THE MAGIC OF BANNAU BRYCHEINIOG

'History, Legends & Landscape'

by

Chris Barber

Issue No 2 - Winter 2026

The Black Mountains

PREFACE

This second edition of my new journal, which replaces *The Beaon* is a personal appreciation of the eastern Black Mountains. It should not to be confused with the western area known as the Black Mountain (Mynydd Du), which I prefer to call the Carmarthen Fans.

Our National Park is blessed with a remarkable variety of scenery and places of historic interest and I am pleased to share with our members, my knowledge, experiences and enthusiasm that I have gained from many years of exploration and dedicated research. My purpose in writing this journal is to help our members enjoy a deeper knowledge and appreciation of the Bannau Brycheiniog National Park.

The third issue will be published in July 2026 and it will be titled 'Part Two of The Black Mountains'.

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INTRODUCTION

Anyone driving along the A465 from Herefordshire towards Monmouthshire, cannot fail to notice the long Hatterrall ridge on the right. From a distance, on a dull day it looks like a dark hued wedge silhouetted against the grey of the sky. So it is not surprising that this compact group of summits is known as the Black Mountains.

Some say that it was the Saxons who provided this name, for they always glimpsed these mountains from the eastern side of the Wye. However, when seen from a closer viewpoint, the colours may vary from green in summer sunlight, to purple in late summer, then change to russet when the bracken is dying in late Autumn, but brilliant white in Winter, if snow has fallen.

The writer, Arthur Bradley in 1911, described the ridges and valleys of the Black Mountains as '…eighty square miles of complete, uncompromising solitude.' This may well have been so in his day, but although much less visited than the Brecon Beacons, the 'Blacks' have certainly grown in popularity.

On weekdays, I sometimes find it possible to complete a walk, taking in two parallel ridges without encountering another walker, but on weekends, one can seldom roam across these heather clad summits without meeting or seeing other like-minded wanderers.

Peter Thoresby Jones' description pf these mountains, written in 1938, is certainly still applicable: 'The Black Mountains of the Welsh-English Border are a singularly unspoilt group of long lofty ridges separated by valleys of understated charm, descending steeply towards the Wye on the northern side, and on the southern side less abruptly towards the Usk.'

The four main ridges average 11 miles in length and 2,000ft in height. Waun Fach at 2,660 ft is the highest peak, but its neighbour, Pen y Gadair Fawr (2,624ft) is a more attractive summit, and even looks higher. At the end of the four main parallel ridges is an abrupt escarpment which overlooks the Wye Valley, and provides extensive views.

The best way of remembering the layout of the Black Mountains is to imagine your right hand placed flat on a table with the fingers spread apart pointing towards Abergavenny. Your thumb is Crib y Garth, or 'Cat's Back; your first finger is Hatterrall, your second finger is Ffwyddog, with Bal-mawr at the knuckle. Your third finger is Gader ridge, your little finger is Allt-mawr, and the nail is Crug Hywel, which gives its name to the town of Crickhowell directly below. On the back of your palm are Y Das, Rhos Dirion, Twmpa and Hay Bluff.

The centre line of the Hatterrall ridge marks the border of England and Wales, and by following it one can walk with one foot in Wales and one foot in Enland. It also provides a high level section of Offa's Dyke Path, a 168 mile National Trail connecting Sedbury, near Chepstow with Prestatyn on the North Wales coast. From this ridge the view east extends to the Shropshire Long Mynd, Clee Hills, Malvern Hills, Graig Syfryddin and the Forest of Dean.

The 'Stone of Revenge'

An interesting feature on the Ffwyddog ridge is Dialgarreg, a stone about 1 metre high, set into the ground beside the track. Also known as the 'Stone of Revenge' it marks the spot where in 1135, Richard de Clare, a Norman knight (brother of the founder of Tintern Abbey) was ambushed and killed by a band of Welshmen led by Morgan ap Owen.

Further to the north along this ridge is the prominent cairn of Garn Wen. This fine tall, circular cairn has been constructed with the tender care of a craftsman's skill, and it is a useful landmark.

Garn Wen

Rhos Dirion on the edge of the north escarpment, is marked by a trig' point (713m), from which impressive views across the Wye Valley may be obtained. Looking west, one may see the Carmarthen Fans, while in the near distance, stand the Brecon Beacons, with the table-top summit of Pen y Fan being most distinctive. Looking north one can see a vast expanse of hill country including the heights of Radnor Forest.

In my opinion , the finest viewpoint in the Black Mountains is the summit of Pen y Gadair Fawr (Top of the Great Chair), which is marked by a heap of stones. Its height of 800m is just surpassed by the neighbouring Waun Fach (Small Bog), for at 811m it is surprisingly higher. The concrete trig' point was removed many years ago, and this featureless summit can be difficult to locate on a misty day.

Pen Twyn Glas (645m) is an interesting summit, for it is marked by two upright inscribed stones. They are not gravestones, as some people imagine, but 19th century boundary markers which bear the names of two local landowners – Mrs Macnamara 1811 and Sir J. Bailey Bart 1847 – whose estates met at this point.

