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## Notes on the History of Trees and Woodland and their Legacy in Carmarthenshire

As a family historian with roots in the Tywi Valley, I have always had a deep interest in the history of the Carmarthenshire landscape, as well as the people within it. The history of the landscape is the history of man, and the history of man is embellished within the landscape. In that landscape there are few things more dramatic, inspiring and culturally revealing than it's trees and woodlands.

Carmarthenshire has many areas of arboreal delight. The uses of trees and woodland have changed over time, but the awe and wonder inspired by them have not. Here is a series of notes on the history and the uses of these natural wonders

### Iron Age

There was a greater management of woodland than was once thought during the Iron Age period of 800BC-60AD. The construction of roundhouses and fences and the tools required show knowledge of various species, each species having different strengths, properties and uses.

Coppicing and perhaps even pollarding must have been widespread in these landscapes. Wood was also necessary for fuel in the home, and collecting the correct timber for working furnaces needed a significant amount of organisation. On reflection a coppiced tree, would on the whole be more use to our ancestors than any single giant. But there is evidence for boats being made from one huge hollowed out oak tree. Acorns featured as a foodstuff of the natives according to the Roman writer Pliny (23-79 AD), who mentions acorns being ground up and used for bread making.

## The Romans

When the Romans came to Carmarthenshire they built forts and laid down roads, many being visible from the air today. They cleared great swathes of woodland along roads and byways in order to make ambush by the pre-Roman Britons a less likely occurrence. The Roman occupiers would have used timber for drying some crops as well as bridge and boat building and fuel for their forges. Oak was the favoured tree for the Roman fortresses and house building. Not only is the oak tough its heartwood is strong and insect damage is minimal.

## Hywel Dda

Some of the Laws attributed to Hywel Dda give us an insight into the importance and values of woodlands and trees in 10<sup>th</sup> century Carmarthenshire and probably much of Wales at this time. This importance is shown in an extract on 'Trees' from the book The Law of Hywel Dda, by Dafydd Jenkins, Gomer, 1986:

The value of an oak, six score pence.

The value of a cross branch, which reaches the heart of the tree, thirty pence; beyond that, it is a bough and has no legal value, except for a *camlwrw* to the King.

A scrub oak, which bears no fruit four pence.

The value of a hazel grove, twenty-four pence: if one hazel is taken from the hazel grove, four pence.

Every tree, which bears fruit, except oaks and apple trees, is of the same value as a hazel grove.

A sour apple tree, until fruit grows on it, is worth four pence; after fruit grows on it, it is worth thirty pence.

A sweet apple tree is worth three score pence.

Every apple tree in the orchard has its legal value.

Every tree which does not bear fruit, except a yew, is worth fourpence- such as an ash or an alder or willow.

The value of a yew, thirty pence.

A holy yew is worth a pound.

A woodland yew is worth fifteen pence <sup>1</sup>.

A thorn bush is worth sevenpence halfpenny.

Every tree beyond that is worth fourpence score pence, except a beech; that is worth six score pence.

He who fells an oak on the King's highway, let him pay three kine<sup>2</sup> to the King, and the value of the oak; let him clear the road for the King; and when the king comes by, let him cover the stump of the tree with cloth of one colour<sup>3</sup>.

These laws were taken from thirteenth century manuscripts. One of the first things that strikes me about these laws is the valuation of each tree and its value in different situations, and different stages of its life. Fruit bearing was obviously a major point.

It is difficult to know whether the value put on a hazel grove was because of its nuts or for its coppicing potential. Hazel produced a large and bountiful crop of nuts, which would have been very useful indeed in medieval Wales.

Three separate values given to yew trees is also intriguing, one pound, thirty pence and fifteen pence respectively. A single tree in a woodland would never have the same size potential as a single specimen grown in the open. This would reduce the capacity to utilize the wood for articles like long bows perhaps. Just what exactly did 'holy yews' mean? Were they church yard yews, single yews that acted as preaching places or perhaps yews produced and propagated in some monastic gardens?

<sup>1</sup> Presumably less value than a shelter yew.

<sup>2</sup> Biblical word for cattle.

