

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



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## The Black Mountains - Part Two

### PREFACE

This third edition of my new journal, is the second part of a personal appreciation of the eastern Black Mountains. They 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, the knowledge, experiences and enthusiasm that I have gained from many years of exploration and dedicated research. My purpose in writing this journal is to increase our members knowledge and appreciation of the Bannau Brycheiniog National Park.



Chris Barber MBE FRGS

### CWM COED Y CERRIG

To the west of the bottom part of the Llanthony Valley is the road leading from Lower Cwmyoy to Fforest Coalpit which is a strange name for there was certainly never a coal mine there. The name refers to the former timbered character of the location and recalls the charcoal burning that used to take place there in the 19th century.

Flowing through Cwm Coed Cerrig (Valley of wood and stone), which has been designated a National Nature Reserve, is a tributary of the Grwyne Fawr river and it is fed by springs on either side of the valley. A boardwalk, accessed from a small parking area about half way along the valley provides easy access into the woodland on the valley floor.

The trees are mainly alder and willow, while the wet conditions supports plants which include greater-pond and greater tussock sedges, marsh marigold and alternate leaved golden saxifrages.

On the higher slopes the trees are mainly ash, birch and hazel. Also to be found are the nettle-leaved bellflower and the toothwort which grows on the roots of woody trees, usually hazel or elm. In autumn there is an abundance of fungi and the reserve is also home to a variety of birds including Redstart, Wood Warbler, Blue Tits, Great tits and Woodpeckers.

In the early years of the 20th century, when the Grwyne Fawr Reservoir was about to be constructed, a railway line was laid through this valley in order to convey materials to the site about ten miles away in the Grwyne Fawr Valley. There was no road in Cwm Coed y Cerrig at that time and the railway had to

cross a quarter of a mile of bog, so it was laid on brushwood, and the present day road follows the route of this railway.

## **CONSTRUCTION OF THE GRWYNE FAWR RESERVOIR**

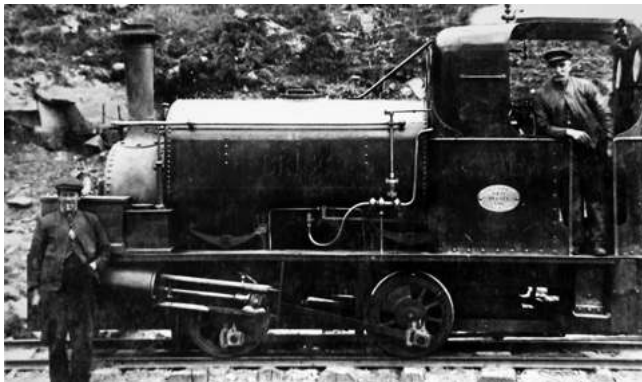
At the end of the 19th century there were serious water shortages in the western part of Monmouthshire as a result of massive population increase due to the coal and steel industries. So it was decided that a new reservoir was urgently needed. It would have to be built at a high altitude in order to gravity feed water to the Abertillery area and it was realised that a suitable location would be at the head of the Grwyne Fawr valley in the Black Mountains. It would be built at an altitude of 1790ft above sea level and this would make it the highest in Britain.



The Grwyne Fawr Reservoir as it looks today

In 1912 a road was constructed up the valley, but it was found that the weight of heavy traction engines made it impossible to be used. So it was decided that a railway was needed, but with the outbreak of the First World War everything was put on hold.

Work started again in January 1919 and when the railway was completed it was connected to the main line at Llanfihangel Crucorney. This railway was never officially authorised because at the time it was theoretically considered impossible to operate. However, it was successfully constructed for the purpose of conveying men and materials to the construction site. In November 1926 it was extended to the top of the dam and the altitude reached made it the highest adhesion-worked line in the British Isles. Eleven miles in length and rising to 1,168 feet it remained in operation for 15 years.



One of several locomotives operated on the line

A workers' village was established at Blaen-y-Cwm, just below the reservoir site and in due course 300 people were living there. They had a canteen, day school, police station and hospital. All the buildings were made of wood covered outside with corrugated iron and this resulted in the settlement being affectionately known as 'Tin Town'.



Blaen y Cwm was otherwise known as 'Tin Town'

The hospital consisted of two wards, a surgery, a consulting room and living quarters for a nurse. Dr Hincks, who practised at Hay-on-Wye made regular visits to the village and his journey involved a ten mile ride on horseback over the Gospel Pass to Capel-y-ffin. He then ascended the 'Pony Path' Over the Ffwdddog ridge and rode steeply down to the workers' village.