The summit of Pen Cerrig calch (701m) is the only area of Carboniferous limestone in the Black Mountains, and was part of the Llangattock escarpment prior to the Usk Valley being formed by a glacier.

Carboniferous limestone on Pencerrig Calch

There are also two minor ridges which deserve a mention. On the eastern side of the Olchon Valley is the previously mentioned Cat's Back, which provides an exhilarating narrow and rocky ascent to Black Hill. The other distinctive ridge is Y Grib, which is popularly known as the 'Dragon's Back'. It rises from Pengenffordd (above the A479) in a series of humps, and is a popular route, via Pen Manllwyn to the summit of Waun Fach.

Someone once said to me that he always finds a day in the Black Mountains rather boring. I bit my lip and shook my head; then felt sorry for him, and argued with passion, that in my opinion, this compact group of ridges and valleys is really quite fascinating, particularly if one knows something about the history of the area and can tune in to its very special atmosphere.

The Lure of Llanthony

I always have a very pleasant feeling when I turn left in Llanfihangel Crucorney, just after passing the Skirrid Inn, for I know that I am about to enter the most beautiful of the Black Mountain valleys. It is not surprising that it has been praised by so many poets, writers and famous artists such as J.M.W. Turner.

The road immediately drops down to the river Honddu, and begins a gradual ascent of the valley; then shortly, a special feature comes into view, which is of particular interest to students of geology.

It is a fine example of a terminal moraine, which dates from the Pleistocene period, and was formed when a glacier forced its way south as far as Llanfihangel Crucorney. There it came to an abrupt halt, and left behind a long curving moraine, which extends right across the end of the valley. It was large enough to divert the course of two rivers - the Honddu and the Monnow - which were forced to make a sharp turn to the north east. They united near Pandy, and in due course joined the Wye at Monmouth, instead of making for the Usk at Abergavenny.

This spur of glacial debris, three-quarters of a mile in length, runs out from the west side of the valley at an altitude of about 500 feet. Passing through the western end of the moraine in a long cutting, can be seen the Newport to Shrewsbury railway.

Very soon, on the right hand side of the road is the Queen's Head Inn, perched on a knoll above the River Honddu. It is well used by walkers, with a

car park specially provided for them at a small charge. The pub is also popular with pony trekkers, campers and fishermen.

It is at this point that you properly enter the Llanthony Valley, but this broader part is also known as the Vale of Ewyas, a name derived from the Marcher Lordship held in Norman times by the powerful de Lacy family. It was a member of this family, William de Lacy who founded Llanthony Priory during the reign of Henry I.

As I drive up this beautiful valley, I always get the feeling that I have entered another world. The mountains rise up to 2,000 feet on either side, the lower slopes are well wooded, while to the east, steep Old Red Sandstone crags, break the green of the otherwise open grassy hillside.

It is a pleasant journey on a well engineered tarmac road, but at one time the way on through this valley was considered hazardous because of the danger of ambush. In the narrowest part, the ground was wet marshland, and early visitors would even have to hack their way through thick undergrowth. There is no doubt that many travellers who came to worship at the shrine of St David would have preferred to make their way to Llanthony via the mountain ridges.

By the end of the 18th century, a vehicular track had been constructed, but William Coxe who made this journey in 1799, during his 'Tour of Monmouthshire' was certainly not impressed, for he wrote:

'I would not recommend timid persons to pass this way in a carriage, for in the whole course of my travels, I seldom met with one more inconvenient and unsafe. Excepting in very few places, there is no room for a single horse to pass by a chaise; and should two carriages meet, neither could proceed, until one was drawn backwards to a considerable distance. The soil is boggy in the wet, and rough in dry weather; the ruts worn by the small Welsh carts are extremely deep, and often times we were prevented from being overturned, only by the narrowness of the road, and the steepness of the sides, which would not allow the carriage to fall obliquely'.

The hamlet of Henllann (old Church) has a Baptist Chapel that was built in 1840. It was mentioned in 1903 by Father Ignatius, who commented: 'Here there is a Baptist Chapel attended by a goodly and devout congregation, and

usually served by a good and earnest minister, for the folk of this valley are mostly pious and God-fearing people.'

From here, the road keeps close to the course of the Afon Honddu, passing some distance from most of the hillside farms, which are linked by tracks running parallel to the metalled road. Stone for these buildings was extracted from small quarries on the hillsides, which provided blocks of sandstone for walls and chimneys; flags for roof tiles and paving. As the centuries passed, the weathered exteriors assumed the same warm brown and purple greys as the natural outcrops.

Many of these farmhouses have been continually occupied since the sixteenth century, but others were abandoned in the nineteenth century, and allowed to decay into ruins. Some have been restored in more recent years as holiday homes, but the rest are now just heaps of stones, and merely a reminder of the generations of people who once lived in much larger numbers in this beautiful valley.

Surprisingly, William Coxe failed to mention Cwmyoy, with its leaning church on the east side of the valley, but it may have of course been obscured by trees or mist, for he wrote, 'We heard the roar of the torrent beneath, but seldom enjoyed a view of the circumjacent scenery.'

