

**THE MAGIC OF
BANNAU BRYCHEINIOG**
'History, Legends & Landscape'
by
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PREFACE

Our National Park has been an important part of my life because ever since I was a child, and I began to explore this area well before it was designated. When I came to buy my first house, I decided that it had to be in the vicinity of Abergavenny so that I would be close to the 'Three Peaks' that surround the town and also the Black Mountains which are very special if you are a dedicated hill walker.



In addition I wanted to write books about the area, and this inspired me to get to know the Park thoroughly, and to research its history and legends. Through the ever changing seasons I wandered with my camera capturing the scenery and places of historic interest.

In 1966, Wilfred Davies, the first Head Warden of the Monmouthshire section of the Park decided to set up a team of Voluntary Wardens, and I can proudly claim that I was the first one to be appointed. So it was not long before I was involved in helping him to repair stone walls, clear footpaths and remove large numbers of eyesores.

We even created the very first waymarked walk in the Park, a five mile circular route at Llanthony. It was waymarked with yellow arrows painted with a black background on posts and slabs of stone set in the ground. This new idea did not meet everyone's approval, for some people considered that walkers should be able

to map read and design their own routes. But gradually the idea of waymarking was accepted, and it certainly helps to ensure that walkers do not stray off rights of way when crossing farmland.

At that time I was working at an Outdoor Education Centre based in the Black Mountains, introducing youngsters and adults to hill walking, rock climbing and caving in the National Park. I did this for about 4 years and it enabled me to explore the area thoroughly.

Subsequently, in 1974 I was appointed to the position of Chief Countryside Warden for Gwent County Council, with the responsibility of establishing a Countryside Warden Service, operating throughout the county, and also in part of the Wye Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. This was my job for the next twenty years, but my role came to an end with Local Government re-organisation when the county of Gwent was abolished.

I took early retirement and decided to set up a publishing business and spend my time researching and writing books which was something that I had started doing in 1970. Initially I had begun by writing articles, and then the idea of writing a walking guide to the Brecon Beacons National Park came to me. There was definitely an important gap in the market, for at that time there were no guidebooks to walking routes in the Park available.

So, I can proudly claim that I was the first person to write walking guides to the Park; beginning with *Walks in the Brecon Beacons*, and *Exploring the Waterfall Country*. People used to vaguely refer to that location as Ystradfellte, but my book introduced the descriptive label 'Waterfall Country'. It was quickly adopted by everyone who went there and is very well established as an attractive destination.

Having spent a large part of my life exploring, researching and photographing this wonderful part of Wales, even before it was designated as a National Park, I would like to share my knowledge and experiences in order to encourage 'Friends of Bannau Brycheiniog' to explore this area intimately.

Chris Barber MBE FRG

INTRODUCTION

The Brecon Beacons National Park was established in 1957 under the provision of the National Parks and Countryside Act of 1949. It was the third National Park to be established in Wales, and it covers an area of 519 square miles, almost half of which is common land which means that walkers may enjoy access to a wide expanse of open country.

Although the Park takes its name from the Brecon Beacons, there are in fact four ranges of mountains in the area and several isolated peaks as well. The four ranges are: the Carmarthen Fans, Fforest Fawr, Brecon Beacons and Black Mountains. There are few areas of Britain that offer such a wide range of scenery and so many fascinating places. In the west we have the shapely summits of the Carmarthen Fans with their two shimmering lakes and fairy legends. Then there is Fforest Fawr (Great Forest), a wild lonely area of mist shrouded moorland. It can be defined as the area between the A4067 and the A4059 and it includes the summits of Craig Cerrig-gleisiad, Fan Frynach, Fan Fawr, Fan Llia, Fan Nedd, Fan Fraith and Fan Gyhirch.

Many walkers who go there for the first time expect to find a dense forest as the name suggests. However, it was never a forest in the formal sense and it was established as a game reserve by Bernard de Neufmarche after he had defeated Bleddyn ap Maenarch, the last Welsh ruler of the area. Large herds of deer roamed the hillsides and these were maintained by the Norman lords to provide good hunting. Apart from the sporting interest it also meant that supplies of fresh venison were readily available during the winter season to supplement the diet of salted meat obtained from the annual slaughter of domestic animals. Undoubtedly the Forest played an important part in the medieval economy of this area.

It was called Fforest Fawr to distinguish it from Fforest Fach on its north side between Cwm Trewern and the lower Crai Valley. Farmers had pasture rights on Fforest Fawr until the Enclosure Act of 1815 -19, and during the last century this area of 50 square miles has been used for sheep rearing on a large scale.

