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Exploring geological language in the Welsh landscape

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Following *Earth Heritage* items by Mick Stanley and Colin MacFadyen on *Namescapes* (issue 39), this article tracks the way geology and geomorphology have influenced place names in Wales. Elinor was crowned at the National Eisteddfod in August 2016 for her collection of poems themed on *Llwybrau* (paths).

How do you begin to explore the geological landscape lexis of Wales? The scope of the topic is vast, the journey complex. If place names themselves ARE our history, as Anthony Lias states in his book *Place Names of the Welsh Borderlands*, then surely geology has provided the backdrop against, and the stage on which centuries of history have been played out. It is the defining force that has shaped our nation, its history, language and culture.

Wales has several layers of linguistic contact, as explained in the *Dictionary of Place Names of Wales*. Successive and overlapping periods in our history – Celtic and Brittonic, the Roman occupation, Anglo-Saxon settlement, Scandinavian invasions, Anglo-Norman conquests and English immigration, have all left their toponymic footprints. It's worth bearing these influences in mind when attempting to interpret place names in the landscape.

The language of our landscape illustrates both continuity and change in our history and culture. Names can be read in different ways; at their simplest they provide a descriptive, and often poetic portrait of the country. But those words, printed on maps and etched into memories, have shadows behind them – of past lives and livelihoods, of changing settlement patterns and shifting cultures, of socio-political struggles, and of economic fortunes and failures.

They also hint at the rich tapestry of habitats that has frayed and unravelled across our landscapes; leaving only bare threads hooked tentatively onto a 21st Century canvas by evocative combinations of vowels and consonants.



Pen y Fan (the mountain summit), Brecon Beacons, Powys
Photo by Joe Cornish,
National Trust

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The topography of Wales

A quick browse of any OS Explorer map for Wales leaves no doubt about the landscape character that typifies this country. Alternatively you might just read the second verse of the Welsh National Anthem:

*Hen Gymru fynyddig, paradwys y bardd,
pob dyffryn, pob clogwyn, i'm golwg sydd hardd;
Trwy deimlad gwladgarol, mor swynol yw si
ei nentydd, afonydd, i mi.*

*Old land of mountains, the paradise of bards,
each cliff and each valley a loveliness guards;
Through love of my country, so charmed will be
its streams, and its rivers, to me.*

Wales, with a landmass of just over two million hectares, is predominantly mountainous. And if topographic names 'reflect a direct human response to the environment, promoted by a simple human need to feel at home', it's no wonder that we have a wealth of Welsh names for mountains, hills, slopes and gradients – as well as for rivers, valleys and wetlands.

In common with Gaelic, and possibly with other Celtic languages, Welsh names for landscape features often include words for parts of the body. In *Gaelic and Norse in the Landscape*, Roddy McLean illustrates this tendency in the Gaelic language with the example of *fe'ith* (a vein or sinew) to describe a bog channel or stream and even to refer to bogs themselves. Examples of Welsh words used to describe topographical features include *trwyn* (nose), *braich* (arm), *cefn* (back), *talcen* (often shortened to *tal* – forehead), *pen* (head), *ceg* (mouth), *genau* (jaws), *llygad* (eye), *troed* (foot), *boch* (cheek), *cesail* (armpit) and even *cest* (paunch).

Welsh topographical names also commonly include references to domestic items associated with everyday rural life – such as *mainc* (bench), *barclod* (apron), *bwrdd* (table), *crib* (comb), *dysgl* (bowl), *cawg* (basin), *cribwr* (wool comber), *cadair* (chair or seat), *crochan* (cauldron), *drws* (door), *ystyllen* (plank), *rhiniog* (threshold), *cylllell* (knife), *nodwvdd* (needle).

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Moel y Gest (the bare, paunch-shaped hill), Porthmadog,



**Llech cylllyll (slab of knives),
Porthclais, Pembrokeshire**



**Trwyn Hwrd dyn (ram's nose),
St David's Head, Pembrokeshire**



This word-cloud illustrates the rich Welsh vocabulary for slopes, hills and mountain.