Cwmyoy Church

Perched on the eastern slopes of the valley, St Martin's Church is about 700 years old, and it appears to be in danger of toppling over because centuries ago, its foundations were disturbed by subsidence. It always gives me great pleasure when I take people to this hamlet, and I always watch their faces when they first set their eyes on this remarkable leaning church. Their mouths drop open in amazement as if they can hardly believe what they are seeing.

The leaning tower of Cwmyoy Church

Not only is the chancel out of line with the nave, but the walls and windows slope away to the south. One writer aptly observed, 'No part of the building is square or at right angles with any other part.' It is even claimed that the tower actually leans more than the world famous leaning tower of Pisa!

The stumpy, battlemented tower has six bells, which is a large number for such a small church, but as a safety precaution only two of them can now be rung. The interior arch beneath the tower seems to have been constructed with dwarfs in mind, for it is just 4ft 6ins high. It is roughly made but impressive in its simplicity.

Visitors often ponder on the origin of the name Cwmyoy, and the fact is that it should be spelt Cwmiou, which means 'Valley of the Yoke'. This is a reference to the hillside above the church where a dip between two spurs resembles a yoke. It has been suggested that the church was deliberately built in a twisted form, in a similar manner to other churches which were erected at an angle from the main body to represent Christ on the cross with his head leaning to one side.

In 1966, following recommendations by Louis Hurley, a local architect, two substantial stone buttresses were built at the back of the church to counteract the leaning of the tower. They were constructed in local stone that blends with the rest of the building, in order to avoid spoiling the look of it. Despite its strange appearance, Cwmyoy Church is in relatively good condition, and can claim to be the most crooked church in Britain!.

On returning to the narrow road leading on through the valley it takes you around a sequence of bends, and in due course reaches a stone bridge spanning the Honddu. I often wonder why it is known as the Bugle Bridge, and my only thought is that perhaps the name has something to do with fox hunting, so perhaps the huntsman blew his bugle here to signify the start of the hunt.

The sleepy hamlet of Llanthony is now just around a few more bends, and on a map of 1880 it is shown to contain a corn mill, a sawmill, a smithy, a school adjoining St David's Church and two inns known as the 'Travellers Rest' and the 'Half Moon'. It must have been a much busier place in those days, but in the 1930s the corn mill burnt down, the saw mill was last worked in the 1940s, and the post office like many others closed in more recent years.

Today, it is the tourists, particularly on weekends, who bring the place to life and I am no different, for I always take pleasure in turning up the lane on the right leading up to the ruined Priory. Then after a walk on the hills, there is the added attraction of enjoying some liquid refreshment in the vaulted cellar bar of the 'Travellers' Rest', now known as the Priory Hotel.

My first visit to Llanthony

My early life was spent in Newport, Monmouthshire, and from my bedroom window, on clear days, I could pick out a grey smudge on the horizon that never failed to fascinate me. When I asked my father what it was, he replied with obvious enthusiasm, that it was the southern extremity of the Black Mountains and promised to take me there one day.

The following year, I was eight years old, and my father suddenly announced that next Saturday, he and I would cycle to Llanthony in the Vale of Ewyas, so that he could take photographs of the Priory. I remember my mother looking up from her knitting with a startled expression on her face, and she commented that surely it was much too far for me to ride on my little bike. My father assured her that we would not be cycling all the way, but would take the train as far as Llanfihangel Crucorney, and from there it was just six miles to Llanthony.

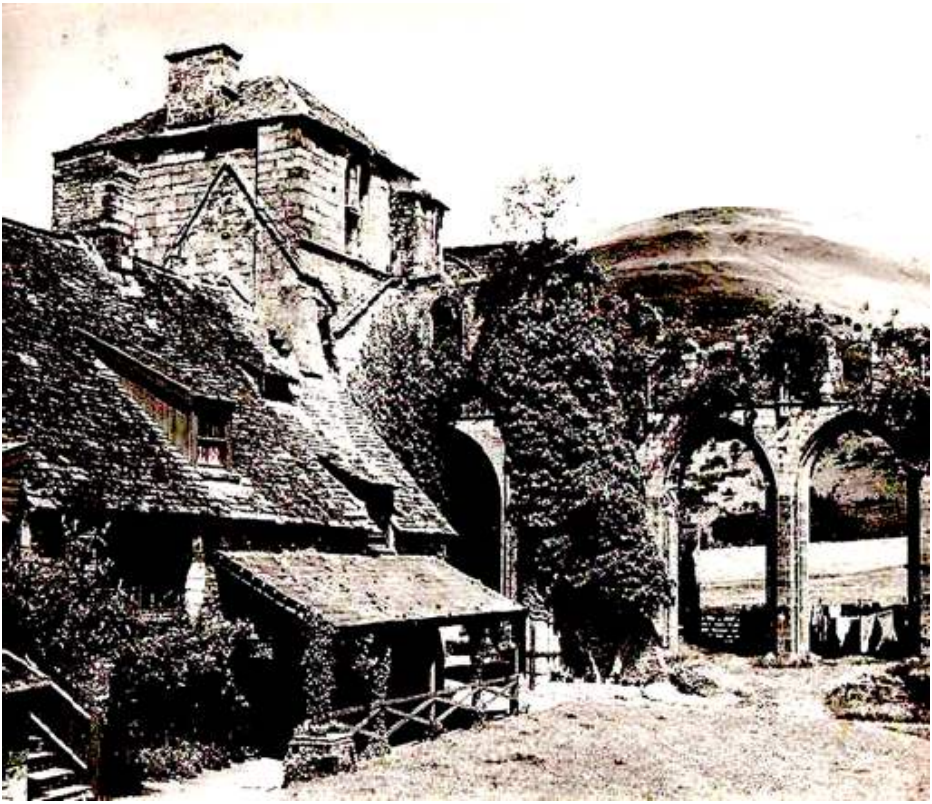
Saturday came at last, and we rode into town early in the morning to catch the Hereford train from Newport Station. I was riding my fairly new 18 inch Hercules, which had recently been purchased to celebrate my birthday. My father was astride my mother's BSA machine, complete with basket on the front which held his precious Rolliflex camera and our sandwiches.

