

The Place-Names of Powys, Wales

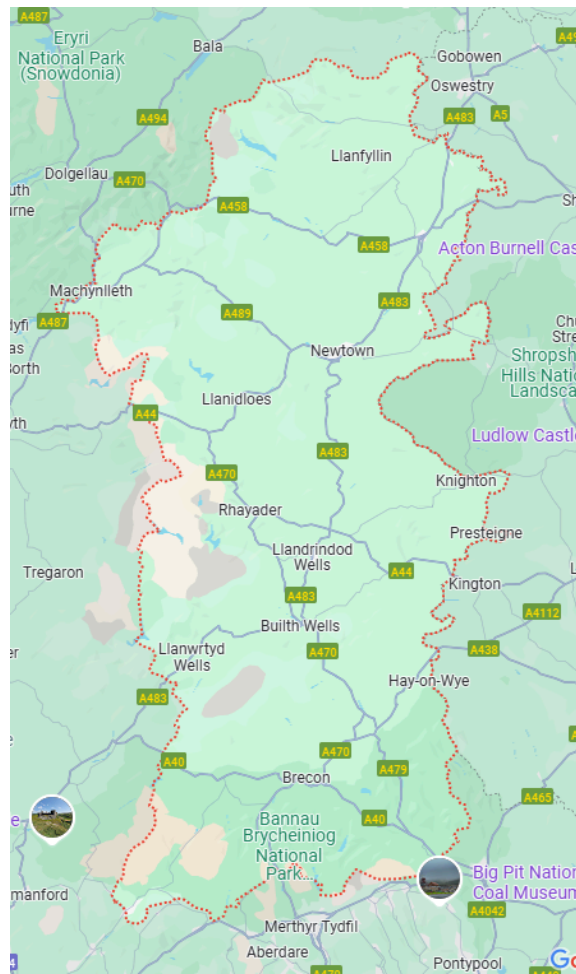


Fig. 1. Google Maps, Map of Powys.¹

Powys is a culturally important region for Wales, often associated with deep roots in the history of Welshmen fighting for their independence. The Princes of Powys are well-known through the cards of history and so is the region, considered one of the largest in Wales. Powys, in the context of this essay, is a region rich in Celtic place names of clear Welsh root, such as Pen, Llan or Bryn. The names analysed here are not just the names of places, these are pages of history engraved into the very terrain and subconsciousness of the residents, reflecting their connections, folklore, beliefs as well as importance of certain spots. The place names in this case are the linguistic fossils and cultural signposts, more than geographic labels to streamline navigation through the area. Powys is a largely rural area of central Wales, with deep Celtic heritage and very minimal influence of Anglo-Saxon policy of anglicising places. It serves as an example for the toponymic study about Celtic place names and what they reveal about the area itself.

Through the analysis of 50 place-names in Powys, this work navigates the intricacies of Celtic toponymy of the region's geographical location and variety of the reasons behind

¹ Google Maps, Map of Powys, exert, full map available at https://www.google.com/maps/place/Powys/@52.4466879,-3.4395503,9z/data=!4m6!3m5!1s0x48655130fa8b4443:0x58f1f2ba64f5e2d5!8m2!3d52.1430868!4d-3.3736822!16zL20vMDEyNWx5?entry=ttu&g_ep=EgoyMDI1MDQyMy4wLXhXMDSoASAFQAw%3D%3D [accessed 26 April 2025].

them. It further reveals the cultural identity, the topology and ecclesiastical focus of the area, giving insight into the formation of the unified territory that remains until this day. The names included in this work are divided and analysed by the landscape type and use, but with the goal of interpreting what they reveal about Powys, not simply to list them and explain their linguistic roots and meanings.