<sup>3</sup> Jenkins, Dafydd, *The law of Hywel Dda*, Gomer, 1986, p. 188

## Giraldus Cambrensis

Giraldus Cambrensis or Gerald of Wales, described Carmarthen in 1188 as an ancient city surrounded by woods and pastures.

Gerald also mentions the dangers of lurking in Welsh woodlands and the weapons used therein.

The bows they use are not made of horn, nor of sapwood, nor yet of yew. The Welsh carve their bows out of the dwarf elm trees in the forest. They are nothing much to look at, not even rubbed smooth, but left in a rough and unpolished state. Still, they are firm and strong. You could not shoot far with them, but they are powerful enough to inflict serious wounds in a close fight. These short elm bows were ideal for forest skirmishes<sup>4</sup>.

## Middle age crises

The clearance of trees in Carmarthenshire for military reasons carried on throughout the age of the Norman invasion. It was partially out of fear of guerrilla attacks. We find in the year 1223 King Henry III ordered that 'effective help be given in the cutting down of forests and the clearing of passes to provide free and safe passage and access for merchants and others to the townships of Cardigan and Carmarthen<sup>5</sup>'.

The thirteenth century was one of the most turbulent in Welsh history, and it was also one of its most dramatic periods within the county of Carmarthen. In the year 1257, according to the monks of Talley a large battle was fought within the Tywi valley itself. The battle was fought in the ancient, and now lost wood of Coed Lathen (Coed Llangathen). The monks tell us that 'daybreak till noon the battle was carried on in deep woods' and soldiers cut down 'in the jungles, the ditches and the dingles<sup>6</sup>'. This type of evidence gives us vital clues to the extent of woodland, and ongoing use by the native Welsh.

This particular use of woodland proved to be a real thorn in the side of the authorities, and more clearances were encouraged. In 1284

<sup>4</sup> Bevan-Jones, Robert, *The Ancient Yew*, Windgather Press, 2002, pp. 152 & 153.

<sup>5</sup> Linnard, William, *Welsh Woods and forests, A History*, Gomer, 2000, p. 28.

<sup>6</sup> Lewis, Anne, *The last siege of Dryslwyn Castle*.

The burgesses of Carmarthen were granted free common in the woods, and were permitted to fell and carry away underwood, oaks for timber, and other trees, without any let or hindrance, as a matter of deliberate policy to clear dense woods where robberies and murders were frequent<sup>7</sup>.

Perhaps unsurprisingly this led to more trouble and Rhys ap Iaredudd, a Lord in the Tywi valley decided to act against such dramatic measures, but evidence suggests that, ‘this rising was suppressed by forces that included very large numbers of woodmen<sup>8</sup>.

### Floating trees

Oaks were used in building ships for Britain’s coastal defences, an aspect of the tradition of felling timber for military purposes within the Tywi Valley. In the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century and again in the time of the Napoleonic war, many thousands of oaks were cut down and stacked up along the banks of Tywi River. When the valley flooded, the trunks were pushed into the Tywi and guided with the help of local coracle men to Carmarthen. From this busy sea port they were transported to ship makers around Britain. This practice of moving logs on the river is also cited by Ethel M Davies, in The Story of Llandyfeilog Parish when talking about Carmarthen imports:

Steamers on the other hand, with a heavy cargo of timber, were too big to go all the way up to the quayside; the furthest point available being ‘Pwll-Du’ a deep whirl pool near Pibwrwen. Here the steamers stopped, and the logs were thrown onto the bank. Later they were tumbled to the river to rafts. The skilled men in charge could be seen jumping from log to log, pushing them with their poles to move them on, until at last they reached the quayside of the town, where there was a large saw-mill on William Joseph the Timber Merchant’s Yard, on our side of the Towy. So we can see this timber trade ebbed and flowed like the Tywi itself.

<sup>7</sup> Linnard, William, op.cit.,p.32.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.,p.32.

After this period the dock in Carmarthen town was situated along the Pothouse Bank to the west of Island Wharf. Ships of two and three hundred tons were built in the yard, such as the brig Mary Anne launched in 1805, the Priscilla in 1806, the Albion of 220 tons in 1813 and Brig Hero 220 tons in 1814<sup>9</sup>.