In due course the train steamed into Llanfihangel Crucorney Station (now long closed), and from there it was just a short ride to the road that led into the Llanthony Valley. A short descent, and then a narrow hedge lined road led us into the heart of the Black Mountains. Within half an hour we reached a little stone bridge spanning the river Honddu, and then around the next corner we arrived in the hamlet of Llanthony.

The sun had been shining when we left Newport, but by now the rain had started to fall in a fine drizzle and the mist shrouded hills on either side of the valley looked dark and menacing. This was very disappointing, for my father had been commissioned by the author Olive Phillips, to take photographs of Llanthony Priory, for a book on Monmouthshire that she was writing.

We wandered around the grey stone ruins, literally soaking in the atmosphere of the place. My father, very annoyed with the change of weather,

muttered that it had been a wasted journey, and then entered the bar of Priory Hotel for a drink.



A few weeks later my father returned to Llanthony and took this picture

Children were not allowed in pubs in those days, so I had to sit on a sheltered bench just outside the entrance, with a glass of lemonade and a packet of crisps that my father handed out to me. He promised not to be long, but I was quite happy sitting there, fascinated by the eerie atmosphere of the ivy covered ruins. To be in such a remote place made a deep impression on me, and I longed to see more of these Black Mountains in better weather.

Our ride back was much easier, being downhill most of the way, but the distance that we covered that day caused me to drop off to sleep as the train

puffed its way back to Newport. My only previous cycling experience had been in the street outside our house, so it was little wonder that I was tired.

As the years passed, I visited the Black Mountains many times, first as a cyclist and then as a keen hill walker, which enabled me to explore these mountains thoroughly, walking the parallel ridges and standing on every summit. I savoured the special atmosphere that cloaks these hills in mystery, quietly enchanting me with impressions and thoughts of both the present and the distant past.

It was beyond my imagination at such a young age to think that the Black Mountains would in 1957 be designated as a National Park. and that by the 1970s I would be writing guidebooks that described the area in considerable detail. Also, that I would follow in the footsteps of my father to become an experienced photographer.

The setting of Llanthony Priory

As I look back on my cycle ride to Llanthony, it also seems remarkable to think that in 1951 there was proposal to flood part of the Llanthony Valley to form a catchment area that would supply water for the needs of industrial

Monmouthshire. Not surprisingly, it was also reported that 'there is little doubt that many interests will fight for the preservation of this lovely valley and its historic church'. Fortunately the flooding proposal was defeated and a large new Reservoir at Llandegfedd was created for Monmouthshire instead.

The importance of Llanthony

It is important to understand that Llanthony is a corruption of Llanddewi-nant-honddu, meaning the Church of St David on the River Honddu. The Normans converted this old Welsh name into Llanthoni, which in due course became Llanthony.

The simple mud and wattle shrine, said to have been built by St David in the sixth century, was discovered about six centuries later, by the Norman knight, William de Lacy, a retainer of the Earl of Hereford. He had ridden into the valley in search of wild deer, and when he found the ruined and deserted hermitage, he was so impressed with this holy place that he decided to stay there in sanctity and prayer for the rest of his life.

In 1108, assisted by Ernisius, a chaplain to the court of Queen Matilda, wife of Henry I, he began building a church. Five years later it was

dedicated to St John, the patron saint of hermits, by Urban (Bishop of Llandaff) and Reynelm (Bishop of Hereford).

Endowments from Hugh de Lacy, enabled a monastery to be built for Black Canons of the Order of St Augustine. They were so named because they were robed in black; and their monastery at Llanthony was the first in Wales. It may also be claimed that this was the highest location of any Augustinian House in Britain.

Legend has it, that for the rest of his life as a self imposed penance, William de Lacy never removed his armour, until it was worn out with rust and age. When this former soldier, who became a pious monk, finally died, he was probably buried beneath the High Altar.

Another important Norman who fell under the spell of Llanthony was Walter de Gloucester, the hereditary Sheriff of Gloucester, who was sometimes called Constable of England, but may only have been Constable of Gloucester Castle. Of local interest is the fact that he was married to Bertha, a granddaughter of Hamelin de Balun, the first Norman Lord of Abergavenny.

Was this stone part of Walter de Gloucester's tomb?

Walter endowed the canons of Llanthony with lands from his lordship of Beryntone, and retired to the priory in his old age, where he died a monk and was buried in the chapter house about 1129.