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Sometimes these topographical words are used in a very general sense; for example *Rallt* (slope). But mostly they include additional elements that tell us something else about the landscape – its appearance, its habitats, its cultural associations and its use. Examples include *Moel Mawn* (bare peat hill) at Llanddewi Brefi and *Trwyn Penwaig* (promontory of the herrings) at Amlwch.

Welsh names for rivers and lakes are often very descriptive and portray their appearance, sound and physical characteristics in relatively straightforward ways. Examples include *Afon Llafar* (the babbling river), *Afon Prysor* (the river with thickets), *Afon Ystwyth* (the lithe river), *Afon Alun* (the wandering river), *Afon Tawe* (the flowing river), *Afon Clywedog* (the wild river) and *Gloywlyn* (the lake of bright water).

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Trum y Ddysgl (bowl-shaped hill/ridge), Dyffryn Nantlle, Gwynedd

**Afon Ystwyth (the lithe river), Ceredigion, aerial photograph
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The use of animal names, though more uncommon, may also illustrate the character of a watercourse. For example, the *Afon Elan* in mid-Wales is derived from elain or fawn, referring probably to its light, tumbling flow. The names *Twrch* (in Carmarthenshire) and *Banw* (in Montgomeryshire) were given to rivers that seemed to burrow or root through the land like pigs. Welsh names of rivers and lakes sometimes relate to their uses by humans, such as *Pysgodlyn* (a fishing lake).

Work undertaken by Cymdeithas Edward Llwyd to map the distribution of historic place names that refer to specific plants, such as alder (*gwern*) and beech (*ffawydd*), has added a further layer of information to our cultural interpretation of our natural heritage, providing an interesting correlation between language, biodiversity and Wales' topography and soil types.

Rocky references

References to rocks and stones, in a general sense, are common throughout the Welsh landscape. Words such as *maen*, *meini*, *carreg*, *cerrig*, *carnedd*, *llech*, *llechen*, *llechog*, *llychau*, *gro* and *graeuan* are found in names of houses such as *Tŷ Maen* and in settlements such as *Tre Maen*, *Bontfaen*, *Gronant* and *Llechryd*. They also feature in names for topographical features, for example *Cerrig yr Hafan*, *Cerrig Mawr* and *Craig y Llech*. They also appear frequently as elements in names of rivers and streams, such as *Nant y gro* (gravel stream) and *Afon Gorlech* (river of gritstone).

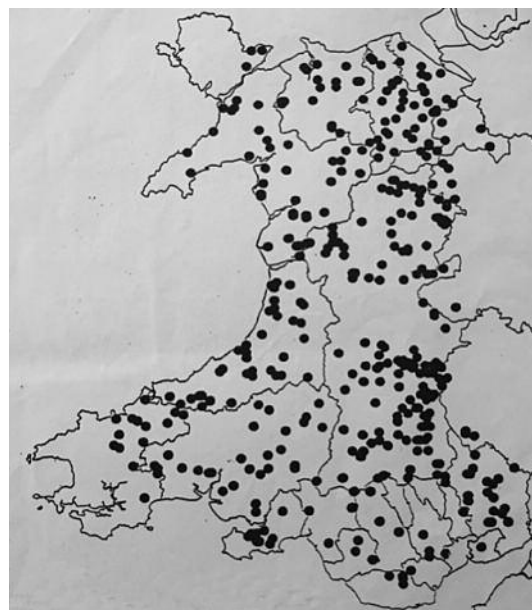
Sometimes names refer to very specific stones or rocks. For example, *Benllech* on Anglesey specifically means the capstone. The element 'llech' is found in both *cromlech* (curved stone) and in *penllech* (capstone). *Benllech* had a distinctively large capstone which gave its name to a mill (*Melyn y Penllegh*, 1453), a fulling mill (*Pandu'r Benllech*, 1718/19) and a croft (*Thythyn y Benllech*, 1691) which gave the 8th Century village its name of (*Y Benllech*).

In some places, names provide clues to specific rock types and sometimes hint at past industries connected with Wales' geology. Inland of *Benllech* on Anglesey, a smallholding named *Galchfaen* confirms that we're in limestone country. A little farther north towards *Amlwch*, and with *Parys Mountain* rising colourfully on the skyline, might the tiny settlement of *Penygraigwen* (the end of the white rock) signify the place where the rich band of limestone to the south had petered out? Or is it, more simply (if interpreted equally correctly as the summit of the white rock), a description of the hillock of weathered *Coedana* granite on which the small cluster of houses and farms sits?