The Princess Royal a barque of 330 tons was the last known large project at Carmarthen docks. The last known locally built boat was a pleasure steamer which went by the name of 'Lily' launched in 1885 which used to go up and down the Tywi between Carmarthen and Ferryside

## Oak for tannin and fuel

Extraction of tannin to make leather was one of the heaviest uses of the oak tree. The oak bark was harvested from coppices every 25 years in site rotations. Spring was thought to be the best time for stripping the trunk bare of the bark. Large quantities of bark were shipped out from Carmarthen quay. Welsh hillside oaks were a highly sought after commodity because it was thought that they had very high tannin content. Not all of the oak bark left the county however; much was used in tanneries locally. Wood was also used as the major source of fuel in lime kilns around the Carmarthenshire area but was replaced by anthracite coal circa 1800.

## Yews for life and death

Yew wood was being used for bow making in Britain six thousand years ago, but this is by no means a continuous tradition, and much of the yew wood used for bow making in the Middle Ages is thought to have come from abroad. The largest in the county to my knowledge are the massive yew at Cilycwm, with a girth of 7 M 30cm (24 ft), and the lonely yew at the tiny St Paulinus church, Ystradffin, whose girth I would estimate to be 7 M 60cm. This yew at St Paulinus is very difficult to measure because of its epicormic growths (stem shoots) but is a very good specimen indeed. This particular church/chapel was founded in 1117 and it begs the question, whether this yew is a memento of its founder, or perhaps a mark left by a pilgrim returning from the Holy Land. The

<sup>9</sup> Lodwick, Joyce and Victor, The story of Carmarthen, St Peter's press, 1994, p.284.

notion is not so fantastic as it first seems given that some yews have been estimated to be up to three thousand years old, making them the longest living trees in Europe, along possibly with olive trees.

There are notable churchyard yews at Llangunnor and Llangathen and a single giant at Llandybie, to name but a few. The Aberglasney garden's yew arch is a very impressive feature within the garden, and it has caused much controversy in the county. The arch is controversial because of varying estimations of its age. The arch has been reckoned to be 250 years old by a visiting dendrochronologist, but other more romantically inclined people have suggested it to be up to 1,000 years old or more. Its recent pruning back seems to have split the botanical world. Aberglasney is also the home of one of the largest weeping ash trees in Wales, which was noted as being mature in the 1870s.

The 'holy well' and yew tree at the source of the Gwenlais River near Pentregwenlais, Carmarthenshire perhaps outline the spiritual importance of both trees and wells in the natural landscape. There is much debate as to the age of the yew and the past uses of the land surrounding the tree and the 'holy well'. Water is after all the giver of life and it is no surprise our ancestors were in awe of wells, especially when they were in the form of a spring and even more so the sources of rivers. The tale attached to this particular spring is as follows: once upon a time a virgin was murdered, and a spring gushed where she fell; stirring stuff indeed.

### Indicators of ancient Trees and Woodlands within Carmarthenshire

The late 18<sup>th</sup> century saw the greatest recorded deforestation of Carmarthenshire (and much of Britain), when vast areas of woodland were lost and some were never replanted. However, despite this decimation, Carmarthenshire has kept a large area of smaller woods and some notable large ones on local estates. Many of the smaller woods occupy steep valleys (*cwms*) and are in a semi wild condition, often full of wildlife. Some are classed as 'ancient woodland', a term used to describe woodland, which is known to have been in existence before 1700, the time just before major industrial felling.

Carmarthenshire has an above average amount of woodland and about one fifth of the county's woods are thought to be on a site of ancient woodland. However we must always be aware when searching for evidence of ancient woodland, that some words and terms such as 'forest' did not in the past have the meaning that we place on them today. Legally

speaking ‘a forest was an area of roughland on which the king or some other magnate had the right to keep deer and to kill and eat them<sup>10</sup>’.