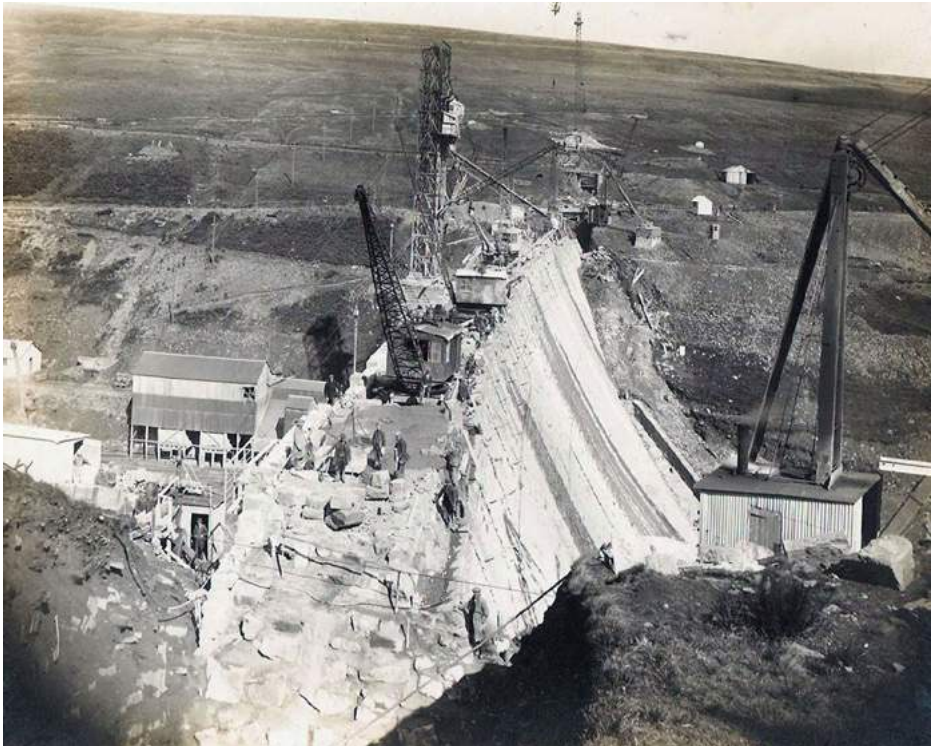


Some of the many workers who made it possible

The work force consisted of a large number of labourers and assorted craftsmen, including stone-masons, carpenters and blacksmiths. Most of them lived in Blaen-y-Cwm with their families, but some undertook journeys each day from Talgarth.

By 1925, 'Tin Town' had a population of 400 with a single street lit with electric lights. All the buildings had interior lights as well, while the outside world was still using oil and gas for lighting. It seems remarkable now but 'Tin Town' had electricity before Abergavenny.

Two hundred tons of sandstone was quarried for the construction of the dam and it contains large boulders weighing up to 5 tons each set in concrete. At the base it is 130ft thick, and the walls are faced with dressed stone.



The wall of the dam gradually taking shape

A 16-inch diameter steel pipe was laid down the valley and it had to be tunnelled through Coity Mountain above Blaenavon to take the water to a holding reservoir at Cwmtillery.

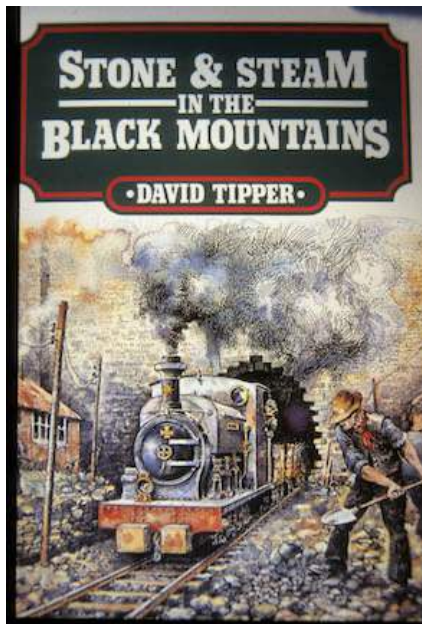
Two decades had passed since the scheme had been conceived, but at last completion was in sight and the project was duly completed at a total cost of one million pounds. The opening ceremony was fixed for 28 March 1928. It was a very special occasion and the Grwyne Fawr railway carried large numbers of people to the top of the dam in two trains to witness the celebration.

By the end of the year the village had disappeared and soon afterwards the Grwyne Fawr railway was dismantled as well. But even today, the observant walker will spot old railway sleepers serving as gateposts at various locations in the valley. The site of 'Tin Town' can be identified by the concrete bases of some of the huts and some stone steps, but most of the people who visit this

beautiful spot have no idea of the amazing story behind the construction of a remarkable example of British civil engineering in the heart of the Black Mountains.