To the south are the unique delights of the 'Waterfall Country', an area of exceptional beauty, where four rivers tumble down from the upland slopes to plunge through wooded ravines and the dramatic cascades fill the deep narrow gorges with the thunder of falling water.

Then there is the dramatic escarpment of the Brecon Beacons where majestic Old Red Sandstone peaks glow russet red and brown in sunlight or appear black and shadowy in stormy weather. On the other side of the Usk Valley, the aptly named Black Mountains is a compact area of parallel ridges and narrow valleys where one can often spend a day walking in solitude, savouring a special atmosphere that always seems to cloak these hills in mystery.

Through the passing centuries, history has blended with scenery and the marks left by people from Prehistoric, Roman, Celtic, Norman and industrial times can be seen throughout the Park. It is rich with Iron Age hill forts, mysterious standing stones, stone circles and round barrows. Norman castles are also numerous and they once guarded such locations as Abergavenny, Brecon, Crickhowell, Trecastle and Tretower. But the most dramatic of all is Carreg Cennen which is perched on top of a steep limestone crag. There are also many fascinating little churches, founded by the wandering holy men of the sixth century and enigmatic ruins such as Llanthony Priory and Tretower Court.

People who enjoy bird watching can delight in the mewing, circling flight of the buzzard, the dipper bobbing along river valleys and the plaintive call of the curlew. Skylarks may be heard singing loudly and seen soaring with great energy, while the occasional red kite may be glimpsed, particularly in the west of the Park.

Those who have already explored Bannau Brycheiniog intimately will no doubt agree that it is the quality of the landscape that is so special, and it is only by walking the valleys and visiting the summits at varying times of the year that you can really experience their moods and the ever-changing views, thus enriching your knowledge and appreciation of this fascinating part of Wales.

The concept of national parks evolved in the United States in 1872, when Yellowstone Park was thus designated. But it was only in 1938 that the idea took root in Britain with the formation of a Standing Committee for National Parks. But due to the war it was not developed until John Dower produced a report outlining the possibilities of adapting the national park ideals and administration to English and Welsh requirements.

This 'Dower Report' was published by the Ministry of Town and Country Planning in 1945 and its recommendations were accepted. Then four years later, the National Parks and Countryside Act was passed and this resulted in the National Parks Commission which in 1968 was renamed the Countryside Commission. This designated the separate areas and advised on their administration.. The first Park to be designated was the Peak District in 1950. This was followed a year later by the Lake District, Snowdonia and others in due course. The Brecon Beacons National Park came into being in 1957, and at that time was the tenth to be designated.

On 17 April 2023, the 66th anniversary of the Brecon Beacons National Parks designation, it was announced that the Park Authority had adopted the name 'Bannau Brycheiniog', which is the Welsh translation of Brecon Beacons. This change of name addressed environmental issues such as climate change and removed any reference to carbon-emitting beacons such as the logo of a massive carbon-burning brazier which was not good for an environmental organisation !

The adoption of a Welsh name had undoubtedly been inspired by the Park Authority in North Wales when Eryri began to be used instead of Snowdonia. It was John Leland, the 16th century antiquary who first referred to the Brecon Beacons area as 'Banna Brekeniauc.'

AREA OF THE PARK



The total area of Bannau Brycheiniog amounts to 519 square miles, which is considerably smaller than that of Eryri (Snowdonia) which is 838 square miles, but twice the area of the Pembrokeshire Coast's figure of 225 square miles. As a matter of interest, Snowdonia is exceeded only by the Lake District which covers 866 square miles.

When designated in 1957 the Brecon Beacons National Park covered a slightly smaller area, and in June 1966 a 'Variation Order' extended it by about 4.5 square miles at its south eastern extremity to include a section of the Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal.

It is interesting that Bannau Brycheiniog involves more counties and districts than any other park except the Peak District and it shares only with Northumberland the distinction of including a national boundary. The extreme eastern boundary follows the English border, along the Hatterrall Ridge of the Black Mountains, beyond which lies the rich agricultural landscape of Herefordshire.

The core of the park (the Brecon Beacons) is owned by the National Trust, which acquired the 8,192 acres from the Eagle Star Insurance Company in 1967. Formerly the area was part of Lord

Tredegar's estate. The Trust also owns some 205 acres of the summit of Skirrid Fawr), and 2130 acres of the Sugar Loaf, both of which are near Abergavenny. The Trust also owns 186 acres around the Henrhyd Falls and several smaller areas.