Potential sites of ancient woodland in Carmarthenshire can be identified in many different ways. The following are examples of significant place name elements:

Allot - Wooded hillside  
Bedwos Bedwes - Birch grove  
Carw - Stag or deer  
Celli - Grove, copse  
Coed - Wood  
Coetref - Woodland homestead or farmstead  
Collen - Hazel  
Collwyn - Hazel-wood  
Derlwyn - Oak grove  
Derwen - Oak tree  
Derwydd - Druid  
Garth - Wooded slope  
Gelli - Grove  
Gallt - Wooded hill side  
Gwern - Alder or marshy land, swamp  
Gwernos - A place where alder trees grow  
Gwinllan - Orchard or grove  
Helyg - Willows  
Llwyn - Grove  
Llydy - Ashes, Ash  
Nyfed - Grove or sanctuary  
Onnen - Ash  
Perllan - Orchard  
Perth - Wood or forest  
Pren - Tree  
Prysg - Brushwood, thicket or copse  
Ysgawen - Elder or elder wood  
Ywen - Yew

These are just some place-name indicators found in South West Wales, the bulk of which have been sourced from B G Charles Place names of Pembrokeshire, National Library of Wales, 1992.

<sup>10</sup> Rackham, Oliver, The last forest, Dent, 1993.



A useful map produced by Professor William Rees in 1933, features the estimated woodlands of Carmarthenshire and South Wales in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. It contains such woods and forests as

Pedol Forest  
Brenaye Forest  
Glyn Amman Forest  
Maes Cathelog  
Glyn Cothi Forest  
Pennant Forest  
Killardun Forest  
Wenallt Wood  
Pencoed Forest  
Cefngorach Forest  
Gellyfeisant Forest  
Penrhyn Forest (submerged)  
Glynneiskin Forest  
Forest of Glynne  
Wenallt Forest  
Coed y Brenin  
Treskech  
Glynistyn Forest  
Coed yr Arglwydd<sup>11</sup>

This map was compiled as a result of William Rees' extensive research of medieval Wales. It may well yield vital clues to lost woodlands and forests in Carmarthenshire, as Oliver Rackham found when he investigated the 41 locations of woods and forests mentioned on W Rees' map. Fifty per cent still existed in the 1830s<sup>12</sup>.

Remnants of ancient woodland can be present in the form of ditches used as woodland edging and borders between old parishes and estates. The importance of using old trees as markers of parish boundaries has been noted for hundreds of years. Indeed it is very likely that the term "ghost woods", coined by the notable landscape historian Oliver Rackham manifests as a feature within our county. The term 'ghost woods' finds expression in the form of hedges that were once the outskirts and boundaries of woodland or wooded areas. These hedges are a living memorial to what was once a much greater expanse of woodland.

<sup>11</sup> List taken from, Linnard, William, op.cit.

<sup>12</sup> Rackham, Oliver, *Trees and woodland in the British landscape*, revised edition, Dent, 1983, p. 86.

Whilst studying the 1887 and 1906 ordnance survey maps for Carmarthenshire, I found evidence of many different tree species noted on either field or parish boundaries, examples of which include cherry, beech, willow, oak, white thorn, birch, ash and apple. I even found ‘an Alder stump’ mentioned, and one location just said ‘stump’. The place name Broad Oak in the Tywi valley, is named after an actual (ancient?) oak marked on the cross roads on Ogilby’s Britannia map in 1675.

Ancient woodland has great diversity of plant, animal and fungi species, some of which can be found only on these specific sites.

‘Carmarthenshire had 22,919 acres of woodland in 1913, 5,473 Coppice acres, 1,546 plantations under 10 years old, 15,900 described as other woodland’<sup>13</sup>. This was around 4% of the total acreage of Carmarthenshire.

### Gelli Aur Country Park and Arboretum

For a hunter of veteran and champion trees, two sites are particularly important; the first is Gelli Aur (Golden Grove), which is situated on the South side of the Tywi, three mile west of Llandeilo. On approach to the site there is a splendid avenue of limes (*Tilias*) thought to have been planted before 1860.

The site of Gelli Aur was the last of the large manor houses once occupied by the Vaughan family, who were great planters and guardians of their trees. ‘As early as 1608, Sir William Vaughan (1577-1641), the agricultural and colonial pioneer, had advocated the planting of trees and the making of orchards among his methods for improving agriculture<sup>14</sup>’. John Vaughan carried on this tradition purchasing in 1781, 5000 saplings from a London nursery which included

- 600 Weymouth Pines
- 600 Spruce Firs
- 200 Silver Firs
- 500 Common Larch
- 600 Portugal Laurels
- 300 Common Alaternus
- 24 Cedars of Lebanon
- 24 Hemlock Spruce Firs
- 400 Lime trees

<sup>13</sup> Linnard, William, op.cit., p.183

<sup>14</sup> Hughes Lynn, A Carmarthen Anthology, Dinefwr Publishers, Llandybie, 2002, p.378.

