cretaceous Period (c.70 million years ago) when sea level was globally high, and was followed by sea level fall and tectonic uplift of the land during the Tertiary Period.

In order of decreasing age, the bedrock geology of Gower Peninsula comprises conglomerates of the Old Red Sandstone (which form the highest ground) and typical sequences of the Carboniferous Limestone, Millstone Grit and Coal Measures. The latter two sequences are dominated by shales, but also include some resistant sandstones. In the southern part of the peninsula these sequences are folded and subsequent erosion has not only cut across the folds but also exploited the softer shales to form valleys and

embayments. To the north of Cefn Bryn the rocks dip northwards and in the north-eastern part of the peninsula they can be followed in sequence, with resistant sandstone units standing out as south-facing escarpments with intervening boggy ground (e.g. Barland Common) developed on the shales.

In many places, particularly along the coast, lines of weakness have been exploited and accentuated by marine erosion and now frequently form gullies in the foreshore and cliffs, extending towards valleys in the coastal slope referred to locally as 'slades' (e.g. Mewslade).

Another distinctive feature of the Gower topography is the karst scenery (sinkholes and cave systems) developed on and in the limestone. In places (e.g. Llethrid and Bishopston valleys) the collapse and subsequent erosion of cave passages have led to the development of limestone gorges with some higher-level caves having been truncated (e.g. at Cat Hole in the Llethrid Valley). These caves were once used as shelter by animals including cave lion and bear. Bones of many different creatures and their prey are preserved within the cave sediments and provide a good indication of climatic changes during the 'Ice Age'. The caves also show evidence of temporary human habitation. Although climate during the Ice Age (c. 2.6 million to 11,500 years ago) was generally colder than today, it was warmer for relatively short periods, causing higher sea level, fragmentary evidence of which remains around much of the southern coastline in the form of raised beach deposits.

During colder climatic conditions glaciers moved out of the higher ground to the north-east of Gower along what are now the main river valleys. Ice from the Irish Sea area also advanced over Pembrokeshire towards Gower and at times either butted up against the western hills or even passed over the whole peninsula. This caused significant erosion and modification of the topography, and as the ice melted torrents of water deepened the valleys. The ice also deposited 'boulder clay' in many areas and locally there are sands and gravels deposited by meltwaters. Arthur's Stone on Cefn Bryn is an example of a glacially transported rock. Although the ice sheets did not reach the southern part of the peninsula during the most recent glaciation of south-west Wales, the intense cold created frost-shattered scree under cliffs and crags. Solifluction, a process which occurs when soil saturated with water from melting snow and subsurface ice flows downhill over frozen ground, created the distinctive terraces of the southern and south-western coast (e.g. between Port Eynon and Oxwich Head and perhaps most notably along the seaward margins of Rhosili Down).

Landscape Habitats influences

Inland, soils broadly follow the underlying geology with generally fine and well drained loamy soils with some seasonal waterlogging where they lie above shaley limestones, and acidic soils over the bands of Millstone Grit. The peninsula supports a mixed agricultural landscape, but with grazing concentrated in the less productive areas. The saltmarshes and dune grasslands along the north coast are grazed by a variety of free-roaming livestock, whereas inland the higher ridges and hills are of a heathy character and common grazed by sheep, ponies and cattle. Elsewhere, the chequerboard pattern of regular, medium to large-scale fields is used for cereal cropping, horticulture, dairying and sheep rearing. The fields are mainly bounded by hawthorn hedgerows or hedgebanks, fringed by often wildflower-rich grass verges along roads, which are of considerable ecological value. The undulating land to the east of the Cefn Bryn ridge is characterised by

swathes of mixed and broadleaved woodlands fringing streams and clothing gentle slopes. Where Millstone Grit is present, there are blocks of mixed and coniferous plantations.

The areas of common land found across the southern half of the landscape include a complex of SSSIs, falling within the Gower Commons SAC. Formed on the underlying, poorly draining surface-water gley soils, they include Fairwood, Pengwern, Welshmoor and Cefn Bryn Commons, which are important for a variety of habitats and species, including wet and dry heath and molinia meadows, the latter habitat supporting the nationally scarce soft-leaved sedge. The only South Wales populations of the southern damselfly and marsh fritillary are found within the commons, with the SAC supporting the second most important area for the southern damselfly in Wales.

Another distinct and ecologically valuable feature which is also part of Cefn Bryn Common but is distinct from the other areas is the dry heath and bracken habitats along the Cefn Bryn Ridge, the habitat differing here due to the much more freely draining podsollic soils. There is a similar, significant area of habitat present further west at Rhosilli Down, which is also part of the Gower Commons SAC.

Deciduous woodland areas are more prevalent within the eastern half of the area, where many fringe streams. The most significant woods are those at Nicholaston and others surrounding Oxwich Bay, Bishopston and Parkmill, which form the Gower Ash Woods SAC.

The southern coast is dominated by steep limestone cliffs interspersed with sandy bays, the most significant being Oxwich, which also has associated sand dunes and an extensive reed-bed area just inland. Much of the southern coastline is within the Limestone Coast of South West Wales SAC, which includes much of the generally agriculturally unimproved, calcareous/coastal grassland that fringes the cliff tops.