The central part of the Park is always referred to as the Brecon Beacons and while the westerly uplands used to be known as the Carmarthen Fans (although the highest point was in Breconshire), it is now politically correct to refer to them as the Black Mountain or Mynydd Du. Personally, I prefer to use the old term Carmarthen Fans in order to avoid confusion with the eastern Black Mountains, which are in Monmouthshire, Powys and a small part of Herefordshire.

On 30 November 2000, the industrial landscape surrounding Blaenavon was inscribed as a World Heritage Site and it is significant that 45% of this area is in Bannau Brycheiniog. While the industrial history is of special interest, it is undoubtedly the outstanding scenic quality of the landscape which provides an added bonus for the visitor.

In 2013 the National Park was recognised as an International Dark Sky Reserve and a large part of Bannau Brycheiniog has also been designated a European and Global Geopark.

THE BATTLE OF BRYCHEINIOG

Brycheiniog was an independent kingdom founded by King Brychan in the fifth century and later in Norman times it was transformed into the Lordship of Brecknock, which in due course became part of the historic county of Brecknockshire. This name in Welsh was retained as Sir Fryheinog, 'the shire of Brycheiniog'.

In 1093 Brycheiniog had been threatened by a force led by Bernard de Neufmarche, a half brother of William the Conqueror and a member of the prominent family of Aufay. On his mother's side he was descended from Gilbert de Saint Valerie. Bernard had accompanied the Conqueror into England, and his name figures as a witness to many of William's early charters. Prior to 1066 Bernard married into a French family which had settled in the area now known as Herefordshire.

Advancing into east Brycheiniog, Bernard made considerable progress and the settlements of Hay, Glasbury and Talgarth were taken into his possession. It is probable that Bronllys Castle was established as a motte and bailey at the junction of the rivers Dulais and Llynfi in preparation for further advances and by 1091 Neufmarche had reached Aberhonddu (Brecon).

Rhys ap Tewdwr, ruler of the ancient kingdom of Deheubarth is believed to have marched to the old Roman fort of Y Gaer, just outside Brecon, to assist his brother-in-law, Bleddyn ap Maenarch, and he encamped with his army at a place called Y GLydwi, between the fort and the site of Aberhonddu. Bernard de Neufmarche and his force took up their position on the summit of Pen y Crug Iron Age hillfort.



Battle Church west of Brecon

The two armies are believed to have fought a terrible battle at a location just west of Brecon which was later appropriately named Battle. It probably took place in the fields to the south of the village

and resulted in the death of both Bleddyn ap Maenarch and Rhys ap Tewdwr. A well on the common is known as Ffynnon Pen Rhys and there is a tradition that Rhys ap Tewdwr was beheaded there.

Nearby is Battle Church which stands in a circular churchyard, indicating that the present building stands on the site of a much older one. It once belonged to the Priory of Brecknock, which was made a cell to Battle Abbey in Sussex. This was founded by William the Conqueror as an act of penance to atone for the carnage in the Battle of Hastings and to create a memorial to those killed. There is a tradition that the High Altar was placed on the very spot where King Harold was killed and it is significant that it was consecrated in 1094, one year after the Battle of Brecon.



Battlefield church near Hastings in Sussex

So it seems appropriate that a similar cell was built at Battle, near Brecon to mark the death of these two Welsh rulers, Whether they are actually buried there is not known and the only portion of the first chapel that still exists may be the holy water stoup, to the left of the entrance door.

According to Theophilus Jones in his *History of Brecknockshire* (1805) Bleddyn ap Maenarch was buried at Ystradfflur in Cardiganshire, which had been established at Yr Hen Ffynachiog by his brother-in-law Rhys ap Tewdwr. It was situated upon the banks of the river Fflur, two miles south west of the later Strata Florida abbey founded by his grandson Rhys ap Gruffydd. It is quite possible that both Bleddyn ap Maenarch and the headless body of Rhys ap Tewdwr were buried at Ystrad fflur.

Soon after the battle Bernard Neufmarche built a castle at Aberhonddu (Brecon), using stone from the Roman fort known as Y Gaer. This castle was the most westerly Norman outpost, guarding routes to the north and west, and from here, Bernard Neufmarche controlled the four cantrefs established by King Brychan in the sixth century.

BRECON CASTLE

Brecon castle was built within twenty five years of the Norman Conquest by Bernard de Neufmarche, the half brother of William the Conqueror and he styled himself Lord of Brecon. He wanted to build a fortress that would serve as a military and political centre for his lordship.

He made use of the rising ground between the rivers Usk and Honddu and no doubt obtained most of his building stone by dismantling the old Roman fort known as Y Gaer which had been built 3 miles to the west of Brecon.