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Moel Penllechog (the bare summit at the end of the slate/slab rocks) towers above Tan y Graig (the house beneath the rock), near Trefor, Gwynedd.



Place names in Wales including the element *Wern* (which may refer specifically to the presence of alder trees or describe, more generally, boggy places with trees). Data taken from Ordnance Survey Digital Gazetteer. Reproduced by permission of Llên Natur



A large capstone still survives in the cromlech at Benllech, Anglesey.

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The name *Rhuddlan* refers to the red banks of the River Clwyd as it flows through red sandstone country. The same element *Rhudd* (red, from the old Celtic *roudo-s*) is also found in the name of the nearby town of Ruthin, where it is linked to *hin*, meaning the edge of the river Clwyd or the sandstone rock of the castle.

The importance of mining and quarrying in Wales is illustrated in place names such as *Bwlch y Maen* (gap of stones), *Y Chwareli* (the quarries), *Mwynglawdd Cwm Orog* (Cwm Orog mine), *Craig y Mwn* (ore rock), *Pwll y Mwn* (ore pool), *Penmaenmawr* (headland of large stones), *Rhyd y Mwyn* (ford of the ore). Names such as *Pentre Gwaith* and *Henwaith* on Parys Mountain also hark back to the days of active quarrying; *Y Gwaith* (the Work(s)) was common in Welsh for quarries and mines. The name *Brymbo*, derived from *bryn* and *baw* (meaning mud, or dirt hill), reflects perfectly the conditions created by the extensive coal and iron works in the area.

Llithfaen, near Trefor in Gwynedd, illustrates the difficulty of interpreting place names. The Welsh word *ithfaen* means granite and at first glance the name of this tiny village, perched high above the north Wales coastline, seems straightforward. But it continues to challenge toponymic experts. The first element (*llith* – meaning decoy or lure) has been recorded since 1160 and could be associated with the traditional belief that the rocky cliffs of *Yr Eifl* have the power to affect mariners' compasses, in which case the name *Llithfaen* may mean lodestone. But *Llithfaen* as a name wasn't recorded until 1858. Could the Irish adjective *liath*, meaning grey, have been part of a name-phrase to describe the grey granite of the hills hereabouts? The famous quarrying village of Nant Gwrtheyrn, now a centre for Welsh learning below the village of *Llithfaen*, was called *Nantyllithvaen* in 1612. Granite was certainly widely quarried in the area but the word *ithfaen* itself wasn't independently recorded until 1850. The name of the village remains a mystery.

Even over the border, Welsh names still persist in the landscape, reflecting the more widespread use of the language, in some form, as far as the Firth of Forth up until the about 9th-10th centuries. *Cefn Gwynlle* (the ridge of the white stone) on the Stiperstones, in south-west Shropshire, still testifies to the presence of the lead and barite *white rock-veins* exploited by 19th Century miners.

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Nant Gwrtheyrn, below the village of Llithfaen, now houses a centre for Welsh learning.



Origins of the word *Brymbo*, the former industrial works near Wrexham, reflect the dirty conditions of the area's extensive coal and iron workings.
Photo by Brymbo Heritage Group



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Challenges of interpretation

The waves of people that came into Wales over the centuries were influenced by the way existing languages were used in the landscape. In turn they influenced those languages – sometimes appropriating and adapting existing words and place names, and sometimes coining new ones. Interpreting landscape language can therefore be extremely challenging. Any piece of the Welsh landscape can contain a mix of Welsh words and names that have weathered the long centuries of change, along with a few Old English and Middle English names, occasional Norse and Norman French names, as well as blended versions of all of these – and a more recent Cymricisation of some elements.

In some cases the interpretation can be straightforward. For example, the name of the town *Flint* is a Middle English word meaning hard rock and it has survived more or less unchanged both in the contemporary English form and the Welsh name, *Y Fflint*.