24 Alexandria Laurels  
200 New White Broom  
400 Common Laurels  
150 Fine Red Virginian Cedars, as well as Scotch Fir,  
Spanish chestnut,  
Beech, etc<sup>15</sup>.

Another strong willed champion of trees was Lady Anne Vaughan (died 1754) who doggedly refused to have her beloved trees cut down, and her ancestral seat ruined despite desperate pleas from her penny pinching husband Lord Winchester. These families often cherished their trees for generations, and the grounds were a reflection of the family's high standing and long lasting link with the locality.

The real jewel in the crown of Gelli Aur, in my opinion, is the Arboretum, which is open to the public seven days a week and is free of charge except for parking. The planting of the arboretum itself is thought to have been started in the 1860s. 'The Western red cedar (*Thuja plicata*) was planted in 1863, Western hemlock (*Tsuga heterophylla*) in 1866, and two Hiba (*Thujopsis dolabrata*) in 1868<sup>16</sup>'.

The arboretum was superimposed over an existing parkland site, which already had some veteran sweet chestnuts and oaks. The sweet chestnuts on the terrace can be abundant in their nut production and two in particular have notable girths. One measures 6.09 m the other 5.37 m. The arboretum has a great deal of charm and interest for young and old alike. One of the fascinating things about this arboretum is not only the size of its trees, but the occurrences of bundle planting which produces multistemmed giants, giving Gelli Aur arboretum a feeling of grandeur, style and uniqueness.

The arboretum has a fantastic selection of specimen trees from around the globe. But for me its mature specimens win the day. It can boast of some nationally verified champions, the fern leaved beech (*Fagus sylvatica* 'Heterophylla') has the widest girth registered in Britain for this species, as does the yellow juniper (*Juniperus chinensis* "Aurea"). Other top national trees of note are the Sawara cypress, (*Chamaecyparis pisifera*) Swamp cypress (*Taxodium Distinctum*) and *Cryptomeria japonica* 'elegans'.

<sup>15</sup> Linnard, William, op.cit., p.145.

<sup>16</sup> Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion and Pembrokeshire: Register of Landscapes, Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest in Wales: Part 1: Parks & Gardens, Cadw ,2002, p.29.

I find the multi-stemmed monsters, the Monterey pine (*Pinus radiata*), and the huge Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) the most impressive. The Gelli Aur collection is a unique collection of arboreal delights, and I hope it will always remain open for the public to view. Incidentally I would like to add a special note about the man who first introduced the Douglas fir, David Douglas, who despite his lowly birth was one of the great botanical pioneers of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, braved just about every discomfort known to man in order to bring back viable trees from across the globe. Just out side the arboretum is the famous Gelli Aur oak, which unfortunately has shown no evidence of life for over five years; this massive ‘hulk’ is thought to be approximately 1000 years old. This oak still majestic in its decline is the host for a huge range of other life forms. Root compression by forestry vehicles is thought to have finally ended the last chapter in this old warrior’s life.

## Dinefwr

The other site of major arboreal interest is Dinefwr Country Park, situated on the edge of Llandeilo town, which overlooks the Tywi River. The country park itself is open only from April to October. The entrance to the inner walled deer park (home of the ancient maiden oaks) is now restricted, but can be accessed for guided walks by bookings, for which there is a small fee for this service. Many of the other public footpaths around the site are open to the public all year. This site also has many areas of interest to the general public besides it’s woodlands.

When mentioning Dinefwr in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century Gerald of Wales noted, ‘Dinefwr is where the royal Palace of South Wales used to be; it is well protected by it’s site and surrounded by woods’.

Sir Richard Colt Hoare described Dinefwr woods in the 1790s and said that the oaks had been ‘persevered with a parent eye from the axe and must therefore, be reasonably ancient’. Of that we can be certain.

There are some exotic conifer plantings probably stemming from the mid Victorian craze for unusual specimen trees. These prized exotics often arrived very shortly after their discovery by European plant hunters. There are eight massive Wellingtonias (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*) on site, the narrowest of which is 5 M 80cm when measured at 1.5 M. In their native Sierra Nevada home they can grow to heights of 300ft and live up to 3,000 to 4,000 years, so our Carmarthenshire giants are hardly approaching adolescence yet.