Bernard began by constructing a large motte and then erected a wooden tower on its summit to serve as the castle keep. When the castle passed to the de Braose family, the wooden keep was replaced by a polygonal stone shell keep, of which today, only three lengths of wall remain. Unfortunately, there is no public access to it because it is situated in the private gardens of the Bishop's Palace which is situated to the north of the Brecon Castle Hotel and the layout is now confused by the road that runs between it and the earlier castle mound.



Brecon Castle Hotel stands next to the ruined castle



The semi-octagonal tower

The de Braose family ruled the lordship of Brecon for nearly a century and were followed by the de Bohuns who held the castle for about 130 years. A member of this family had received the castle through marriage and it was held by Henry IV who was not only lord of Brecon but also King of England. It was Humphrey de Bohun who built the great hall which is the most impressive part of the castle, and adjoining the wall on the Honddu side is a semi-octagonal tower.

During the 13th century, Brecon was surrounded by a stone wall which began at the castle and enclosed the town in the form of an oval, measuring about 1,000 yards. On the inner side was a raised terrace, while on the outer side ran a deep foss or ditch, so that with the Usk, Honddu and the Foss, Brecon was surrounded by water. There were also ten turrets on the wall through which arrows could be fired on the enemy. There were four entrances in the wall known as Struet Gate, Water Gate, Watton Gate and Bridge Gate, which are shown on John Speed's map of Brecon that was drawn in 1610.

The stone tower on the motte became known as the Ely Tower, being named after Dr Morton the Bishop of Ely. He was confined there by order of Richard III in the custody of Henry Stafford, Duke of Buckingham who had helped to procure the crown for King Richard. Disappointed in his expectations of reward, he planned with his prisoner the union of the houses of York and Lancaster which would lead to Henry Earl of Richmond becoming Henry VII, the first Tudor Monarch.

Their intentions were discovered and Bishop Ely fled to Flanders while the Duke of Buckingham was arrested and beheaded for his treasonable actions. This rebellion undoubtedly helped to prepare the way for Henry Tudor's defeat of Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth in 1485 and he rewarded Bishop Morton by appointing him Archbishop of Canterbury.

During the Civil War in 1645, Brecon Castle was besieged by the Parliamentarians and this brought the fortress to its end. Several generations of Brecon residents then used the ruined castle as a quarry for building stone and the town wall was also demolished.

The castle remained a deserted ruin until 1809, when Sir Charles Morgan of Tredegar House, Newport, took possession of it and spent a large sum of money turning it into a Regency style hotel. This became popular with people travelling in horse drawn coaches and it was the beginning of tourism in Brecon.

A number of well known people are known to have stayed there, including the scientist Michael Faraday during his tour of the area in 1819. It is also of interest that George IV dined there in 1821.

Today, it is recognised as the oldest hotel in Wales and in 2022 was purchased by 'The Coaching Inn Group', which has a passion for restoring historic coaching inns. They expensively refurbished the building and with 43 guest rooms it is one of the most attractive and historic venues in Bannau Brycheiniog.

BRECON CATHEDRAL

Bernard Neufmarche ordered that a religious establishment should be built at Aberhonddu on the site of an earlier Celtic church of which no trace remains. One of his followers, Roger, a monk from Battle Abbey founded a priory on this site as a daughter house and the first prior to be appointed was Walter, another monk from Battle Abbey. The present building, dedicated to St John the Evangelist was begun in the 13th century and is sometimes described as being 'half church and half castle.'

The round shape of the churchyard confirms that this is the site of an earlier Celtic church and Bernard de Neufmarche in 1093 made a grant of this Church to Roger, one of the monks of Battle Abbey He founded a priory on the and this led to the beginning of the construction of The Priory Church.

Few parts of that building remain to the present day except for a curiously ornamented font and a unique cresset stone. The font is the oldest object in the Cathedral and was probably made and carved for the Norman Church. It is adorned with fantastic beasts and birds that are intertwined.

The cresset stone, which was a medieval system of lighting is a slab 6 inches thick with 30 hollows cut into it. These were filled with oil or grease and a wick was then added and lit to provide illumination. It is the finest example of such a medieval lamp that has ever been found.

This Church has stood in a commanding position on Priory Hill for a thousand years, and it is built of Old Red Sandstone, extracted from a quarry in the neighbouring Priory Groves. Large and solid with a squat tower in the centre, it is as much a fortress as a church for the plain walls, the height of the windows, the embattled parapets and the strong tower give it a military appearance, which was important because when it was being built, there was certainly a need for such a fortress.