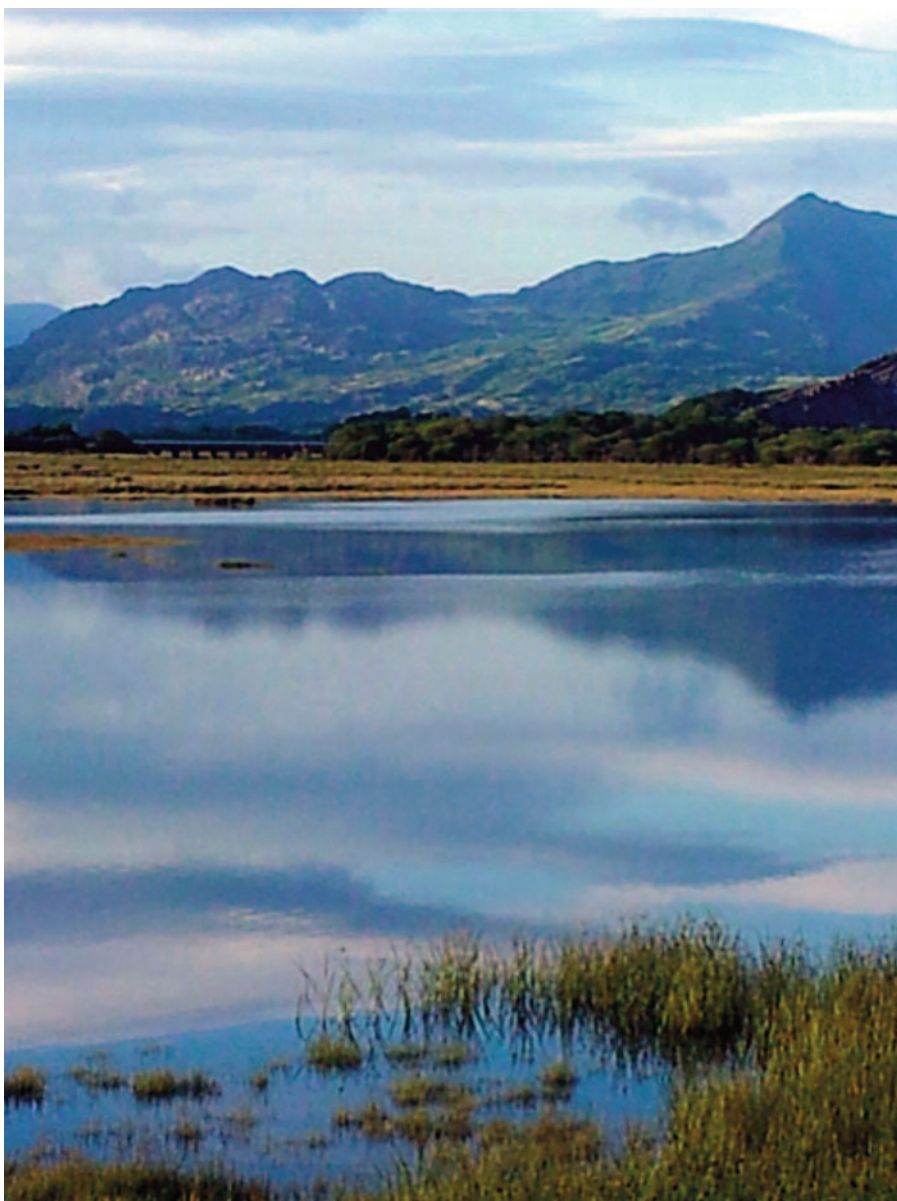
The very Welsh-sounding *Wepre*, in Flintshire, is however an Old English name meaning silted land and one can probably guess at the meaning of *Mos* in nearby *Mostyn*; it is Old English for fen or swamp, a habitat which would once have characterised the low-lying land along the Dee Estuary.

At the other end of Wales, *Newgale* in Pembrokeshire is a combination of Old English *Niwe* (new) and Old Norse *geil* meaning ravine or narrow lane. The modern Welsh form *Niwgwl* is a Cymricisation. Old Norse words and place names are frequently found along the Welsh coast, often ending in –ey (e.g. Bardsey, Ramsey) and testify to past Viking raids and invasions.

