

Examine the place-names of one area in Wales. What does their study bring to an understanding of the topography, history and language of the area?

By T. J. Conde

This essay will examine a list comprised of sixty place-names from the *Dolgellau* area of *Gwynedd*, with particular attention being paid to the localities of *Islawrdref* and the *Afon Gwynant* valley. The names chosen can be reviewed in the appendix attached to this paper and have been selected with the aim of providing a range of names that can reveal information about the geography, history and language of the area. Examples taken from the catalogued names will be used to highlight relationships to these three topics and evaluate how they can shape or enhance an understanding of a particular area. Comparisons will be made to similar examples of names that occur in additional locations within Wales, to further aid in the understanding of the names and what they can provide in the means of topographic, historic and linguistic data. The case study will also aim to assess the potential strengths of the place-name study, as well as likely drawbacks and pitfalls that attempting to apply the theory to a specific area can have.

Although Welsh place-names can yield a great deal of knowledge from any given area, they also have their difficulties and limitations. A potential student of the subject should be aware of these and recognize the challenges that can arise. Changes in language can affect the names in Wales, either through Anglicisation as in the case of Cardiff, the Welsh name being *Caerdydd*, ‘fort on the Taf’¹, or in an example taken from this essay’s appendix in Barmouth, *Abermaw* in Welsh, ‘mouth of the river *Mawdd*’. This tends to occur where direct contact with the English language has occurred, whether that be through tourism or commerce and trade. Shifts in the Welsh languages can also aid confusion, certain words may no longer be used in the modern language and have their origins in Old or Middle Welsh. Similarly, the mutations that are involved in the Welsh language can also sometimes obscure the true meaning of a name, especially true for the non-Welsh speaker. The mutations can easily be misinterpreted, particularly in the case of compound words, where two or more words can become conjoined and sometimes compressed to form one new unique word. They are a common feature of place names and can be made of two or more words joined together to make a name such as *Brithdir* > *Brith*, ‘speckled / variegated’ *Dir*, ‘land’. The soft mutations to be aware of involve changes in the following letters, c > g, p > b, t > d, g > -, b > f, d > dd, ll > l, rh > r and m > f. As well as soft mutations there are also nasal mutations to be noted and these involve the letters, c > ngh, p > mh, t > nh, g > ng, b > m and d > n. full details of the mutations and where and when they occur can be found here.² An example of a compound name with mutation can be seen in the name *Dolgledr* ‘railed water meadow’ where the second element ‘*Cledr*’ has mutated into ‘*Gledr*.’

Geographic features are often contained within place-names and this is apparent throughout Wales and the study area. They describe features including mountains and hills from this paper’s corpus such as *Mynydd Moel* ‘bald / bare mountain’ and *Bryn Brith* ‘speckled hill’,

¹H.W.Owen & R.Morgan, ‘*Dictionary Of The Place Names Of Wales*’ (Llandysul: Gomer press, 2007) p.70.

² BBC Cymru Wales, ‘*Welsh Grammar Mutations*’

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/learnwelsh/pdf/welshgrammar_mutations.pdf> [Accessed 02/01/22].

these examples also give an indication to the type of vegetation. Names of peaks can also display particular features such as *Craig y Castell* ‘castle rock’ in reference to an old hill fort or *Tyrau Mawr*, ‘big piles’ which has cairns at its summit, one of which is *Carnedd Lwyd* ‘grey cairns.’ From these examples it is apparent that colours often appear in place-names, together with an association in the landscape. Furthermore, the use of several different words for hill or mountain is apparent, each with their own connotations as is the case in English. Additional words describing relief features in the landscape of the study area are represented in *Pared y Cefn Hir* ‘wall on the long ridge’ again in reference to a hill fort but containing the word *cefn* for ‘ridge’. Also present is *Penrhyn* ‘promontory’ in the name of the disused quarry *Chwarel Penrhyn Gwyn*, ‘white promontory quarry’. The promontory component of the name is now mostly quarried away, but the white element is possibly involved with the colour of the stone but more probably used in description of the white torrent that rages nearby after heavy rainfall. Ridge or crest is again seen in *Coed y Gribbin* ‘wooded crest’ with the ‘C’ of *Cribbin* having undergone mutation to a ‘G’ as alluded to in the introduction to this essay.

Water features are also prominent, *Gwynant* ‘white stream’ or ‘white stream valley’ a probable compound word formed from the words, *Gwyn* ‘white’ and *Nant* ‘stream’ as a river name. This would have been coined in much the same way as the modern word Brexit would be. *Llyn Pen Moelyn* ‘lake at the head of the bare hill’ makes use of relief, water and vegetation in the description.