Every time I come here I look at a stone set in the wall of the chancel which may be part of Walter's tomb. It is incised with a Crusader's cross and depicts part of a mailed foot with a spurred heel.

The stone was found during the nineteenth century in a pile of stones, and inserted here for all to see. It is thought that it was his remains that were discovered some years ago, near the ruins of the chapter house.

Written records reveal that the monks hated the wet and misty weather in the Vale of Ewyas, and they also suffered problems with pillage and oppression, for no law prevailed in such a remote location. Milo de Gloucester, Earl of Hereford (the son of Walter de Lacy), granted them land to build another home on the bank of the Severn near Gloucester. So, in 1136 they migrated to Gloucester, where a new Llanthony Priory (Llanthony Secunda) was founded, leaving just a prior and four canons at Llanthony Prima in the Black Mountains.

It then became a place of penance where offending brothers were sent as a punishment for their sins. When any monk was sent there from Llanthony Secunda, he would ask what fault he had committed to cause him be sent to prison, where he would have 'no mind to sing to the wolves!'

Yet, it is the mother priory which has survived more intact, for the daughter priory at Gloucester was largely destroyed in the 18th century when the Ship Canal was constructed from Gloucester to Sharpness, and only scanty remains of the building can be seen now.

Towards the end of the twelfth century the de Lacy family made large grants to Llanthony Prima, and a new phase of building took place between 1175 and 1230. A magnificent church and extensive buildings with styles of architecture, ranging from Norman to Early English were built, the ruins of which we see today.

When I look through the arches on the north side, and see the mountain ridge, I think of how Giraldus Cambrensis, described 'the monks sitting in their Cloisters, enjoying the fresh air, and looked up towards the horizon, would behold the top of the mountain as if it were touching the heavens and herds of wild deer feeding on the summits.'

The height and pitch of the nave roof can be identified by the mark on the central tower which stood some 30 feet higher than at present above the canons' choir. It contained its own system of spiral stairs and galleries and the whole structure was supported by four large arches.

Although of small dimensions, this priory is well proportioned, and built on the lines of a cathedral, in the shape of a Roman Cross. From the western door the Priory church is 200 feet in length and in breadth,

including the two aisles, it measures 50 feet. In the centre of the Church, the four pointed arches which originally supported a massive square tower remain, but the tower which was 100 feet high had to be partially demolished in 1808 to make the rest of it safe.

The arches on the north side

The western front with its twin towers was built in three stages, and the empty space between them, was once filled with a magnificent window of three lights. Sir Richard Colt Hoare tells us that in 1803, he 'was a mournful eye witness of the total downfall of the three windows which then composed the principal ornament of that Front.'

He was so upset by this calamity that he commented, 'Llanthony will soon no longer excite nor deserve the attention of the traveller.' But this was a very pessimistic statement for Llanthony Priory will always be a very special place to visit.

A short walk across the field to the south west brings you to the great gatehouse which was built in the 14th century as the main entrance to the Priory. It faces north/south with the great archway built up and the two ends converted into gables. Inside are two vaulted bays and the

The great gatehouse

building is used by Court Farm as a very substantial and impressive barn.

In 1870 the Reverend Francis Kilvert recorded in his diary the following account of his visit to Llanthony Priory, and I always find amusing.

'What was our horror on entering the enclosure to see two tourists with staves and shoulder belts all completely postured among the ruins in an attitude of admiration, one of them of course discoursing learnedly to his gaping companion and pointing out objects of interest with his stick. If there is one thing more hateful than another it is being told what to admire and having objects being pointed out to one with a stick.

Of all the noxious animals too, the most noxious is a tourist. And of all tourists the most vulgar, ill bred, offensive and loathsome is the British tourist. No wonder dogs fly at them and consider them vermin to be exterminated. The most offensive part of their conduct however, was that they arrived before and already ordered their dinner, so we had to wait until they had done, solacing ourselves with the Visitors' Book from which to the great and just indignation of the landlord some British tourists had cut out and stolen half a year of entries from October 1865 to May 1866, including my last entry!

We were hungry and our ham and eggs fried and served in a pretty upper room were very acceptable. We also had good bread, cheese and butter and fair beer for which we paid 2/- each.

We could not have had a more beautiful day for our excursion. Under the cloudless blue and glorious sunshine the Abbey [he means Priory] looks happy and peaceful like a man in old age.'

The Priory Hotel

At the northern end of Llanthony is a public house called the 'Half Moon' which was originally built in the 18th century as two cottages, utilising stone taken from the priory ruins. Local farmers stopping for a drink here, still talk of the terrible winter of 1947, when for thirteen weeks, all supplies had to be manhandled along the snow blocked road from the Queen's Head at Lower Cwmyoy, which became the supply point during the emergency.

Beyond the Half Moon inn , the road becomes narrower and slightly steeper, winding between high hedges along a wooded stretch of the

valley. During the summer months, particularly at weekends, it can get very congested with cars travelling in both directions having difficulty in passing, and much patience is often needed. It seems remarkable now, considering the nature of this road , that until the early 1960s there was a weekly bus service to Capel-y-ffin.