The cresset stone



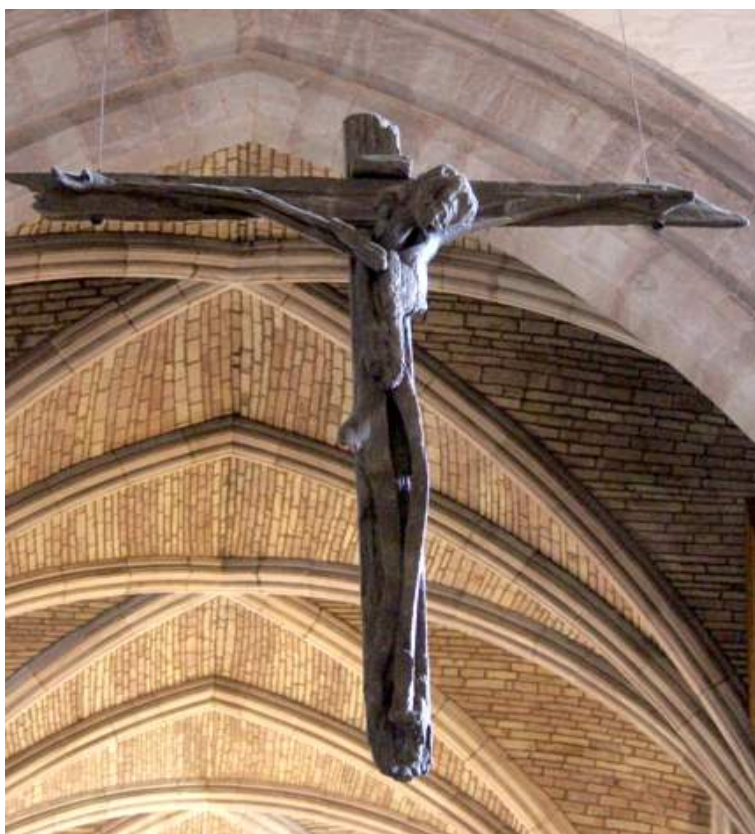
The ancient font

In the late Middle Ages the Priory Church was renowned for its Golden Rood Screen, which would have been across the east end of the nave, forming a boundary between the parochial and monastic areas of worship. Above the screen would have been a rood, a representation of the crucifixion of Christ.

This fifteenth-century lofted-rood screen would have been a massive structure and the golden cross on this elaborately painted rood was credited with miraculous powers. Known as the 'Church of the Holy Rood' it became an object of pilgrimage, but all that can be seen today are the stone corbels which supported the

screen, and the doors which would have opened onto the gallery at the top of the screen.

Unfortunately the rood screen was destroyed in 1538 during Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries. However, a life size bronze crucifix has now been hung near the spot where the screen used to be was Commissioned by Anthony Bunker, a Welsh-born lawyer, to celebrate his wife Elizabeth's ordination to the priesthood, it was made by Helen Sinclair, a Welsh sculptor whose work is in private collections all over the world.



The Bronze Crucifix

The present chancel, tower and transepts were constructed in the early 13th century and the nave in the 14th century. It is 107 feet long and on either side are transepts. The one on the north side is called Battle Chapel and was used by the people who lived in the hamlet of Battle just outside Brecon. The chapel on the south side is called Capel y Cochaid, or the Chapel of the Red-haired Men, and it is believed to be the burial place of Norman soldiers who garrisoned the castle. But did they all have red hair?

The Havard Chapel, erected in the fourteenth century, is named after a local family, descendants of a companion of Bernard de Neufmarche. It is now the Regimental Chapel of the South Wales Borderers (24th Regiment) and contains extensive items of militaria including the frayed and tattered regimental colours and battle flags carried during the Zulu War of 1879.



Regimental Colours and Battle Flags

The east window is filled with stained glass commemorating the memory of the officers and men of this of this Regiment who were killed during the Battle of Rorke's Drift in 1879.

There are numerous stained glass windows such as those depicting the figures of King Brychan, his eldest son St Cynog, and esteemed Lords of Brecknock, which include Giles de Breos, Humphrey de Bohun and Edward Stafford.





The Priory House

In 1923 the Priory Church was chosen as the Cathedral of the new Diocese of Swansea and Brecon. It is a Grade I Listed building and the present Dean is Dr Paul Shackerley who was appointed in 2014. The Cathedral is open to the public daily from 9am to 6pm and guided tours can be arranged by contacting the office (01874 623857).