As touched on above, as well as describing the obvious physical landscape features, place-names can also be suggestive of different types of flora and fauna. While *Brithdir* ‘speckled land’, *Glas Dir* ‘green land’ and *Nant y Gwrddail* ‘stream of green leaves’ all hint at the type of vegetation on display. *Llyn Gwernan* ‘little alders lake’ and *Waen – Fechan* ‘small moorland’ (note the disappearance of the consonant ‘G’ in ‘*Gwaun*’) reveal specifics in regard to the plant life or ground conditions. An array of animals appear in the names of the corpus studied, including wild animals combined with natural features as in *Pant y Piod* ‘magpies hollow’ and *Ffwrdd y Brithyll* ‘fast flowing trout brook’ but also agricultural animals with an example being *Llyn Gafr* ‘goat lake’. As the cases presented have hopefully established, place-name evidence can provide a host of topographical information regarding an area. Whilst this is an obvious strength of toponymy when utilised in very rural areas where the geography has changed little in centuries, as is the case with the study area, geographic information gleaned from place names in urban areas can be harder to decipher. This is due to development and terrain alterations which now prevent the once obvious geography from being apparent on the ground.

The history of a location can also be detected from the study of place-names, the names of three medieval townships are preserved in the names *Dolgledr* ‘railed water meadow’ and the farmhouses, *Dyfrydan* ‘under the valley?’ and *Cefn yr Owen*³ ‘ridge of the Owen’. Personal names are another fairly common feature in the study of place-names and presumably first appear simply to denote ownership of land. *Cefn yr Owen* contains the personal name ‘Owen’ and there is evidence to show that a family of that name resided in the farmsteads of *Cefn yr*

³ Gwynedd Archaeological Trust, ‘*Historic Landscape Characterisation: Mawddach - Area 18 Medieval Settlements, Islawrdref*’ <<http://www.heneb.co.uk/hlc/mawddach/mawddach18.html>> [Accessed 03/01/22].

Owen Uchaf and *Isaf* (higher and lower) in the 16th Century and probably earlier.⁴ This fact could of course be coincidence, but it also seems likely that this place-name has been corrupted by the personal name and could originally have been a name that sounded similar. For instance, *Cefn yr Wyn* ‘ridge of the lambs’ which over time influenced a transformation into *Cefn yr Owen*, as a result of an obviously wealthy and prominent family’s presence there.

The name *Islawrdref* ‘below the town’, with mutations from ‘*Islaw yr Tref*’, is the locality that the majority of the farmhouses are situated in today. It would seem an odd name viewed in modern day terms as there appears to be no town present. The three townships mentioned in medieval times, however, would have indeed been situated above this ground in the main and would confirm the name as originally appropriate.

Many of the farms and houses in the area exhibit an agricultural heritage in their names including *Tyddyn- Evan Fychan* ‘small croft / farmstead of Evan’ which also yields a personal name in Evan, *Ty’nyceunant* ‘small croft / farmstead in the streams ravine’ and *Ty’n Llidiart* ‘croft by the gate’ or ‘gated croft’. In the names of *Hafod-Dywyll* ‘dark summer upland dwelling’, *Hafoty-Fach* ‘small upland summer house’ and *Hafoty Gwastadfryn* ‘summer upland house on the plain by the hill’ are preserved the names of *Hafod* and *Hafoty*. These were the residences of the upland summer pastures associated with the practise of transhumance farming as opposed to the main winter homes and lands of the *Hendref* on lower ground. These names appear throughout Wales except for *Hafoty* which is seen in the North only. The two words are explained in the following quote from Melville Richards:

Hafod is a compound of haf ‘summer’ and bod ‘dwelling’ (often shortened to foty) is a compound of hafod + ty ‘house’, and as perhaps might be expected is nowhere near as common in earlier documents. It is almost without exception confined to the six North Wales counties.⁵

Instances from elsewhere in Wales are too numerous to list but appear with a host of different adjectives to describe them, like *dywyll*, ‘dark’ in the case study. Some examples from elsewhere are *Hafodgarreg* ‘stone/ rock *hafod*’ which appears in multiple locations⁶ and *Hafodoerddu*⁷ ‘cold and black / shaded *hafod*’ in *Llanwenog*.