The holy hamlet of Capel-y-ffin

This remote hamlet, situated at an altitude of 1,050ft is dominated by the towering green dome of Darren Llwyd, which divides the valley and has a river flowing on each side. To the left is Nant y Bwch and a track leading to the north escarpment, and on the right is the upper part of the river Honddu flowing from its source beneath Hay Bluff.

Capel-y-ffin is a very peaceful location, and the most holy hamlet imaginable, for there are three religious establishments to be found there. The name means Chapel on the boundary and refers to its position near the point where the three old counties of Brecon, Monmouth and Hereford meet, in addition to the three Dioceses of St David's, Llandaff and Hereford.

St Mary's Church, Capel-y-ffin

Visitors might imagine that it is the little whitewashed church that gave the hamlet its Welsh name, and it certainly looks more like a typical Welsh chapel than an Anglican church. But the name refers to a chapel of Baptist origin situated behind the church dedicated to St Mary, on the other side of the infant River Honddu. A church was first built here in the fifteenth century, and 1762 it was replaced by the present building, which has a connection with Llanigon, 2 miles south west of Hay-on-Wye.

When the Reverend Francis Kilvert walked here from Clyro in 1870, he described St Mary's in his diary, as being 'short, stout and boxy with its little bell turret reminding me of an owl.' It is easy to understand what he meant, for one can see how the two windows represent the eyes, the porch is the beak, but sadly the poor owl only has one ear, which is the bell turret.

Set in a semi-circle of ancient yews, the church is quite picturesque. The roof is tiled with slabs of sandstone and the small wooden louvered bell turret which sits astride the roof, leans at an angle.

About forty worshippers can be accommodated within the church, and most of them would have to sit in the gallery which runs along two sides of the building. It was no doubt built to double the seating capacity, in the days when the population in this part of the valley was much greater.

In the churchyard is an interesting assortment of memorial stones dating from the 1730s. A particularly touching epitaph commemorates little Noah Watkins:

'In memory of Noah, ye son of Noah Watkins
Who died aged 8 years in 1738.
This child said he would not take a hundred pounds
For breaking the sabbath, but keep it holy.'

Capel-y-ffin Monastery

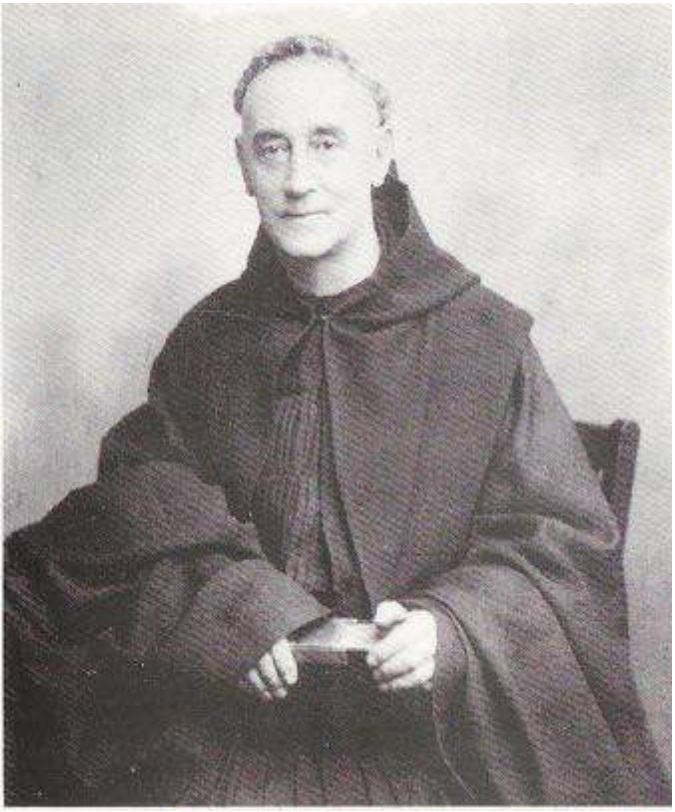
This building was established in 1870 by the Reverend Joseph Leycester Lyne, a Church of England clergyman who adopted the name Father Ignatius of Llanthony, and set out to revive the Benedictine monastic way of life for men within the Church of England.

Initially he tried to purchase Llanthony Priory, but the owner, Walter Savage Landor refused to sell the property. So instead, Ignatius bought Ty Gwyn Farm with 38 acres of land at Capel-y-ffin, and began building his monastery with an adjoining church. The foundation stone of the monastery was laid on March 17 (St Patrick's Day) in 1870. He decided to call the building, Llanthony Tertia – 'the third Llanthony', which caused much confusion.

Llanthony Tertia – the third Llanthony

Designed by Charles Buckridge, the monastery was built around a central garth on a traditional quadrangle plan in a pseudo-gothic style of architecture. There were four blocks, and the west one was the first to be built. The north block was lower than the others and at a lower level. There were no cloisters, but the ground floor of each block went by that name.

The foundation stone of the Church was laid by Father Ignatius on August 22, 1872, under the centre of the eastern wall. But only the Choir of the Church was ever built, and it was styled after the old Augustinian choir at Llanthony Priory. Much of its interior was taken up by the altar and stalls, with misericord seats and canopies and an organ on which Ignatius enjoyed performing.