The dam is 1783 feet high, the footings are 24 feet deep; the wall thickness at the foot and top is 128 and 16 feet respectively and there are sixteen overflow arches. The top water level is 1790 feet above sea level, and it was once the highest reservoir in Britain. This claim was lost in 1980 to Marchlyn Mawr in Snowdonia (1,985 feet).

The full story of this remarkable project has been told by David Tipper in his book *Stone & Steam in the Black Mountains* and I have special memories of an evening in 1985, when I sat in the bar of the Robin Hood Inn at Monmouth having a discussion with the Revd. David Tipper and my artist friend Michael Blackmore, who are both sadly no longer with us. We had arranged to meet there to discuss publishing David Tipper's manuscript for the book. It was decided that I would edit the manuscript and design the book while Michael would produce drawings based on photographs and plans that David had acquired



He had enjoyed walking holidays in the Black Mountains and had become intrigued with the story of the Grwyne Fawr Reservoir. Many years were spent researching the story of this very difficult project and he even managed to interview people who had lived and worked at 'Tin Town', the specially built workers' village. The book was on sale for about ten years and then went out of print. Unfortunately, following the death of the author, there has been a problem with copyright ownership so it is no longer available.

It is very disappointing that Dwr Cymru in fairly recent years found it necessary to decommission the Grwyne Fawr Reservoir which means that it no longer supplies drinking water. This is due to poor management of the surrounding catchment area which has allowed peat sediment to wash into the reservoir, causing water discolouration and to remedy this problem would be too expensive.

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The following poem was written by my wife Anne Marie Barber after we spent an enjoyable sun filled day at the Grwyne Fawr Reservoir.

## THE GRWYNE FAWR RESERVOIR

Up the Grwyne valley we walk with open eyes,  
Discovering the railway tracks which head towards the sky.  
We walk in awe and wonder to see this mighty feat,  
Through men's enduring efforts in wind and rain and sleet.

And soon we see the remnants of a long lost village site,  
Four hundred people lived there and toiled both day and night.  
But all the toil was worth it to see the finished sight,  
A man made cliff of sandstone and of the greatest height.

Soon we reach that sandstone cliff, its mighty wall ahead,  
And think of Egypt's pyramid inverted in its stead.  
This mighty wall, protector of all that lies behind,  
Its darkest depth of water brings Loch Ness into mind.

And as we climb the valley side to reach your mighty top,  
We see the lake of Grwyne Fawr all sinuous where you drop.  
And as we walk along its banks, it slithers like a snake,  
While mountain streams are racing to fill its shiny shape.

The lichen crusted sandstone glows white under the sun,  
Where men once quarried for the rock which was with effort won.  
That rock now stands the test of time as it takes all the strain  
Of endless tons of water which fill it after rain.

And here we sit and wonder at this impressive sight,  
Which looks like God's creation, created with His might.  
How could it be that man alone could make this heavenly scene,  
So stunning in its beauty among these mountains green.

Anne Marie Barber

## PARTRISHOW CHURCH

I always enjoy visiting Partrishow Church which is situated high above the entrance to the Grwyne Fawr Valley and it can be reached by following a narrow road leading from the Five Lanes junction at Fforest Coalpit. After a steady ascent, it leads down into Cwm Nant Mair and perched on the hillside will be seen the little church.

At a sharp bend where a stream tumbles beneath the road can be seen a flat stone on which in 1188 Baldwin, Archbishop of Canterbury once stood preaching to the local people. He and Giraldus Cambrensis, Archdeacon of Brecon, passed this way during their tour of Wales in order to persuade men to fight in the Third Crusade.



The Crusaders' Cross

Just below this point, steps lead down to a holy well where St Issui once baptised people who wished to accept the Christian faith. But his kindness brought about his death, for one traveller, to whom he had given shelter and sustenance savagely murdered him.

St Issui's well became a place of pilgrimage and those who were sick found that the water had curative powers. A story is told of a wealthy traveller who

drank the water and was cured of leprosy. In gratitude he financed the building of a church which was dedicated to St Issui.

It is a short but steep climb up to the lych gate, and there is an attractive view of the church, and a good time to come here is when the snowdrops are out for they make a pretty sight in the churchyard. The snowdrop is a symbol of Christianity being dedicated to the Virgin Mary and supposed to flower on Candlemass Day (2 February). If you come here in March then you will find the church surrounded by daffodils, which would have delighted William Wordsworth if he had ever come here.