The common name used for the tree (which is the world's bulkiest tree) 'Wellingtonia' derives from a nurseryman's sales gimmick. The Duke of Wellington had died in 1852, and the tree was discovered by plant hunter William Lobb in California in 1853. It was decided to replace one giant with another one in the public's consciousness. It certainly worked and the Wellingtonias were a 'must have' for any stately home or botanical park and replaced the 'Cedar of Lebanon' as the arboreal giant to grace their local piles. It is no surprise to find other specimens of these impressive trees with similar girths at Gelli Aur Arboretum, Tre-gib school in Ffairfach (also the home to one of the largest horse chestnut trees in Wales), and Pant Glas Hall. Wellingtonias grow very well in the damp Carmarthenshire climate, and were native to Britain in the Cretaceous period as seen from fossil evidence. Wellingtonias are a haven for the bird quite common in Carmarthenshire called the 'tree creeper'; they also provide a home for many insects and have a spongy fire resistant bark which can grow up to two feet thick in larger specimens.

We find other evidence of this relatively new zest for exotic trees in the 1858 book *Llandeilo-Vawr and it's neighbourhood*, written by William Davies (Gwilym Teilo) where he mentions (when talking of exotic trees) 'Many new varieties have lately been introduced into Dynevor and Golden Grove Parks'<sup>17</sup>. The book also mentions tulip trees in the grounds, as well as Carex, Medlar and many other common parkland trees of the day.

Capability Brown visited Dinefwr in 1775, and probably had an influence over the planting scheme, though apart from the clumps of beech scattered about the park it is difficult to be certain just how great an influence he had over tree planting and the landscape in general. Sir Richard Colt Hoare described Dinefwr woods in the 1790s and said that the oaks had been 'preserved with a parent eye from the axe and must therefore, be reasonably ancient'.

## The Pine legend

There are a few Scots pine (*Pinus sylvestris*) dotted around the site, one with a girth of 2 m 40. According to legend they were planted as a show of support or in remembrance of the final Jacobean revolt headed by

<sup>17</sup> Davies, William, *Llandeilo-Vawr and it's neighborhood* D.W &G. Jones, 1858, p. 161.

Bonnie Prince Charlie in 1745. That apparently is how they came by the nickname 'Charley trees', and it is interesting to note that Lord Dynevor in his book on the trees of Dinefwr estate 1934 reckoned the Scots pine on his estate were planted in 1745. Whether he had evidence for this, or was just influenced by the legend it is difficult to say.

### Noble oaks, a giant ash and humble alders

The magnificent oaks of Dinefwr's woods and deer park are a haven for a huge array of diverse wild life. There are many stately veteran and ancient oaks here of tremendous size; the Castle oak has a rather noble girth of 8 m 68 cms, measured at the standard measuring height of 1.5 m (5, ft). Experts estimate an approximate planting date of 1170. Many other pedunculate oaks have a girth of at least 6 m. The largest ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*) has a girth of 6 m 24 cms, with an estimated planting date around the 1520s. An exceptional feature of these medieval plantings is the number of Maiden oaks in the park, particularly in the Heronry, (maiden being a term used for a tree that has not been coppiced or pollarded). The oaks in the Heronry provoked William Davies to write "What a splendid Heronry! See the height of those oak trees, some of them about 70 feet high<sup>18</sup>".

Many of the rest of Britain's ancient oaks have survived because of crown reduction, but here at Dinefwr this is not the case. I think the Dinefwr nobility seem to have regarded woodland, certainly their timber trees, as a reflection of their wealth and status within the locality, much the same as Gelli Aur.

Large trees and woodlands have a special place in the psyche of local wealthy land owners, whether this springs from a distant memory of sanctuary in the protection of trees, or perhaps woodland represents self sufficiency in the shape of fuel in a wet climate, or indeed some sort of an insurance policy should their dealings with the outside world fail. We should also point out that in the Middle Ages at least there was money to be made by local estates from wild bees living in the woodlands and forests which produced an abundance of honey

Of course these trees have exceptional aesthetic properties and are highly inspirational, but on a more environmental front these ancient and veteran trees, of which there are nearly three hundred standing at Dinefwr,

<sup>18</sup> Davies, William, op.cit.,p.134.

provide a home for a myriad of insects some of which are rare, also they are homes to a vast number of lichen species, which have an European and national importance, as being a natural indicator of air pollution. The veteran oaks not only provide a wealth of habitat for other life when they are alive they also fit this roll when they are in decay.