Father Ignatius

On Monday, August 30, 1880, four monastery choir boys: John Stewart (12), Thomas Foord (11), Daniel Maguire (15) and Joseph Chalkey (9) were playing in the Abbot's field adjoining the monastery.

It was about eight o' clock and dusk was beginning to fall. John Steward was waiting his turn to run in the game, when he suddenly saw a bright dazzling figure gliding across the meadow towards him. It was surrounded by an oval halo of glory, and took the shape of a woman, wearing a veil. Both her hands were raised as if in blessing, and she approached very slowly. They watched it

enter a hedge and after remaining there in the light for a few moments it passed through a bush and vanished.

Watch was kept on the four following days, but nothing was seen. Then on the fifth evening, the figure was seen again by the boys. This time one of them summoned Brother Dunstan, who was in charge of the monastic community in the absence of Father Ignatius.

On September 8, which was the Feast of the Nativity of the blessed Virgin, it is claimed that the mysterious lady appeared a third time. Then again, on September 15, she made a dramatic appearance, which was witnessed by Father Ignatius himself during a rainstorm which swept over the valley.

The bush was aglow with a mysterious light, though no figure was visible, but as the group of watchers sang the words of 'Ave Maria' the form of a woman, appeared, to be joined briefly by a male figure with outstretched hands, and dressed in a loin cloth. Then the visions disappeared. The grass and ground were very wet with dew, but the place where the figures had been was found to be warm and dry.

Father Ignatius said:

'Light poured upon our faces and the buildings where we stood and in the centre was a most Majestic Heavenly form, robed in flowing drapery. The form was gigantic, but seemed to be reduced to human size as it approached, the Figure stood sideways, facing the Holy Bush. The Vision was most distinct and the details were very clear; but it was in the 'twinkling of an eye.'

Father Ignatius had no objection to publicity being given to these apparitions, but the amount of abuse and ridicule they brought on him was enormous. Pious but excited Protestants wrote that since the visions were of the Virgin Mary, they must be the Devil's work; . It was even suggested that they must have been caused by a mischievious unbeliever with the aid of a magic lantern. However, in 1880 no magic lantern or similar apparatus would have been powerful enough to produce such an effect.

Statue of the Virgin Mary

A life size statue of 'Our Lady of Llanthony', hewn out of marble was erected on the spot in the meadow where she had been seen, and it was unveiled in August 1905 in the presence of three hundred people. After Father Ignatius died, the statue was removed and taken to All Saints Church in Hereford. Then in 1968 the Father Ignatius Memorial Trustees arranged for its return to a site near its original position at Capel-y-ffin.

Whether or not one believes the story of the 'Apparitions', it is all part of the remarkable history of Capel-y-ffin. Father Ignatius himself, had claimed to see the vision on its last appearance and subsequently in a sermon, he commented: 'The veil between the visible and the invisible is so thin that we Christians can sometimes see through it.'

He was an eloquent orator who frequently went on preaching tours raising funds to build his abbey and establish his community at Capel-y-ffin. When the National Eisteddfod was held at Brecon in August 1899 he was elected a Member of the Druidic Order of Wales and the title Dewi Honddu (David of Honddu) was conferred on him in the presence of about 12,000 people.

On Friday16 October 1908, he died at the age of 71. His body was brought back to Capel-y-ffin in a hearse drawn by a team of white horses, and along the roadside large numbers of farm people stood to watch the flower-covered hearse come up the valley during a misty evening. He was buried on 22 October in the floor of his Abbey Church, under a tiled cross featuring the symbol of the four evangelists, and it bears the Latin inscription:

HIC: JACIT: IGNATIUS: JESUS: O.S.B.
DOMUS: CONDITOR: PRIMUSQUE: ABBAS
R.I.P.: OBIIT: OCT 16: MCMVIII

'Here lies Ignatius of Jesus, O.S.B.
Founder of this house and first Abbot
R.I.P. Died 16 October 1908'

Except for breaks during the two World Wars, every year, since his death and burial at the monastery, there has been a pilgrimage to Capel-y-ffin on the nearest weekend to 30 August (the date of the first vision), to commemorate the life and work of this remarkable Victorian clergyman, who will always be remembered as Father Ignatius. Those participating gather in the Abbot's Meadow in front of the monastery.

In 1924 the monastery buildings were occupied by the Ditchling Guild headed by the stone carver, engraver and typographer, Eric Gill, who chose this spot for its solitude, where he could 'make a cell of good living in the chaos of our world.'

He bought the property in 1930 for his eldest daughter Elizabeth, who married a local farmer and lived there until 1956. The monastery continued to belong to the Gill family and was even run for a short time as a boarding house, a youth hostel and a guest house.

In 1962, Eric Gill's grand-daughter Helen inherited the property, and lived there with her husband Wilf Davies, who on his retirement from the RAF had been appointed as Head Warden of the Monmouthshire section of the Brecon Beacons National Park. They ran it as a family home for their five children until

1984, when they sold the property with thirteen acres of land and moved to Abergavenny. The old Abbey Church was transferred by deed of gift to the Father Ignatius Memorial Trust, a registered charity which was formed in 1966 in order to maintain the ruins.