By looking at the names of places in Powys, a clear picture is painted of a varied terrain, not so unusual for Wales in general. It is a land of hills, valleys, rivers, moors, with a focus on agriculture and belief. The religious aspect of Powys will be discussed in later parts of this essay, whilst this point focuses on the physical landscape and its variety. Out of the 50 names included there is one mountain and fifteen other names that refer to the landscape alone, making up slightly less than 50 percent of this study. Pen y Fan, the highest point in South Wales, located in Brecon Beacon consists of two Celtic roots, Pen and *ban*, suggesting that perhaps, people naming it were aware of the height of the mountain they named. The Pen y Fan is further worth mentioning as it can refer to Cadair Arthur, with the root of *Caer* - stronghold, therefore Arthur's Stronghold.² This is in line with the typical use of the hills and their defensive capabilities, or perhaps, due to the height of the peak, Pen y Fan could be called that due to this factor. Further reference to the hills and heights in Powys can be found in such names as Moel y Golfa, Fan Brycheiniog, Mynydd Epynt. This points to a variety of high-raised points within Powys, giving the beginning to its varied topographical structure. Mountains, and hills, due to their height and slopes, create perfect defensive or scouting points. Especially from the South. Nowadays, this serves more as a vantage point, predominantly Brecon Beacon National Park (Bannau Brycheiniog - the peaks of Brecon),³ serving as a reserve for the wild nature of the area. Similar to rivers or bodies of water such as seas, mountains can serve as a natural boundary or a border. This might point towards the advantage Powys had against potential invaders. Mythologically mountains are associated with Dragons, a presence of which is important for Wales.⁴ Next on the list that showcase the natural variety of the terrain are the valleys, starting with Cwmdru, followed by Cwm Linau and Glyn Tarell a natural occurrence in the presence of raised points such as mountain passages or formed by a presence of a river. The valleys tend to be rich in flora, often due to the presence of a river, enriching the natural environment and giving people the ability to grow better crops on the fertile ground.⁵ Valleys therefore serve as a source of nourishment for both the land and the people, giving them value that could not be easily overlooked, especially in earlier times when people would not trade as easily, with limited access to the resources other than the ones they could grow. Given how reliant people were on their crops, their land, valleys would be a highly sought-after area, increasing chances of survival. Additionally, the mountains, or any elevated point of sufficient height, was used in orientation and navigation during the days, similar to how stars were used during the night. People could assess their point of a journey or the correct direction, based on elevated points, in area where mountains and hills are located, they become the first point of

² Hywel Wyn Owen and Richard Morgan, *Dictionary Of The Place-Names Of Wales*, (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 2007). p. 45

³ Hywel Wyn Owen and Richard Morgan, *Dictionary Of The Place-Names Of Wales*, p. 45

⁴ Brecon Beacons National Park Authority, 'Dragons Back Circular Walk, Black Mountains', *Brecon Beacons National Park*, 30 April 2022

<<https://www.breconbeacons.org/blog/dragons-back-circular-walk-black-mountains>> [accessed 26 April 2025].

⁵ Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'Valley', *Britannica*, <<https://www.britannica.com/science/valley>> [accessed 26 April 2025].

orientation, the easiest one to pinpoint, contrary to for example rivers, that without additional points, such as settlements, landmarks - hills, would not help with navigation. In the case of Powys, the names for mountains and hills contain such roots as Pen - head, top, summit,⁶ Moel - fem. hilltop, summit, or bald, barren,⁷ mynydd - mountain, hill.⁸

The mountains and valleys point elevated nature of South of Powys paint the picture of a well-defended or easily defended terrain, the further reference to Cadair Arthur with Pen y Fan, further references not only geological importance, but also mythological, folklore association with the king from legends.

Following the valleys are the rivers themselves. The rivers were a point along which people would build their settlements, a source of freshwater, fish, hydration of their land. Rivers were crucial for survival, being not only able to sustain people, but also providing them with means of transportation, depending on the depth of the river and the capabilities of people that settled next to it. They could be likened to arteries of settlement and culture, due to their extraordinary abilities of supporting life and gathering people. As the settlements formed along the rivers, so did the culture and tradition. An example of such a river, directly connected to myth and belief is Afon Hafren (River Severn), centering around the person of Sabrina. It is not only an example of myth being engraved into the land, but also an example of survival of pre-christian celtic names in Wales. Amongst the names included in this work, the rivers in Powys include Afon Tarell, Afon Haffes and Dulas. The previously mentioned River Severn (Afon Hafren), the longest River in Wales, serves as a proof for the reasoning given above, as next to it, Aberhafesp is located. Aber is an example of celtic place-name linguistic root often seen in Wales (Aberystwyth, Abertawe, Aberhafesp) literally meaning mouth of a river or a convergence of rivers.⁹ What is noticeable upon examination of the topology is that even smaller waterways were given a name, though their precise etymologies may be debatable, whether they refer to descriptors, or perhaps individual names (i.e. even in English words such as 'Black' can be used as a descriptor or a surname). Dulas, a name appearing on multiple occasions through Wales is an example of the way waterways were named - given a name based on their physical aspects. Dulas can be broken down into *du* meaning black,¹⁰ and *glas* standing for green or blue, focusing the name on the adjectives rather than any fixation on unique, perhaps personal names, a pattern reflecting the appreciation of the appearance. This approach showcases the sensory relationship between the body of water and the community it enriches. This repeated convention of using such descriptors throughout Powys and other regions reflect the naming conventions and patterns, conveying a direct, living experience of the landscape. Further to this, river names often influenced the settlement names, as was the case of many villages or hamlets (Aberhafesp, the settlements in Glyn Tarell, a valley whose name is intertwined with the name of the river Tarell). From the analysis of the hydronyms a thesis could be formulated that the communities lived with the rivers, rather than beside them. As mentioned previously these could be likened to the arteries in human bodies, providing transportation routes predating roads, serving as a source of sustenance and boundaries often marking political or tribal territories. The act of naming them helped with navigation, as well as provided a sense of association and identity within the vast landscape surrounding them. It can be said that the river-based place-names of Powys teach us about the deep connection between the people and the water, the persistence of Welsh linguistics in describing their