The Priory House, adjoining the Cathedral is now the Diocesan Offices and before the Reformation it is thought to have been the house of the Prior, the monk who was in charge of the Priory and its estates. The first Prior at Brecon was Walter, a monk from Battle Abbey in East Sussex, where the Battle of Hastings had been won by William the Conqueror

It is of interest that during the first Civil War, after the disastrous Battle of Naseby, Charles I arrived in Brecon collecting fresh

forces. He came to the Priory on August 5th and was received by Colonel Herbert Price, Governor of the Priory town and castle.

In Priory House that night, King Charles wrote a letter to his young son, which reads as follows:

“Charles, it is very fit for you to prepare for the worst. Wherefore my pleasure is; whenever you find yourself in danger of falling into the rebels’ hands, that you convey yourself to France, and there to be under your mother’s care, who is to have full power of your education in all things, except religion, and in that not to meddle at all, but I leave it entirely to your tutor, the Bishop of Salisbury. This is all at this time from your loving father, Charles R.”

The following morning King Charles left Priory House to make his way towards Hereford. Leading off Struet Street is a cobbled lane which is known as King Street because King Charles ran up it to escape from Parliamentarians during the Civil War. A plaque on the wall tells the story of this incident.



A PORTRAIT OF PEN Y FAN

When people visit this area for the first time and drive along the A40 on their way to Brecon, they are always surprised and impressed when the dramatic , shapely skyline of the Brecon Beacons comes into view. This north facing, escarpment with its distinctive table-top summits of Pen y Fan and Corn Du and the sharp nosed profile of neighbouring Cribyn, is certainly majestic in appearance.



The N. E. Face of Pen y Fan

Writers in the eighteenth century sometimes referred to Pen y Fan as Mount Denny. This was probably due to a misunderstanding of the Welsh language and even today people visiting the area often call it Pennyfan, so one can appreciate how the mistake arose. Other writers of the same period proclaimed the highest peak to be Cadair Arthur and thus began yet another Arthurian legend. The heroic King Arthur was portrayed as a giant, whose head soared above the clouds and was encircled by a rainbow. The back of his chair was a semi-circular sweep of two or three miles and the seat was marked by the pool called Llyn Cwm Llŵch.



Llyn Cwm Llŵch

The idea of a beacon being lit on the summit of Pen y Fan has been doubted by some people, but there was a time when a complex warning system consisting of a chain of intervisible hill beacons was established. Their use can be traced back to the time

of the beginning of troubles with France in the fourteenth century, when the threat of invasion was a constant worry. News of the approaching enemy could be conveyed along the coast and inland by fire signals.

Where the terrain was suitable, the gap between the beacons was about six to eight miles and a chain of beacons included a high point which would be visible from a wide area and no doubt Pen y Fan would have been used for this purpose.

In the beginning of the nineteenth century, when Napoleon threatened to invade this island, beacons were prepared for possible use, and it is recorded that in 1804, the beacon at Hulme Castle in Berwickshire was accidentally lit, causing a long chain of beacons to be set off, bringing out hundreds of volunteers to arms.

The jubilee of Queen Victoria was celebrated in 1887 with the lighting of many beacon bonfires throughout the country, and again in 1887 for her diamond jubilee. A beacon was fired on Pen y Fan for both these occasions. On 31 December, 1992 a beacon was lit on the summit of Pen y Fan to celebrate the new European unity and the advent of the single European Market. Thousands of beacons were lit on this night throughout the twelve EC countries and spectacular firework displays held on the summits of hills and mountains.

Geologists will tell you that the Brecon Beacons were formed from the sand and mud of a great marine estuary which covered the area in Devonian times, about 300,000,000 years ago. Their tops are capped by 'plateau beds' of Old Red Sandstone, which give them their characteristic 'table top' appearance.

Few landscapes could more perfectly illustrate the effects of glaciation than this quartet of magnificent north-west facing cirques that overlook smooth U-shaped valleys. During the Ice Age great depths of ice accumulated in the north facing cwms, enlarging them by grinding out bowls in the bases of the valleys. Corrie lakes were often left behind in such hollows when the ice receded, but now, with the exception of Llyn Cwm Llŵch (below Corn Du), only head streams remain.

Pen y Fan is not only the highest mountain in South Wales, but it also represents the geographical centre of Parc Bannau

Brycheiniog. At just under the magic 3,000ft, it is the highest peak south of Cadair Idris and the tallest Old Red Sandstone summit in Britain. The exact height is 2,907ft (886m) which means that it is just 600 feet lower than Yr Wyddfa (Snowdon).