The Abbey Church had been totally neglected since the death of its founder in 1908 and by 1962 the interior was piled high with fallen masonry while the tiled surface of Father Ignatius' tomb had been smashed by falling stones.

Work began on clearing away the rubble, and this was done with the help of local Scouts, Guides and voluntary groups of young people working in the National Park. The tomb was re-tiled complete with new symbols, and the side chapel arches were enclosed with protective railings.

The grave of Father Ignatius

The Gospel Pass

From Capel-y-ffin the road makes a steady ascent to reach a pass known as Bwlch-yr-Efengel, which at 1,778ft is the second highest road in Wales. The highest is the Bwlch y Groes (Pass of the Cross) which is 1,790ft and situated between Llanuwchllyn and Dinas Mawddwy on the road to Bala.

Bwlch-yr-Efengel translates as 'Pass of the Evangelist', and the legendary explanation of this name is that during the time of the Roman invasion, a daughter of Caratacus, the Silurian chieftain, invited St Paul and St Peter to come to Britain to preach the Gospel and evangelise the Silures. It is reputed that they crossed the Black Mountains by this route, but it is doubtful that either of these two saints ever set foot in Britain.

It was not until the mid 1950s that this road was surfaced from Capel-y-ffin to Hay. Old guide books used to issue a special challenge to the adventurous motorist. Information was provided in guide books that in dry conditions it was possible to take your car over a pass to Hay-on-Wye, but it was certainly not a journey for the feint hearted.

I first made the crossing on a bicycle in the early 1960s and a few years later crossed the pass on a tandem, with a very worried companion. My tandem had dodgy brakes, and we flew down to Hay in the teeth of a raging blizzard.

The view from the Gospel Pass is extensive and some people have claimed to see Cadair Idris, 60 miles away on a very clear day. I have certainly seen Plynlimmon, where the rivers Wye and Severn have their source. In the middle distance can be seen Mynydd Eppynt and to the west the Brecon Beacons stand proud with their distinctive table-like summits. Directly ahead are the rounded tops of the Radnor Hills, while in the valley below, the River Wye curves on it great loop from Builth to Whitney.

THE HATTERRAL RIDGE

The eastern ridge of the Black Mountains runs for 12 miles from Pandy to Hay Bluff and forms the boundary of the National Park. It also separates Wales from England and is part of the Offa's Dyke long distance trail.

On the10th of July, 1971 I was invited to an open air ceremony in Knighton , when Lord Hunt of Everest fame decaled the Offa's. Dyke National Trail officially open. He owned a holiday cottage in that area in the village of Llanfair Waterdine, so the route was of great interest to him and his wife.

The Hatterrall Ridge

The driving force behind the creation of this trail was Frank Noble, and by chance I had met him three years previously, whilst walking in the Black Mountains. He told me that he was setting up a charity called the Offa's Dyke Association, which would help walkers by providing information about the route and all the available accommodation along it.

Llwybr Clawdd Offa, to give the path its Welsh name, was the fourth of Britain's long distance paths to be established, and it had been designated in 1955. It took many years to fully open this route, with the need to create new rights of way, erect stiles, footbridges and waymark paths across farmland.

Although it is not entirely laid out along the line of an ancient boundary created by King Offa, it does closely follow about 80 miles of bank and ditch which can still be recognised.

The dyke was first mentioned by Asser, the biographer of King Alfred, when he wrote that 'a certain vigorous king called Offa had a great dyke built between Wales and Mercia from sea to sea.'

King Offa ruled the English Midland kingdom of Mercia and dominated the whole of Britain between 757 and 795 AD. He was the first ruler to be styled King of the English, and it is likely that his dyke was built as a boundary marker rather than a defensive work. It is also possible that the dyke was never completed across the plain of Herefordshire, so the Hatterrall Ridge has been included as a part of the trail that provides excellent views.

Starting from Pandy one heads to the foot of the ridge to climb steeply for 500 ft to reach the ramparts of Pen Twyn Iron Age hill fort. From there, the ascent is quite gradual, and on a clear day with far reaching views, you feel that you are on top of the world., with the Malvern and Clee Hills visible and you then reach a trig' point at 1503ft.

Further on, the next trig' point comes into sight, situated at an altitude of 1810ft. The ridge then becomes broad, and there is a gradual ascent to the highest point at 2,3096ft which is unname, and about 1 mile south of Hay Bluff. Also known a s Pen y Beacon it is the northernmost tip of the Black Mountains. The summit, 2,221 ft is more flat topped than seems likely from the map and it is a magnificent viewpoint

To the west can be seen the distinctive twin summits of the Brecon Beacons, and beyond them is the dark ridge of Fan Hir and Bannau Brycheiniog, the highest peak of the Carmarthen Fans. To the north, one looks across the Wye Valley to the low hills of Radnorshire. The Offa's Dyke Path follows a diagonal track that heads off the eastern ridge down to a car park and the remains of a stone circle. If you have arranged to be picked up at the end of your ridge walk, this is an ideal meeting point, and on a sunny weekend there is the added bonus of an ice cream van waiting there.

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