The north coast falls within the Burry Inlet SAC, SPA, Ramsar site and SSSI, which is characterised by extensive areas of mud-flat, salt-marsh and coastal grazing marsh, supporting a wide range of species, notably wading bird and wildfowl populations.

Historic Landscape influences

Archaeologically the Gower coast is particularly noted for its Upper Palaeolithic cave sites, notably Longhole, Paviland and Deborah's Hole, which were occupied during warmer intervals at the end of the last Ice Age (c. 38000 – 8000 years ago). Well-defined remains of later, Iron Age settlements and forts occupy the headland at the Knave and Thurba Head, where there are also good examples of recent limekilns. The recently conserved salthouse at Port-Eynon, remains a unique example in Wales of a 16th century coastal saltworks.

Inland, the central ridge of Cefn Bryn is undoubtedly one of the richest archaeological areas of South Wales, containing dense concentrations of monuments providing evidence of human activity from at least the 4th or 3rd millennium BC, including a Neolithic tomb and possible settlement and Bronze Age funerary and ritual monuments. In the Medieval period, the imposition of the manorial system on Gower was an important influence on the land use on the ridge, which fell within the 'Welshry of the Lordship of Gower'. Generally, that area had poorer soils and Cefn Bryn was manorial waste over which commoners rights were established and exist to the present day.

Anglo-Norman influence is also apparent elsewhere in the landscape, with stone castles such as Oystermouth, Penrice and Oxwich in the south and Bovehill and the fortified manor of Weobley castle to the north, each occupying prominent locations with views across Swansea Bay and the Burry estuary respectively. Settlements such as Llanmadoc and Cheriton also reflect Anglo-Norman influences, while St Cadog Church at Cheriton is acknowledged to be one of the most beautiful of the Gower churches. Of outstanding importance from this period is the Penrice manorial estate, complete with ruined castle, gentry house, home farm and historic park and garden, which have grown around Penrice hamlet and survived without being broken up.

Rhossili and the Rhossili Down area to the west are also archaeologically very rich. In addition to the Iron Age promontory forts on the clifftops, Rhossili Down contains a number of Neolithic burial chambers and Bronze Age cairns. At the foot of the Down is the site of the deserted Medieval village and former church of Rhossili, which were be-sanded in the later Medieval period. The most significant survival, however, is the remarkable 'Vile', Medieval open field system, extending to about 390ha in extent and divided into the characteristic strips bounded by stone faced earth banks known as 'landshares'. The practically unique survival of this Medieval open field system is of national importance.

Further north, Burry Holms island contains an Iron Age promontory fort and also the remains of a Medieval chapel. Inland, the church at Llangennith, itself the largest in Gower, is dedicated to St Kenyth who was reputedly washed ashore on Burry Holms. To the south of the church lay a Medieval college and priory, making Llangennith one of the most notable Medieval settlements on the Gower. Hardings Down to the south east contains a number of important prehistoric sites, including two Iron Age hillforts in close proximity. The Loughor estuary to the north was also a hub of early settlement and many of the hills or promontories overlooking it had their own fortified settlement such as The Bulwark to the south west of Cheriton.

The C19th saw industrialisation of north Gower around Penclawdd and Crofty where coal was extracted, and limestone quarrying from the cliffs stretching from Pwll Du to Rhossili on the southern and eastern cliffs.

Cultural Landscape influences

The cultural essence of Gower's landscape has changed radically over the past 50 years. Agriculture, which has been the traditional mainstay, is gradually being replaced by tourism and a residential population whose increasing presence is displacing long-held family farms. Outside the boundary of, but close to the AONB area, many commuter housing estates of undistinguished appearance have been permitted, their presence also shifting the balance. However, today's pattern of scattered nucleated settlements remains largely true to their historic development, often centred on churches or castles in a compact form.

The exceptionally picturesque beaches have attracted several very large static caravan parks associated, particularly, with Horton and Port Eynon on the southern coast, and Broughton Burrows in the north west. Seasonally, many farmers open their fields as camp grounds. Two of those beaches – Three Cliff Bay and Rhossili Bay, coupled with the intriguing topography of Worm's Head, have become iconic images of the glories of Gower. The southern and western coasts are a mecca for surfers, and Rhossili Down is popular with hang-glider enthusiasts.

Place names south of Cefn Bryn owe their origins to Anglo-Norman dominance, while those north of the ridge are of Welsh provenance, a pattern which reflects the division imposed between the better lands confiscated by the former and poorer land retained by the latter. The distinctive Gower dialect which corrupted the pronunciation of some names has, however, virtually disappeared.

Outside influences have also affected many of the long-established gentry estates, with some like Kilvrough Manor and Stout Hall, becoming field studies or alternative therapy centres, the latter until the late 20th century being a field trip centre for the London Borough of Merton.

Industry, apart from agriculture, has also declined. Limestone quarrying ceased in the C19th, while coal mining lingered on into the early part of the 20th century. However, the abiding traditional cultural image associated with north Gower is the still-active cockle gathering off Penclawdd in the Burry (Loughor) estuary.



White-washed cottage near Penrice ©LUC



Rhossili, centred around the old church © John Briggs