One of the chief reasons Dinefwr is a site of specific scientific importance is it's wide range of insect species which survives almost solely on deadwood, These areas of decaying timber furnish a rich environment for rare species of beetles and other insects. These decaying branches and tree trunks provide a vital haven for many species that would certainly stand no chance in our obsessively "tidy" gardens and parks. The ancient and veteran trees have some species of fungi that first colonized the tree centuries ago and can be a useful indications in showing the historical uses of the area and the land around it. These fungi would perhaps find it impossible to propagate themselves now, locally, due to the changes that have occurred around them.

One of the most abundant trees in the wet soils of Carmarthenshire is the alder (*Alnus glutinosa*), which was used for the making of clogs and the stabilising of riverbanks amongst other things. Ash was another viable coppice crop providing handles for tools. It grows very well on limestone sites, as does the spindle tree, which can be seen in numbers at old limestone quarry sites, such as the quarry close to the Pant-y- Llyn Turlough, near Pentregwenlais. The largest ash in Carmarthenshire as far as I know is the "monster ash" at Talley. This huge giant measures up at 7 m 30cm (24 ft) in girth though it is a difficult to measure with complete accuracy.

### Llandeilo churchyard

Llandeilo churchyard must have a greater variety of trees than any other churchyard of its size in Carmarthenshire. It houses some fine specimens which include one of the largest weeping ash trees recorded in Wales, as well as one of the largest recorded copper beech trees in Wales. Some of these specimen trees were listed in the W Samuel's 1868 book Llandilo, Present and Past. Samuel says of the churchyard trees,

Some of the trees have braved many a breeze, but the majority of them have been planted since the rebuilding of the church, among which will be found the following

Cedar of Lebanon  
 Cedrus deodadra (or Himalian Cedar)  
 Arbor Vitae  
 Double-flowering Cherry  
 Purple-leafed Beech  
 Robinia pseudacacia  
 Robinia inermis  
 Juniperus sabina (common savin)  
 Taxus baccata (common yew)  
 Taxus hibernica (Irish yew)  
 Araucaria imbricata –or “Puzzle Monkey”  
 Pyrus aucuparia (Mountain Ash)  
 Ulmus crispa (curled-leafed Elm)  
 Ulmus pendula (weeping Elm)  
 Fraxinus pendula (weeping Ash)  
 Betula pendula (weeping Birch)  
 Pinus Maritima (small Fir)  
 Sumach.

He goes on to say, ‘The old standards or large trees are Wych or Scotch and Common Elm, Oak, Sycamore, and large Horse chestnut<sup>19</sup>’.

Many of the trees of this list have survived to the present day, and thanks to W Samuel we not only know the date they were growing but we can also get a rough date of planting .The Church was completed on 10 October 1848, and opened by the exotic tree enthusiast Lord Bishop Thirwell of the Bishops Palace, Abergwili (Now the Carmarthen Museum).

One of the interesting features about the list is how many tree species have had a scientific and common name change since 1868. ‘*Pyrus aucuparia*, for instance is now called *Sorbus aucuparia*, and the *Araucaria imbricata* is now *Araucaria araucana*; we now call it the ‘monkey puzzle tree’ it was originally called a ‘puzzle monkey tree’, because it was said to ‘puzzle a monkey to climb it’.

<sup>19</sup> W Samuel, Llandilo, *Present and Past*, Morgan and Davies, “Welshman” printing office, 1868, p. 3.



## The Roots of the matter

I have been very fortunate to have been asked to conduct walks and talks on some of the woods and trees mentioned above, and it has always been a pleasure to do so.

What I do know, is that even today we still seek our refuge and solace amongst the groves, coppices and forests of our landscape as our ancestors once did, and perhaps in doing so, we are unconsciously answering a call from our deeper instincts, leading us back to our distant origins in the wild woods of old.

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