⁶ Hywel Wyn Owen and Richard Morgan, *Dictionary Of The Place-Names Of Wales*, p. lxii

⁷ Ibid. p. lviii

⁸ Ibid. p. lix

⁹ Ibid. p. xxiv

¹⁰ Ibid. p. xli

surroundings, perhaps spiritual significance attached to the major rivers (Afon Hafren) or integration of their courses into human settlements. Rivers, therefore, were at the centre of the system of community, rather than mere elements of the landscape, as simple stones or pebbles are.

In addition to the rivers, Powys contains other bodies of water, such as Llyn Clywedog, Llyn Efyrynwy, Llyn y Fan Fawr, Llyn Hir. At the beginning what really comes forth is the continuous, repeated use of the root *Llyn*, meaning Lake¹¹. In addition the name *Clywedog* (created in 1964), is a direct reference to Afon Clywedog,¹² giving it a meaning of *Rocky Lake*. Llyn y Fan Fawr with the root *mawr*, translated as the 'great lake (near) the peak',¹³ Llyn Efyrynwy, contrary to the naming system presented so far, does not contain an adjective, but a noun, in this case *Ebur*, meaning *a river associated with Ebur*.¹⁴ Llyn Hir, on the other hand returns to the adjective system, meaning 'long, extensive, tall',¹⁵ perhaps to mean Long Lake, or Extensive (size-wise) Lake. Analysing these examples, the conclusion presented previously, that there is a deep connection between the bodies of water and the people, this system of naming the Lakes is no surprise. It points to an experience, feelings and association, but also to the way people tend to describe what surrounds them when they do not know the names - i.e. big pond, small lake.

Powys, like many places in Wales, is rich in ecclesiastical places, ones where a temple was at the centre of the community. Majority of the religiously-rich places contain a prefix *Llan*-, which can directly be translated as 'enclosure, church',¹⁶ perfectly describing what was at the heart of the people that gathered there to live. Examples would include Llanidloes, the church of little known saint Idloes, a son of Gwydnabi.¹⁷ The next one would be Llanfyllin, the church of St Myllin, a Celtic Saint from the 7th century.¹⁸ Llanfair Caereinion is an example of a two-part name, a church of Mair in Caereinion,¹⁹ Mair being the saint venerated there, and Caereinion being the place, with the Welsh root *Caer*- meaning fort and personal noun *Einion*, possibly *Ceraint*.²⁰ Llanwrtyd Wells is on the other hand a name of the current settlement retaining a part Welsh (Llanwrtyd) and part English (Well) names. Llanwrtyd seems to contain the roots *Llyn* and *Gwrtyd*, possibly a personal noun, though it is possibly a short version of the full name of the church, dedicated later on to another saint 'Llanddewi wrth y rhyd' - David's Church by the ford.²¹ This serves as an interesting example that seems to follow the standard naming pattern, but the additional, apparently 'traditional' etymology points to this being an adaptation, or simply an attempt to give the name a 'better' meaning, though this does not hold a valid linguistic proof behind it. Llanbrynmair is an example of a name consisting of three words, *Llan*, for church, *bryn* for hill,²² and *mair* for a personal noun, meaning Church of Mair on the Hill, a name that contains a particular compound of not only a topographical descriptor, but also the descriptors for the most important aspect of that

¹¹ Ibid. p. lv

¹² Ibid. p. 91

¹³ Ibid. p. 300

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 137

¹⁵ Ibid. p. li

¹⁶ Ibid. p. liv

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 267

¹⁸ Visit Mid Wales, 'Llanfyllin', *Visit Mid Wales*,

<<https://www.visitmidwales.co.uk/information/product-catch-all/llanfyllin-p1727841>> [accessed 26 April 2025].