Partrishow Church surrounded by daffodils

The church is situated at about a thousand feet above sea level, and there is a fine view down the valley, so I always like to sit there on a stone bench to soak in the solitude and atmosphere of this secluded shrine, which is one of the gems of the Black Mountains.

The oldest part of the church dates back to 1060, and the chancel and western chapel were added in the 13th century. The name Partrishow is a corruption of Parthau yr Ishow, which means 'the territory of Ishow', who was the patron saint of this parish. In the 11th century, Bishop Herewald of Llandaff dedicated the church to Ishow and named it Merthyr Yssui, but generally it is referred to as the church of St Patricio.

A stone stable next to the church was provided for the priest as a shelter for his pony, and a place in which to change his garments before conducting the service. There is even a fireplace to enable him to dry his outdoor garments if he had travelled there on a wet day.



The beautiful rood screen is carved in Irish oak

Inside the church is a beautiful 15th century rood screen which has been carved in Irish oak, and left in its natural colour of silvery grey. It is one of the most beautiful examples of the woodcarver's art to be found in Britain, and included in the intricate designs is the dragon, which is shown as a symbol of evil

devouring a vine which represents goodness. Some writers have said that the screen was carved by an Italian, but it is more likely to be the work of a local craftsman.

A Rood Screen provides a division between the nave and chancel, while the Rood itself was the figure of Christ Crucified and usually positioned on a Rood beam across the church. Access to the loft is provided by seven steps through a Tudor headed doorway, but the door at the top of the stairs is kept locked in order to protect the screen from possible damage.

Below the screen are two stone altars bearing five consecration crosses. In 1550 orders were given by Edward VI for all such stone altars to be destroyed, so it is remarkable that this one has survived.

In a glass case, near the screen is a copy of the 1588 translation of the Bible into Welsh. This was undertaken as the result of an Act of Parliament in 1563 which enacted that the Bible must be translated into Welsh, and a copy together with an English Bible must be placed in every Welsh church.



The ancient font has a Latin inscription on the rim

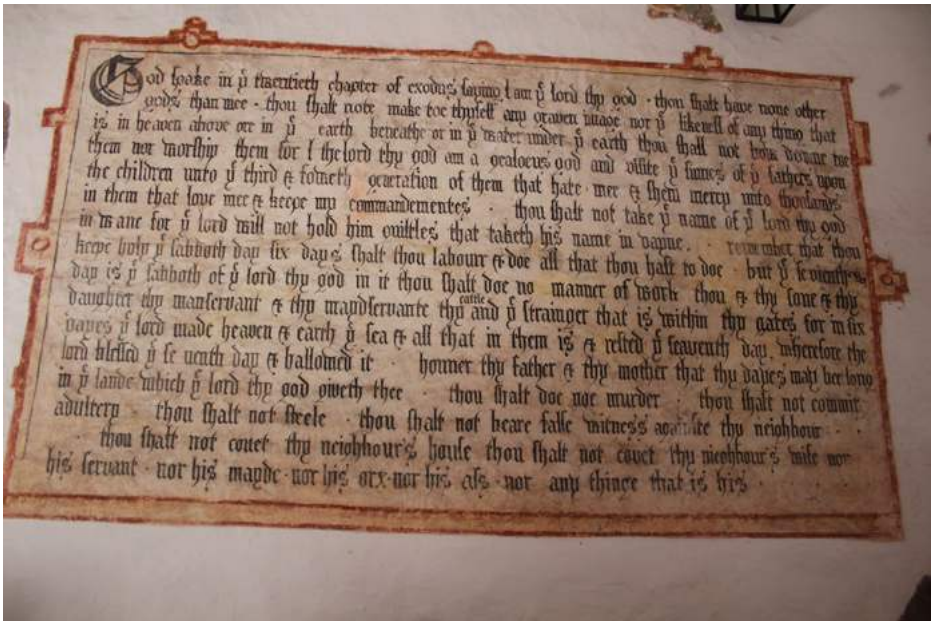
The ancient font which is one of the oldest in Wales and it bears a Latin inscription around the rim: 'Menhir me fecit tempore Genillin.' This records that it was made in the time of Genillin, a prince of Powys, who was Lord of Ystradyw before the Norman Conquest.

Hereward, Bishop of Llandaff (1055-1103) consecrated the church and its date may thus be fixed between 1055 and 1066.

Behind the font one can look through a grill into a 13th century chapel which can be entered through an outside doorway, and it is likely that it stands on the site of the saint's original cell.

Carved from an oak tree is a 'dug-out' chest that has been strengthened with iron bars. It is secured with three locks and would have been used to hold the church treasures and could only be opened with three keys which were separately held by the Parson and two Churchwardens. Thomas Cromwell in 1538 ordered that every church should have such a chest in which to store parish valuables.