I may also reluctantly add that it is probably the easiest summit of nearly 3,000ft to reach in the whole of Britain, because the most popular route starts from about 1400ft on the A470 at Pont-ar-daf and an ascent of Pen y Fan can be easily accomplished in less than an hour. Such accessibility makes Pen y Fan a magnet, drawing walkers from far and wide, attracted by the lure of climbing the highest peak in South Wales, but unfortunately severely adding to the erosion .

Admirable progress has been made by the National Trust during the last two decades in dealing with erosion problems on the main tracks leading up to the summits , but it seems to be a never-ending problem.

If you have a well out of date map, it will show a trig point on the summit of Pen y Fan, but this once familiar structure was demolished by the National Trust between 2002 and 2004 when an archaeological dig was carried out to investigate a Bronze Age burial cairn. The ashes contained in a central cist were dated to 2000 BC using radiocarbon technology.

The view from the summit is particularly fine and it ranges from the Carmarthen Fans in the west to the Black Mountains in the east. Llyn Syfaddan (Llangorse Lake) is seen shimmering to the north-east and Plynlimmon can be seen beyond Mynydd Epynt. Between Radnor Forest and the Black Mountains appear the north Herefordshire plain and the Shropshire hills. Cadair Idris in Eryri (Snowdonia) may reveal itself to the north-west in exceptionally clear weather. To the south down the valleys of the old South Wales coalfield, the Bristol Channel may gleam and sparkle in the sunshine. One may also glimpse Dunkery Beacon on Exmoor and the Preselli Hills of Pembrokeshire, giving an outlook over no less than four National Parks.

THE MOUNTAIN CENTRE



The Mountain Centre on Mynydd Illtud

I have special memories of the National Park Mountain Centre being built on Mynydd Illtud and it has proved a very important facility. People today take its presence there for granted, but the original plan was to build it at Storey Arms. However, it was sensibly decided that this site was already very popular, so it would be better choose somewhere more peaceful that would also provide commanding views of the Brecon Beacons. So, for these reasons the high moorland of Mynydd Illtud was chosen.

Finance for the project was helped by the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust and it was decided that the building should have a refreshment room, a lecture room, lounge, public toilets and parking facilities.

The building was designed by S. Colwyn Foulekes and the contractor was Haydn Evans Ltd. It was officially official opened

by the Rt. Hon. Cledwyn Hughes MP, Secretary of State for Wales, on 1 June, 1966. So next year will be its sixtieth anniversary

The project had been well publicised and people were eagerly awaiting the opening ceremony, but there was immediately an access problem in both directions with a large amount of traffic endeavouring to use the narrow lanes that led up to it. No one seemed to have visualised the chaos that would result by building it in this location without first improving the access routes. It took a while, but in due course this was done and there is certainly no access problem today.

A SERIOUS CLIMATE CHANGE PROBLEM

In 2025 we have had the driest start to spring in 69 years and this is a result of Climate Change altering patterns of weather and water around the world; causing shortages and draughts in some areas and floods in others. Unfortunately This situation will only get worse and it will have a disastrous effect on our rivers, wildlife and food production. It is significant that water companies have already started building new reservoirs in in some parts of England .

On 22 May 2025, Natural Resources Wales declared that the whole of Wales is in a prolonged dry weather status with very low rivers, reservoirs and groundwater levels, resulting in the drying up of land and soils.

The Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal winds its way for 35 miles through Bannau Brycheiniog and 2025 is the 225th anniversary of its opening and Glandwr Cymru – the Canal & River Trust for Wales – who care for the Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal own and also own the Llangollen and Montgomery Canals. The Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal has been faced with a very difficult problem this year, because due to the unusually early dry weather, water levels in the canal have been dangerously close to forcing the Trust to close the canal to navigation.



The Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal

Fortunately, as a temporary measure the Canal & River Trust have managed to agree a new arrangement with Welsh Water so that at significant cost (to the Trust), water can be released from the Usk Reservoir, via the River Usk into the canal at Brecon. However, this is only a short term solution to the problem.

Money earmarked for repairs to the canal have had to be used to buy this emergency water supply because the Welsh Government were unable to help. It has been said that although it recognised the value of the canal, any arrangement between the Canal & River Trust, and Welsh Water is a 'commercial decision' in which it would play no role.

This canal is not only an important tourist attraction that brings a considerable amount of money into the area, but permanent closure would mean financial hardship for the boat hire businesses, the closure of pubs along the route that only function because of the canal. It would also be devastating for all the wildlife such as fish, water voles, ducks, otters and Kingfishers that live on the canal. There are also people who permanently live on narrowboats moored in the canal.