Other names in the area also point to a rich agricultural heritage. *Erw Wen*, ‘White acre’ is mentioned as a fulling mill along with *Cefn Yr Owen Pandu* in a collection of *Dolgellau* deeds.⁸ These would have been involved in the production of wool, the white element of *Erw Wen* a possible reference to the woollen fleeces that could, quite plausibly, have been piled high at times. *Erw* itself is an interesting agricultural term, being a ‘Welsh measure of land⁹’ equivalent to the English acre. *Cae Bwtsier* ‘butcher / slaughterers field’ is further suggestive

⁴ The National library of Wales, ‘*Owen And Portsmouth Collection Of Dolgellau Deeds*’ <<https://archives.library.wales/index.php/owen-and-portsmouth-collection-of-dolgellau-deeds-2>> [Accessed 03/01/22].

⁵ M. Roberts, ‘Hafod And Hafoty In Welsh Place-Names: A Semantic Study’, *Montgomeryshire Collections*, 56 (1959–60), p.13.

⁶ *Ibid* p.17.

⁷ *Ibid* p.16.

⁸ ‘*Dolgellau Deeds*’ <<https://archives.library.wales/index.php/owen-and-portsmouth-collection-of-dolgellau-deeds-2>> [Accessed 03/01/22].

⁹ ‘*Dictionary Of Wales*’ p.xlii.

of livestock farming and the small size of the field in comparison to others along with a nearby stream and structure would seem to support the idea of it being a slaughter field. Further historic agricultural land use can be glimpsed in the field name *Cae'r Ysgubor*¹⁰ 'granary field' and having arable connotations in this instance as opposed to livestock.

In the farmhouse name of *Cae Enion* 'anvil field' there is evidence preserved of an operating blacksmith, indicative of a working environment. A rare name in *Gallestra*, mutated from *Callestr*, 'flint' is also noted, unique in the corpus studied for being the only single element name on display. Flint would have been a valuable and useful commodity, evidently to the point that it warranted inclusion in a name.

Alongside the clearly apparent and abundant farming heritage shown in the place-names the area is also plentiful in pre historic monuments and relics, including *Llys Bradwen* 'court of Bradwen' and various standing stones and cairns centred around *Llynau Cregennan* 'shell lakes' (note the 'au' suffix to denote plural and appears as *Crogennan* on early maps) and along the ancient route of *Ffordd Ddu*, 'black / shaded road', that crosses the mountains to the sea. Shaded would seem to fit perfectly in this sense as the road runs through the mountains and is within their shadow for much of its course.

Religious names feature prominently in the study area. From certain place-names it is possible to glean information on religious beliefs and sometimes also the practises. The typical *Llan* 'church or church enclosure' names are found in the study area and are widespread throughout Wales. They are generally followed by a saint's name whom the church is usually devoted to. *Llanelltyd*, 'church of Elltyd'¹¹, *Llanfachreth* 'church of Machraith'¹² and *Llanfihangel-y-Pennant*, 'Church of Mihangel in Pennant' *Pennant*, a compound word consisting of *pen* and *nant* 'head stream' or 'head of the streams valley' is probably taken from the nearby mountain of *Mynydd Pennant*.¹³ All exhibit this feature and point to a Christian form of worship in one of its various forms. Not every '*Llan*' name conforms to this rule, an example being *Llanbradach* 'place on the bank of Bradach', in this case the *Llan* stems from the lenited form of *glan*. The name of *Dolgellau* itself, 'water meadow of cells'¹⁴ may have religious origins as the cells stated are possibly monastic, relating to the nearby *Cymer Abbey* 'confluence abbey' situated on the joining of the two main rivers in the area. There is also a biblical name recorded in the chapel name *Capel Rehoboth* 'Rehoboth chapel'.

Place-names can also play an important part in tracing the linguistic history of a particular location. Changes in language that can often be dated to a particular age can be detectable, as in the case of Celtic place-names in England often surviving in a different word order to modern day Welsh. An example of this can be seen in, Malvern 'bare hill' where the adjective comes first and the noun second. The names in this case study do not harbour any such peculiarities and it would appear from the place-name evidence to have been a continuously and uninterrupted Welsh speaking society. However, even in a Welsh language strong hold like the area studied anglicisation of certain names has still occurred. The tourist

¹⁰ '*Dolgellau Deeds*' <<https://archives.library.wales/index.php/owen-and-portsmouth-collection-of-dolgellau-deeds-2>> [Accessed 03/01/22].

¹¹ 'Dictionary Of Wales' p.239.