On the north wall is a large royal coat of arms, and on the south wall, painted in black letters are faded texts which include the Lord's Prayer and Ten Commandments. It should be realised that wall paintings were once a valuable teaching medium in the days when books were scarce and country folk were illiterate.



A text painted on the wall

All the interior walls of most churches would have been covered with colourful paintings such as scenes from the life of Christ and illustrations of church teachings. Most of these paintings were destroyed by 19th century restorers, who removed the plaster and the paintings to expose the bare walls, or re-plastered the walls. Partrishow, however, was spared this vandalism and is privileged to possess such a large area of painted wall surfaces.

When a mason was engaged in 1881 to do some repairs at the west end of the church, he discovered some red paint under a thickness of whitewash. He informed the vicar, Reverend T. Jones, of what he had seen and was then told to scrape the whitewash off the wall. When this was done, the painting of a full size human skeleton was revealed. It had never been seen by even the oldest inhabitant living in the parish. Some people find disturbing for it represents the Reaper with a scythe, hour glass and spade. This macabre figure is reputed to have been painted in human blood and suggests to the departing figure that judgement day is fast approaching. A similar painting was once discovered beneath the whitewash of Cloddock Church in the Longtown Valley on the east side of the Black Mountains.



These symbolic and highly coloured paintings were intended to persuade, and sometimes frighten the illiterate into a state of piety and respect for holy scriptures.

I think it is remarkable that Partrishow Church has survived the attentions of Puritans and Victorian restorers, and this is undoubtedly a treasure house of medieval art. Its very isolation in the heart of the mountains is not likely the reason why it has survived intact.

In the churchyard is a preaching cross which dates back to about 1300 and it would have been partially destroyed in 1547 when Thomas Cromwell ordered the destruction of all such crosses. In 1919, the cross was restored and a tabernacle placed on top of the pillar. On its four sides are carved the figures of

St Ishow, Archbishop Baldwin, the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Crucified Christ. On Wednesday, 14 May, in 1919 in Rogation Week, the Bishop of St David's visited Partrishow to rededicate the restored cross.

The only other rood screen to be seen in the Black Mountains area is at Llanelieu beneath the steep northern escarpment, and not far from Talgarth.

Inside this church is an interesting 15th century rood screen and loft, but its only decorative feature is the red and white roses stencilled in random patterns on the rough planking of loft and tympanum. It would seem that the local parishioners, wishing to prove their impartiality during the Wars of the Roses, thought it wiser, and safer, to display the emblems of both York and Lancaster.

The church is Grade I listed and it stands at the head of Cwm Rhyd-Ellywe, within a raised oval walled churchyard. The yew tree was once used as a whipping post; the offending person's hands were inserted into holes cut into the trunk and held in place by a bar.

From Partrishow churchyard, a path leads down through a field to reach a lane descending to Ty'n y Llwyn (the house in the grove), a Tudor farmhouse which was once the home of a branch of the Herbert family during the reign of Henry VII. Their ancestor was Sir William ap Thomas, whose original seat was at Werndu near Abergavenny. When he died in 1440, he left two sons, William the elder, who was summoned by Edward IV to his first Council as William Herbert, and Richard the younger, who also took the name Herbert, and founded a branch of the family at Coldbrook, near Abergavenny. His descendant Charles Herbert, was the last member of this distinguished family to live at Ty'n y Llwyn and he died there in 1703.



Ty'n y Llwyn below Partrishow Church

When I first visited Partrishow Church in the 1960s it was necessary to walk up the drive which leads to Ty'n y Llwyn from the Grwyne Fawr Valley in order to obtain a key to the church (and then return it afterwards). Visitors to the house could also purchase copies of a leaflet giving '*A short account of the Church of Ishow the Martyr*'. The church is now left permanently open and you walk or drive there from Fforest Coalpit.

## THE GRWYNE FECHAN VALLEY

This is the shortest and the wildest of the three main valleys within the Black Mountains. At a height of 2,500 feet below the summit of Waun Fach, the river flows down a narrow valley, collecting additional water on the way from several tributaries and there are signs of glaciation, particularly just below Llanbedr where the river has cut its way through a terminal moraine to form a small wooded gorge. It then joins the Grwyne Fawr which in due course meets the Usk at Glangrwyney.

The village of Llanbedr provides a gateway to the Grwyne Fechan Valley and it used to be known as Llanbedr Ystradwy, which means St Peter's Church in the Vale of waters. Built on the brink of a steep descent to the river the church consists of two aisles and a chancel with a square embattled tower containing five bells. Inside the church is an unusual feature which allows the five bells to be chimed by a single ringer.