But old Celtic and Welsh names still abound in these coastal areas, and include words such as *parrog* (stony beach), *pil* (creek), *traeth* (beach) and *ynys* (island). The latter two are particularly interesting as they can also be found some distance inland: *traeth* indicating lands at the uppermost reach of the tide (e.g. *Traeth Mawr*, a large area within reach of the tide, inland of Porthmadog, which forms part of the Glaslyn Estuary) and *ynys*, signifying a piece of raised land in the middle of wetlands (e.g. *Ynys-hir*, a long piece of raised land, in the middle of the coastal wetlands of Cors Fochno, Ceredigion, and *Ynys Ddu* in Monmouthshire, a small model village built by F.H. Moggridge on the west bank of the Siryhwyi river, and *Ynysgynwraidd*, a small hillock on which Skenfrith Castle and settlement were built in the middle of a low-lying area of wetland).

In some cases, Welsh words have survived into contemporary English over the border; for example the word *Crŷc* (from the Celtic *crouc*, meaning hill or mound) passed unchanged into Old English and is seen in elements such as in Creech Barrow, Shropshire.

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**Traeth Mawr,
Glaslyn Estuary,
Porthmadog,
Gwynedd**

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Sometimes, names for places are so completely different in Welsh and English that it is almost impossible to find a common thread, let alone find a topographical and geological connection. Take the town of Mold, for example – *Yr Wyddgrug* in Welsh. The English form is derived from the Norman French *Mont* and *hault* (from the 12th Century Latin *mons/montis* and *altus* – high mountain). It refers to Bailey's Hill, a mound or hill (*crug* in Welsh) on which the Normans built a castle in the 14th Century. The element *gwydd* here most probably signifies prominent – therefore bringing the Welsh name (first recorded as *Yr Wyddgrug* in the 15th Century and as *Wythgric* in 1612) close in meaning to the very different sounding English name Mold. It illustrates not only their similarity but the relevance of both names to the local geology and topography.

The social and political associations of some of our topographical names are fascinating. Consider the name *Tryweryn*, meaning a section of river that was extremely liable to flood (*gweryn*); it was almost a premonition of the fate that befell the Tryweryn valley, and the village of Capel Celyn, when both were drowned in 1965 to create a reservoir of fresh water for Liverpool, catalysing a period of political tension in Wales.

Digging back even farther, seeds of unrest were also sown in 1295 on Anglesey when Edward 1 built the town of *Beaumaris* (*beau marais* – Norman French for beautiful marsh) intending to invest only the English and Norman-French residents with civic rights. Native Welsh residents of Beaumaris were largely disqualified from holding any civic office, carrying any weapon, and holding assemblies. Neither were they allowed to purchase houses or land within the borough. Many of the native Welsh people were deliberately relocated to the other side of Anglesey, to the village of Newborough which is close to *Malltraeth* (the element *mall* meaning rotten, putrid, unwholesome, unhealthy – and *traeth* meaning beach).

Celebrating language heritage

The importance of language heritage as a distinctive, valued element of our landscapes is gaining recognition in Wales. Recent years have seen, for example, energetic lobbying to broaden the scope of the Historic Environment Bill in order to encompass historic place names, new awareness-raising initiatives led by *Mynyddoedd Pawb* (translated as Everyone's Mountains, twitter.com/mynyddoedd pawb), support for recording and interpretation activity by the newly formed Welsh Place Name Society (www.cymdeithasenuwalleoedd cymru.org), and individual practical projects that bring these intangible elements of our landscape to life. One example is the section of wall recently constructed by Snowdonia National Park staff to illustrate local names used for physiographic features in the adjacent Mawddach river channel.

These activities, and many others, are important in helping us understand how the language of our physical landscapes can inform our sense of history and cultural identity. They also have a significant role in contemporary landscape or ecosystem management approaches, by offering more diverse ways in which people can become involved with our natural environment and landscapes.

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The Tryweryn Valley (above) and (below) protestors against the drowning of the valley and the village of Capel Celyn.
Photos by Daily Post



The elegant seafront houses of Beaumaris make a strikingly colourful sight.

The recently constructed wall at Pwll Penmaen (the pool at the far end of the rock) illustrates local names for channel features along the Mawddach and Wnion rivers, Gwynedd.
Photo by Rhys Gwynn