¹⁹ Hywel Wyn Owen and Richard Morgan, *Dictionary Of The Place-Names Of Wales*, p. 242

²⁰ Ibid. p.76

²¹ Musiewild, 'Llanwrtyd Wells – 2', *Musiewild's blog*, 7 January 2022

<<https://musiewild.wordpress.com/2022/01/07/llanwrtyd-wells-2/>> [accessed 26 April 2025].

²² Hywel Wyn Owen and Richard Morgan, *Dictionary Of The Place-Names Of Wales*, p. xxix

area. In other words, it tells us that it is not only important that it is the Church where Mair is venerated, but that it is also the church on the hill, possibly suggesting that the community was aware of other churches dedicated to Mair and wished to differentiate themselves from them. A similar example can be seen with Llanbadarn Fynydd both of which serve to tell us the saint that was venerated there -Padarn and where it was located - the mountains, *Mynydd* undergoing a mutation to *Fynydd*, even if the church was simply located among hill.²³ Llanfihangel-yng-Ngwynfa, is another interesting example, as even though it is similar to Llanfair Caereinion in the meaning behind it, the way the name was formulated is different, Llanfihangel means church of Mihangel (personal noun), whilst yng-Ngwynfa consists of yn Gwynfa, which means fair land.²⁴ So technically if Gwynfa was not treated as a place-name, it would mean 'the church of St Mihangel in the fair land'. The place names for the settlements near to the Church venerating a popular saint seem to differentiate themselves by changing the end part of the name, i.e. Llanfihangel Tal-y-llyn, refers to the church of St Mihangel and roots: *tal* for *end, top*,²⁵ *y* for *the*, and *llyn* meaning lake, pool,²⁶ giving the final meaning of The church of St Mihangel at the end of the lake or on top of the lake. These examples show certain repetition as well as spread of Christianity through Powys, as both Mair and Mihangel seem to be repeated, in different location and the fact that the churches are not simply called Llanmair and Llanfihangel suggest that at that point the community was aware of other places named as such. This further reveals a pattern of place name originating from precise descriptors of the location, as it is not only a church, but also of St Mihangel, not only is it the church dedicated to him, but it is also at the end of a lake, rather than in Gwynfa or 'fair land'. This, specifically highlights the possible spread of pilgrimage at that point in Wales and need for navigation. The very vast amount of places named *Llan* suggest a particular need for direction towards them, not unusual when it comes to ecclesiastical places. Furthermore, the place-names serve as record of existence for some saints that may otherwise be only remembered thanks to oral history, Llangynog, Llangynidr, Llangammarch, Llanwddyn, Llanerfyl, Llanllwchaiarn or Llangyniew, respectfully referring to Saints Cynog, Cynidr, Wddyn, Erfyl, Llanllwchaiarn or possibly Llanllwchaearn, saints that are not as famous as for example Mair or Gabriel or Dewi. In such a case, the place names are one of the ways those saints will remain part of the record and their history might not get lost to time.

The Llan prefix suggest a spread of Christianity, as well as variety of veneration, the suffixes added to the name like Tal-t-llyn might also suggest that this particular place was previously pagan, as it refers to a particular type of terrain, something important to nature-worship observed in Druidism or paganism in general. Therefore it can be further deduced that perhaps this particular church was built on a previously existing place of worship or veneration, giving us something to think about or perhaps serving as a clue for those that seek places of supposed power.

The above body of work was compiled upon a study of over 50 place-names from the area of Powys and nearby, even though, for practical reasons, such as limitations, not all of them were used as an example, but will be included, with their meaning in the Appendix 2 of this essay.

By analysing the place-names of Powys, we can come across a conclusion that the place-names of Powys offer a profound and tangible insight into the cultural, spiritual and

²³ Ibid. p. 218

²⁴ Ibid. p. 250

²⁵ Ibid. p. lxix

²⁶ Ibid. p. lv

geographical heritage of the region. The names of mountains, valleys, rivers, lakes, settlements, the people of Powys engraved their language into their surroundings, creating a sort of guide to their area. Each name stands to show how important their surroundings were to them, conjuring a feeling that each name consists of memory, of a *spirit* of the land. The persistence of Welsh linguistic elements, minimal Anglo-Saxon influence and the strong ecclesiastical toponymy throughout the area, further solidify the view that Celtic Culture was not only important but also capable of surviving the test of time, putting Powys on a pedestal as the place where the land and language remain inseparable.