Four yew trees in the churchyard are said to be 800 years old and near the porch is a massive base of a cross which was destroyed in 1547 when Thomas Cromwell ordered the destruction of all such crosses in England and Wales.

Inside the church is a brass plaque commemorating ten American airmen, who were the crew of a 'Flying Fortress' B-17F bomber. They were all killed when their plane crashed during a storm on a hillside above the valley on September 16, 1943. There were no survivors and the wreckage was later removed from the site, but the site of the crash is marked by a cairn.

Also of interest in the church are some memorial tablets carved on local sandstone by the Brute family of stonemasons. The inscriptions are noted for the elegant lettering and simple coloured designs, which depict gilded angels and apocalyptic cherubs with white faces and pink cheeks blowing trumpets. Vegetable or lichen dyes were used by the Brutes to create these figures, and it is remarkable how they have retained their colour.

From Llanbedr a narrow lane leads up through the valley to reach a roofless shell of an early Georgian building known as 'The Hermitage'. There is a popular story which associates the house with John Macnamara, an 18th century gambling man, who is said to have concealed Rosamund his beautiful mistress here. I often wonder if her spirit lingers on in this remote place.

John Macnamara was known as 'Mad Macnamara', and he is reputed to have constructed the track known as the Rhiw Trumau which ascends from near Pengenford to reach a pass on the Penallt Mawr ridge. From there it snakes its way down into the depths of the Grwyne Fechan Valley, and it is said that he used to drive down it in a coach and four to visit his mistress. It is certainly a well engineered and enjoyable track to walk, but the truth of the story is another matter.

Walkers who have an intimate knowledge of the Black Mountains will know that on the summit of Mynydd Llyisiau can be seen some boundary stones bearing the names of local landowners; Mrs Macnamara and Sir J. Bailey Bart MP 1847. They are not gravestones as some people imagine, but mark the point where two neighbouring estates adjoin. Mrs Macnamara was the widow of John Macnamara and her large estate covered both sides of the valley.

The track soon crosses a simple but sturdy stone bridge spanning the River Grwyne and this makes a very pleasant spot to stop for coffee or to just admire the scenery.

## LLANGENNY

This picturesque village has a graceful single arch stone bridge spanning the River Grwyne. It was built by Aaron Brute, a member of the Llanbedr family of stonemasons, to replace one that was badly damaged by a powerful flood. Its importance was recognised in the will (dated 1620) of John Powell, a generous benefactor to this village, for he left a sum of money for the upkeep of this impressive structure.

Originally this village was known as Llancenau, being named after St Cenau, one of the many daughters of King Brychan, the 5th century ruler of Brycheiniog. She was born in this area, but spent the greater part of her life in Cornwall, where she is known as St Keyne or Keyna. Towards the end of her life she returned to her homeland and erected a simple cell to the east of the present church.

There is a tradition that by her prayers to God St Cenau caused a spring to flow out of the earth, which provided cures to various ailments. It became known as St Cenau's Well, but is no longer accessible. At one time it was much visited by newly weds who went there because of a local belief that the first partner of a newly wed couple to drink from this well would be 'the boss' throughout their married life.

The present Llangenny Church was built in the fifteenth century and not having a tower, it has the appearance of a chapel with a bell cote, housing two bells at the west end of the north aisle.

Of particular interest, near the chancel arch, is a memorial to Lewis Morgan, who died in 1868. It displays the Morgan arms which depict a dragon's head, holding a hand in its mouth. This explains the origin of the name of the village pub which is called the Dragon's Head.

## THE RHIANGOLL VALLEY

The source of the River Rhiangoll is on the western slopes of Waun Fach, the highest summit in the Black Mountains. During its journey to join the River Usk. It is joined by minor streams on its left bank. These include the Ffinant, Nant-yr-Ychen, Nant-y-fedw and Nantgarreg which all rise on the side of the ridge between Pen Trumau and Pen Gloch Pibwr. Two more tributary streams flow from Mynydd Troed and Mynydd Llangorse on the right. This is the most westerly valley of the Black Mountains and the only one which carries a main road (A479). It was constructed in about 1830 to connect the Usk and Wye valleys and superseded the Cwmdru to Cwm Fforest road which ran along the valley's western flank

## PENGENFFORDD

This is the highest point on the A479 and rising above it is the ridge called Y Grib which ascends in a series of humps. It is affectionately known as the 'Dragon's Back' and provides a challenging route that leads up to Pen y Manllwyn and then on to the summit of Waun Fach (811m) which translates as 'Little Bog'. The summit used to be boggy but some years ago stone chippings were laid and the ground is now much firmer. There is no longer a trig point but its concrete base is still there. It is the highest peak in the Black Mountains but its neighbouring summit, Pen-y-Gadair Fawr (Top of the Great Chair) is only slightly lower and provides a much better view.