The canal basin at Brecon which marks the beginning of the canal is supplied with water via a pipeline which leads for about three quarters of a mile from Newton Weir on the River Usk. This extraction of water obviously results in a severe reduction of water in the river and that is a major concern, and it must take priority over the canal.

A PROPOSAL TO FLOOD THE LLANTHONY VALLEY !

We had a worrying situation about seventy years ago when inadequate water storage in Monmouthshire was causing much concern. This resulted in a serious proposal to create a new reservoir by flooding part of the beautiful Llanthony Valley in order to meet the demand for water to feed the county's industries and steadily increasing population.



Llanthony Priory

A report produced by the Senior Engineering Inspector of the Ministry of Health advocated an initial scheme which involved the construction of a dam just above the ruined priory at Llanthony. The catchment area would be in a length of the valley from a quarter of a mile above Llanthony to well beyond Capel-y-ffin

If still more water was required after the construction of the River Honddu dam, a second scheme would involve building a compensation water reservoir below Llanthony Priory.

This scheme would have displaced 23 families comprising eighty persons. Some of these families had owned and lived on their farms for many generations and for them the prospect of losing their farms in this way was quite appalling.

It was stressed in the report that, looking into the future, by the year 1970, if nothing was done to provide more reservoirs and pumping stations, the water shortage in Monmouthshire would become acute.

The Llanthony Valley was regarded as the only source practicable without going further afield to one of the tributaries of the River Usk to the west of Brecon, which would require a much longer pipeline. Neither would it be economic to construct an additional dam in the Grwyne Fawr Valley, because due to the steepness of the valley floor, the dam would have to be about 140 feet high to impound some 450 million gallons, and the extra yield for supply would only be about 1.25 million gallons per day.

James Kegie, the County Planning Officer was most concerned, but commented that as yet no proposal about the Llanthony Valley had been put before the County Planning Committee. He also stressed that the area affected was included in that Scheduled to become the Brecon Beacons National Park.

Mr A.D. Williams, Group Secretary of the National Farmers' Union, remarked that "indiscriminate taking of land for various urban pipe dreams is costing British Agriculture countless thousands of its most fertile and productive acres every year."

He added that, "the farmers of Llanthony had no cause for immediate alarm, as the NFU had fought successfully against

similar encroachments before, and, should it prove necessary to fight for their land the NFU would fight to the last ditch."

The Secretary of Monmouthshire Rural Community Council, Mr D. L. Jones commented that his organisation worked in conjunction with the Society for the Preservation of Rural Wales and that they were much concerned about the proposals.

He said that, "if the proposed dam was approved it would mean that Llanthony Priory would be in the immediate foreground of a concrete barrier running across the valley. The little church and Capel-y-ffin Monastery would be completely submerged.



The monastery at Capel-y-ffin

Though Llanthony Priory ruins would remain untouched, the monastic atmosphere which had prevailed for so long would be lost. Mr Jones also expressed the view that "the expense of the scheme was so great that it would probably not be put into

operation for a number of years. But if necessary, when the time comes it will be met with considerable opposition both locally and nationally.”

Fortunately good sense prevailed and the scheme did not proceed any further. The Brecon Beacons National Park was designated in April 1957 and between 1961 and 1964 a new reservoir was constructed at Llandegfedd, between Usk and Newport, providing over 30 million gallons of water per day to Cardiff and Monmouthshire. The inhabitants of Llanthony Valley and all those who treasure its unique atmosphere and scenic quality breathed a sigh of relief !

Putting this first issue of my journal relating to Bannau Brycheiniog has been an interesting challenge and I decided that it should largely relate to Brecon because this is the geographical centre of our National Park and even the name Brycheiniog needs explaining for not everyone realises that it was once an ancient kingdom. I also wanted to stress the importance of the date 1093, which is the Welsh equivalent of 1066, the date of the Battle of Hastings which is such an important event in English history.

I have told the subsequent story of the building of Brecon Castle (Castell Aberhonddu) by Bernard Neufmarche the victor of this important battle and the establishment of the Priory Church which in later years became Brecon Cathedral. Yes, just like Pembrokeshire and Eryri (previously known as Snowdonia there are cathedrals at St David's and Bangor. How many of you I wonder have taken time to visit and admire Brecon Cathedral?

I have finished this issue with serious concerns that have been brought about by climate change, for the future of the Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal which takes 90% of its water supply from the River Usk at Brecon, and not only is the canal in danger of drying up but the River Usk as well.

I hope that you have found this first issue of interest and are now more aware of the historic importance and beautiful landscape of Bannau Brycheiniog. The second issue will be sent to you in January 2026.