Appendix 1. Bibliography:

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<<https://www.visitmidwales.co.uk/information/product-catch-all/llanfyllin-p1727841>> [accessed 26 April 2025].

Appendix 2. Table of Place-names. Linguistic roots of the place-names listed below are based on Hywel Wyn Owen and Richard Morgan, *Dictionary of the Place-Names of Wales* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 2007), unless otherwise stated.²⁷ The coordinates for the places were gathered using Google Maps (coordinates for the specific place can be found by right-clicking on the place in question).

No.	Name	Roots	Meaning	Location
1.	Llanidloes	Llan + Idloes (p. noun)	Church of St Idloes	52.4482134698 22505, -3.5451379637 852805
2.	Llanfyllin	Llan + Myllin (p. noun)	Church of St Myllin	52.7658444951 42574, -3.2674175901 49895
3.	Llanfair Caereinion	Llan + Mair (p. noun) + Caer (<i>fort</i>) + Einion (p. noun)	Church of St Mair in Caereinion / Einion's Fort	52.6482994831 5412, -3.3341837729 86169
4.	Llanwrtyd	Llan + Gwrtyd (p. noun)	Church of St. Gwrtyd	52.1172298857 8644, -3.6516333274 65983
5.	Llanbrynmair	Llan + Bryn (<i>hill</i>) + Mair (p. noun)	Church of St. Mair on the Hill	52.6121314189 7362, -3.6270768759 84115
6	Llangurig	Llan + Curig (p. noun)	Church of St Curig	52.4054088773 0953, -3.6023356859 199387
7.	Llanhamlach	Llan + Anlach (p. noun)	Church of Anlach	51.9297357871 26035, -3.3215149545 304588

²⁷ Hywel Wyn Owen and Richard Morgan, *Dictionary Of The Place-Names Of Wales*, (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 2007)

8.	Llanfechain	Llan + Mechain (or fechan)	Church in Mechain	52.7746666048 26415, -3.2050337439 582983
9.	Llanrhaeadr-ym-Mochnant	Llan + rhaeadr + yn + Mochant	Church of waterfall in Mochant	52.8266468782 7699, -3.2893313860 734312
10.	Llanbadarn Fynydd	Llan + Padarn + Mynydd	Church of St Padarn in the Mountain	52.3901366788 0693, -3.3245024027 058268
11.	Llanbister	Llan + Pister (?)	Church of Pister (potentially)	52.3518645525 6422, -3.3040106903 056423
12.	Llanfihangel Tal-y-llyn	Llan + Mihangel + Tal + y + Llyn	Church of Mihangel at Tal-y-llyn / at the end of lake.	51.9469186609 1608, -3.2917020763 12815
13.	Llangynog	Llan + Cynog	Church of Cynog	52.8302935603 9202, -3.3930974716 84727
14.	Llangynidr	Llan + Cynidr	Church of Cynidr	51.8678083412 6569, -3.2272785933 747357
15.	Llangammarch	Llan + Cammarch	Church by the river Camarch	52.1124554680 12435, -3.55571101505 3282
16.	Llanfair-ym-Muallt	Llan + Mair +ym + Buallt	Church of Mary in Buallt	52.1495169488 2738, -3.4059776444 654135
17.	Llanwddyn	Llan + Gwyddyn	Church of Gwyddyn	52.7626919182 9787, -3.45364113988 6912
18.	Llanfihangel-yng-Ngwynfa	Llan + Mihangel + yng + Gwynfa	Church of Mihangel in Gwynwa	52.7445019515 4307, -3.3643252141 25066

19.	Llanerfyl	Llan + Eurfyl	Church of Eurfyl	52.6765225418 1756, -3.4245549391 396826
20.	Llanllwchaiarn	Llan + Llwchaearn	Church of Llwchaearn	52.5252942028 80715, -3.2879302465 21477
21.	Llangyniew²⁸	Llan + Cyniew	Church of Cyniew	52.6700472566 18865, -3.2929647840 00464