Just above Pengefordd, are the remains of Castell Dinas which was built to guard the pass between Talgarth and Crickhowell. At an altitude of 1,476ft, this is the highest medieval castle in England and Wales. Although there are only scanty remains, it is a very special site, because other fortifications on this hill top date back to the Iron Age (600 BC to 50 AD). In the twelfth century the Normans not surprisingly recognised the strategic importance of this location for guarding the mountain pass connecting Talgarth with Crickhowell.

William FitzOsbern built a stone fortress here in the period 1070 to 1075 and he made good use of the already existing ramparts and ditches that had been established in the Iron Age. The site was divided into two wards, and the eastern half of the inner ward contained a rectangular keep while the northern ward contained a gatehouse facing the Black Mountains. It was flanked by a small tower and protected by a barbican.

Barbara Erskine's best selling novel *Lady of Hay* contains a dramatic description of this castle as it would have been in the twelfth century, at the time when it was owned by William de Braose, Lord of Abergavenny. She describes his wife Matilda riding here from Hay in the company of Prince John on a stormy day.



The remains of Castell Dinas

Llywelyn ab Iorwerth sacked the castle in October 1233; it was then refortified by Henry II and subsequently given to Peter Fitz Herbert. Llywelyn ap Gruffudd captured it in about 1263 and in the early 15th century it was destroyed by local supporters of Owain Glyndwr.

Directly below, on the A479 is the Dinas Castle Inn which is situated beside the A479, and at a height of more than 1000ft above sea level it can claim to be the highest pub in the Bannau Brycheiniog National Park. Previously known as the Dragon's Back Inn, this is a very popular starting point for walks, with good parking available for a small payment at the inn.

Near the bottom of the Rhiangoll Valley is the village of Tretower (Tre-twr), which stands in the ancient kingdom of Ystradyw (Vale of Yew Trees) or Stradewy in its English form. This was once the site of the fortified home of Genillin, who was Lord of Ystradyw and Prince of Powys. His name is inscribed on the rim of the font in Partrishow Church which featured earlier on in this journal.

Towards the end of the 11th century, the Usk valley fell to the invaders when their leader Bernard de Newmarche established himself at Brecon. One of his followers was Sir Miles Picard, who was rewarded for his assistance in the conquest of Brycheiniog with the gift of land at Scethrog and Ystradyw.

In about 1090, on the possible site of Genillin's home, Sir Miles Picard established a timber castle on a mound and surrounded it with a timber palisade. It was built to control the Rhiangoll pass and guard the Usk Valley from hostile Welsh activity.

Water from the Rhiangoll river was redirected to strengthen the defences, which were enclosed on three sides by ditches and marshy ground. The motte is just 10 feet high and surrounded by a ditch about 30 feet wide, but now filled in to a certain extent. The bailey lies to the east and is now occupied by farm buildings.



The lofty tower of Tretower Castle

It was Miles Picard's son Roger, who built the stone shell keep, during the reign of King John in about 1150. Within it an L-shaped residential block consisting of a hall, solar and kitchen were also built in stone, and the remains of fireplaces and windows can still be seen. In 1197 the castle was captured and partially destroyed by Rhys ap Gruffyd of Deheubarth and further damaged by Llywelyn the Great in 1216. Then in about 1240, a lofty circular tower was built within the ruins of the square keep which became an outer defence. This three-storey tower was tall enough to enable defenders to shoot over the top of the curtain wall.

Strangely, the round tower was not built exactly in the centre of the original keep but close to the south west corner, so there is quite a narrow space between

the two towers on that side. It is the only known example of a round tower built inside an earlier Norman keep.

The Picard family held the castle until the line died out in the early 14th century, although they lost it temporarily when the Welsh rose under Llywelyn ap Gruffydd in support of Simon de Montfort's rebellion. The whole district in of Ystrad Yw, in which Tretower was situated then came under Llywelyn's overlordship. His death in 1282 and Edward I's subsequent pacification of Wales then brought more peaceful times.

## TRETOWER COURT



The rear of Tretower Court

Following the death of the last member of the Piccard family, his daughter and heiress Amicia married Ralph Bluet of Raglan, and they built a modest dwelling on the flat ground east of the castle. Their daughter Elizabeth married Sir James Berkley, who in 1403 fortified Tretower Castle during the Owain Glyndwr uprising, and it was at this time that the adjoining settlement took the name Tre-twr (the village of the tower). In 1432, Lord Berkley (son of Sir James) sold Tretower and Raglan castles to his mother's second husband, Sir William ap Thomas.