¹² Ibid p.240.

¹³ Ibid p.250.

¹⁴ Ibid p.127.

hotspots of Barmouth and Fairbourne both use English names along with a partly anglicised *Penmaenpool* ‘pool at *penmaen*’¹⁵ *Penamaen* being another compound word meaning promontory *pen*, ‘head’ and *maen*, ‘rock’ and the pool element is probably present due to English visitors to the area. Another glaring anomaly in the heart of the Welsh speaking countryside is the house name Kings having an English name and not the Welsh, *Brenin*, ‘king’ as one might expect. The name is also used for a bridge *Pont Kings* ‘kings bridge.’ According to Gwynedd archaeological trust ‘the origins of the name Kings are unknown’¹⁶ but a possible solution could be that an originally Welsh name that sounded somewhat like the English word ‘king’ has taken an anglicised form. For instance, the word *cynghad* meaning ‘concourse’ could possibly correspond as several streams converge with the river in that area. This is of course conjecture but what it does do is to serve as a good example of how names can change and alter over time and to show why it is important that records are kept preserving these names in the future as the names themselves and the associations they have can be easily lost forever.

In conclusion, the place-names of Wales can hold valuable historic data from a particular time on a range of subject areas, including topography, history and land use, religious practises and clues about language. From the place-names of the studied area alone, it is possible to discern that it is a mountainous upland location that has fast flowing white-water streams, mountain lakes, green fields and moorland with rocky crags as well as wildlife and livestock. This geographic information remains relevant today, as one can instantly acknowledge by looking at a modern-day map. It must be noted, however, this is not always the case and varies from location to location. On top of this knowledge, it is also possible to determine that the locality has a long history of farming, with a host of words to suggest this in the place-names. There is also evidence to suggest the area has been settled in some shape or form for thousands of years in the form of words like *Carnedd*, ‘cairn’. Religious and biblical place-names point to a Christian society who from the small proportion of Anglicised words compared to other parts of Wales have probably spoken virtually uninterrupted Welsh for centuries. It is however possible to detect English names in the tourist towns.

For a small study of just sixty place-names taken from one relatively small locality of Gwynedd, that is a remarkable amount of detail. They do have their limitations however, place-names can only hold a certain amount of information and it is sometimes vague or ambiguous. The fact that names tend to be coined in older forms of the language is another potential weakness as it is not always clear what the word precisely means or refers to.

¹⁵ Ibid p.368.

¹⁶Gwynedd Archaeological Trust, ‘*Historic Landscape Characterisation Mawddach - Area 19 Gwynant Valley*’ <<http://www.heneb.co.uk/hlc/mawddach/mawddach19.html>> [Accessed 03/01/22].

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Appendix

1. Afon Arthog
2. Afon Mawddach
3. Arthog
4. Barmouth / Abermaw
5. Bontddu
6. Braich Ddu
7. Brithdir
8. Bryn Brith
9. Cadair Idris
10. Cae Bwtsier
11. Cae-Einion
12. Cae'r Ysgubor
13. Capel Rehoboth
14. Carnedd Lwyd
15. Cefn Yr Owen Isaf
16. Cefn Yr Owen Pandu
17. Cefn Yr Owen Uchaf
18. Chwarel Penrhyn-Gwyn
19. Coed y Gribin
20. Craig y Castell
21. Cymer Abbey
22. Dolgellau
23. Dolgledr
24. Dyffrydan
25. Erw Wen
26. Fairbourne
27. Ffordd Ddu
28. Ffrwd Y Brithyll
29. Gallestra

30. Gilfachwydd
31. Glasdir Mawr / Glasdir Fach
32. Gwynant
33. Hafod
34. Hafoty
35. Hafoty Gwastadfryn
36. Islawrdref
37. Kings
38. Llanelltyd
39. Llanfachreth.
40. Llanfihangel – y – Pennant
41. Llyn Gafr
42. Llyn Gwernan
43. Llyn Pen Moelyn
44. Llyn Wylfa
45. Llynau Cregennen
46. Llys Bradwen
47. Maes y Rhyn
48. Mynydd Moel
49. Nant -y- Gwyrddail
50. Pant y Piod
51. Pared y Cefn Hir
52. Penmaenpool
53. Pont Kings
54. Ty'n Llidiart
55. Tyddyn Mawr
56. Tyddyn-Evan Fychan
57. Ty-Nant
58. Ty'nyceunant
59. Tyrrau Mawr

60. Waen – Fechan