2. Names of Topographical Features and of their origin

a. Mountains and Hills

22.	Pen y Fan	Pen + y + Ban	Summit of the Beacon	51.8852112912 52425, -3.4329237792 082443
23.	Fan Brycheiniog	Fan + Brycheiniog	Summit of Brecon	51.9255600235 55114, -3.5707889228 92162
24.	Mynydd Epynt	Mynydd + Eb + hynt	Mountain crossed by a horse path	52.1069432662 44066, -3.5148986914 19852
25.	Moel y Golfa	Moel + y + Colfa	Summit of the place characterised by tree branches	52.7065861876 1083, -3.0470066083 54834

b. Valleys and Streams

26.	Cwmdu	Cwm + du	Dark valley	51.9061411044 5726, -3.1897622860 502706
27.	Cwmllinau	Cwm + Llinau	Valley of river Llinau	52.6520190543 4682, -3.7027152778

²⁸ Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust, *Llangynyw: Historic Settlement Survey – Montgomeryshire* (Welshpool: CPAT, 2009) <<https://heneb.org.uk/archive/cpat/ycom/mont/llangynyw.pdf>> [accessed 26 April 2025].

				34632
28.	Nantmel	Nant + Mael	Mael's valley [near river Dulas]	52.2859199171 9877, -3.4168842140 01906
29.	Aberhafesb (Aberhafesp)	Aber + Hafesb	Mouth of the river Hafesb	52.5223071309 68656, -3.3706192829 83099
30.	Glyn Tarell	Glyn + Tarell	Valley of the river Tarell	51.9028843735 6018, -3.4744959802 57945
31.	Afon Tarell	Afon + Tarell	River Tarell	51.9234696533 7975, -3.4590365464 19732
32.	Afon Haffes	Afon + Haffes (possibly a personal noun)	River Haffes	51.8481069928 377, -3.70013711770 9323
33.	Dulas	Du + Glais	Dark Stream or Black Stream	52.2846813514 1818, -3.4232952470 475766

c. Forests and Moors

34.	Ffridd Faldwyn	Ffridd + Faldwyn	Faldwyn's Pasture	52.5633719685 2026, -3.1497365744 02737
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d. Lakes and Water Bodies

35.	Llyn Clywedog	Llyn + Clywedog (clawedog)	Lake of the Wild River / Clywedog Reservoir	52.4826906515 8624, -3.60035623224 2255
36.	Llyn Efyrynwy	Llyn + Ebur + nwy	The lake of river Vyrnwy / Efyrynwy	52.7804464300 4734, -3.50147338007

				0239
37.	Llyn y Fan Fawr	Llyn + y + Ban + Mawr	Great lake (near) the peak	51.8813722489 9207, -3.70022133584 33456
38.	Llyn Hir	Llyn + Hir	Long Lake	52.2935442714 8123, -3.77664949818 75565

3. Settlements and Towns

39.	Aberhonddu (Brecon)	Aber + Honddu	Mouth of River Honddu	51.9484256972 54635, -3.38787845258 80574
40.	Y Drenewydd (Newtown)	Tref + Newydd	New town	52.5127064297 4149, -3.30876983022 16952
41.	Y Trallwng (Welshpool)	Y + Trallwng	The muddy pool - Eng. Welshpool	52.6617067335 06705, -3.13967402733 29264
42.	Tref-y-clawdd (Knighton)	Tref + y + clawdd	Settlement of the followers (eng), (farm by the dyke)	52.3411105172 03674, -3.04903726823 35187
42.	Machynlleth	Ma + Cynllaith	Plain of Cynllaith	52.5904047980 0993, -3.85226204490 342
43.	Rhaeadr Gwy (Rhayader)	Rhaeadr + Gwy	Waterfall (on the river Gwy)	52.3012856131 81626, -3.51041503644 02384
44.	Llanandras (Presteigne)	Llan + Andreas	Church of Andreas / border meadow of the priests	52.2718738479 2451, -3.00415363520 89144
45.	Y Gelli Gandryll (Hay-on-Wye)	Y + Celli + Candryll	The grove of many pieces	52.0752766835 1175, -3.12650281331

				59642
46.	Crug Hywel (Crickhowell)	Crug + Hywel	Hywel's mound	51.8814656348 19726, -3.11937419001 14507
47.	Trefeglwys	Tref + eglwys	Settlement with a church	52.5023666665 0373, -3.51837845817 5643
48.	Cegidfa (Guilsfield)	Cedig + ma	Place of hemlock	52.6963205073 0708, -3.15791935459 8878
49.	Erwd (Erwood)	Cerwyd (potentially)	Stag land (potentially)	52.0779614381 4148, -3.31619360580 87575
50.	Gwenddwr	Gwenddwr	(place near the river) Gwenddwr	52.0807525835 17096, -3.35876810809 80514