Some years later, Sir William Herbert inherited Tretower, and he generously gave it to his half-brother Sir Roger Vaughan, who made considerable additions to the court building. He divided the existing north range into two storeys and added a timber gallery. Next, he built the extensive west range, which contained a new ground floor hall, buttery, pantry areas and various private chambers. The Vaughan's living quarters were on the first floor of the fourteenth century north range which was reached by a staircase from the solar.

Sir Roger Vaughan was beheaded following the Battle of Tewkesbury in 1471, but his son Sir Thomas continued to develop Tretower Court by adding the impressive gatehouse and enclosing the courtyard with a battlemented wall. Along the exterior wall are walkways with occasional slits for archers to point their arrows through and there are even crossway slits for a pair of archers to cross-fire through the same opening.



The impressive gatehouse built by Sir Thomas Vaughan

After the Wars of the Roses, Tretower was handed from one Vaughan to another and in 1613 it was held by Frances Vaughan, whose grandson Henry Vaughan became a much respected poet. His grave can be seen in Llansantffraed churchyard which is situated beside the A40 on the way to Brecon.



Windows overlooking the courtyard

Further improvements were made to Tretower Court in 1630 by Charles Vaughan, and these included the chimneys and timber-framed windows overlooking the courtyard. Sixteen generations of the Vaughans owned Tretower Court, but the direct line of this noble family died out with Edward Vaughan, who was the last member of this distinguished family to inhabit the house. He died in 1665, and was succeeded by his sister Margaret who married Thomas Morgan of Llanelly. Their son Vaughan Morgan, lived at Tretower as did his son Charles, who adopted the name Vaughan. He died in 1704 and his son, another Charles Vaughan succeeded.

In 1777, Tretower Court was sold, and it became a farm with the ground floor rooms used as a cow shed and storage areas for hay. Decay rapidly set in and the building became semi-derelict, until thanks to the efforts of Colonel Sir John Conway Lloyd, both the castle and the court were purchased by the Brecknock Society in 1935. It passed to the Ministry of Public Buildings and Works (later the Department of the Environment), while today it is in the care of Cadw (Welsh Historic Monuments).

Many years of restoration have made it one of the finest examples of a fortified manor house in Wales. To visit this medieval mansion is now like stepping back in time, for the great hall has been furnished by Cadw to show how it would have looked when the lord and lady were in residence with tables set for a feast.



The lord and lady (Chris & Anne Marie Barber) presiding over a feast in the Great Hall

Special events are frequently held at Tretower Court and they include medieval re-enactments, the magic of medieval music, Falconry displays, and Shakespeare's plays such as Romeo & Juliet, Othello and Macbeth.

. . . . .

At Pengenffordd, I mentioned that Castell Dinas is the highest Norman castle in England and Wales, so it is also appropriate to include the highest Iron Age hillfort in Wales (1,479ft) which can be seen on the southern flank of Pen Cerrig Calch. It is called *Crug Hywel*, from which the town of Crickhowell takes its name, but of course it is more popularly known a Table Mountain, because of its distinctive shape.

The summit looks flat when seen from Crickhowell, but on arriving there you will be surprised to find that the ground is sloping. It is a simple fort, covering an area of about 2 acres, with earthwork defences consisting of a ditch and rampart running around it for 600 yards. In places the rampart is 20 feet high and the original entrance was a cutting through the rampart on the eastern side.

Many writers have associated Crug Hywel with Hywel Dda, a 10th century king, but they are mistaken for it was actually Hywel ap Rhys of Morgannwg. He was King of Glywysing from 830 to 886 AD, so he predates Hywel Dda who reigned from 942 to 950 AD. The connection of Hywel ap Rhys with this hill fort is recorded as follows:

'Hywel, son of Rhys made war on the Lords of the land of Brycheiniog for the district of Ystrad Yw and Ewyras, which territories rightly belonged to Morgannwg, but the Lords of Brycheiniog transferred their claim for those lands to Cadell, King of Deheubarth, so that Hywel ap Rhys was forced to lose his right to them and to fix the boundary of his country at Cerrig Hywel [Crickhowell] because it was there that the boundary stones were raised, and he made a town and castle, calling the place Cerrig Hywel.'



Table Mountain looming above Crickhowell

There are about 3000 hill forts in Britain and 200 of these are located in Wales and 23 of them are in the Bannau Brycheiniog National Park. They are mainly situated along the Usk Valley between the Black Mountains and Brecon.

I hope that you have found this copy of my journal interesting and will look forward to the next issue which will come out in January 2027.