

## Local character shaped by landscapes

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LLOYD, D.J. (2008). Local character shaped by landscapes. *Proceedings of the Shropshire Geological Society*, **13**, 27–32. The landscapes of The Marches, as seen through the works of great artists, provide an insight of the region at the time it was visited by the pioneer geologists. Such paintings can sometimes reveal details of the ground that have since been lost, or features whose importance might otherwise be overlooked.

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### BACKGROUND

In 1770 the English landscape painter Paul Sandby, with his patron Sir Watkin Williams-Wynne of Wynnstay near Ruabon, and accompanied by his nine servants, fifteen horses and a large cart, visited Llangollen, Bala, Dolgellau and Caernarfon.

This provides a flavour of the portrayal of the landscapes of the Welsh Marches seen through the works of artists, providing an insight of the region as seen by the pioneer geologists and often revealing details of the ground that have since been lost, or features whose importance might otherwise have been overlooked.

This is not the place to provide a detailed description of the geology of Shropshire *per se*, for which the reader is referred to Peter Toghill's *Geology of Shropshire* (2006), thereby to benefit from his detailed knowledge of the local geology.

### GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

The Welsh Marches straddle the boundary between lowland and upland Britain, exemplified by the view south across Herefordshire towards the Brecon Beacons (Figure 1) – “*And all this tract that fronts the falling sun*” (John Milton's *Comus*, first performed in Ludlow Castle in 1634) (Milton, 1637).



Figure 1. The Brecon Beacons © Copyright 2007 David Lloyd.

A particular characteristic is that “The many small pays or sub-regions reflect great geological diversity, a feature of the Welsh Borderland” (Sylvester, 1969). Thus the small hamlet so characteristic of the Shropshire settlement pattern is revealed in the local painting by the Rector of Hope Bowdler (Figure 2).

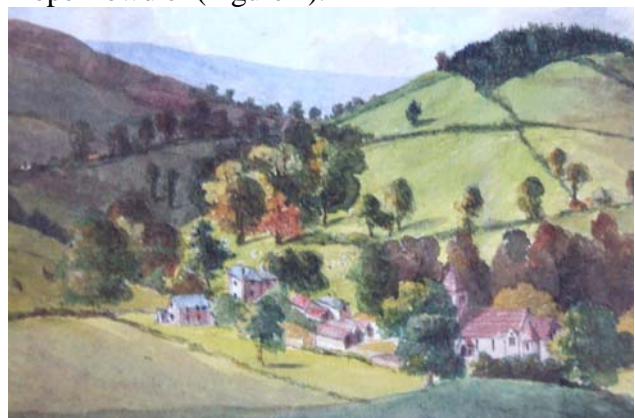


Figure 2. R.G. Benson (Rector), Hope Bowdler, 1871.

The German word for the pays is *marken*, meaning the boundary or limit, hence the Marches. These refer to the boundaries between upland and lowland as much as between Celt and Saxon,

Welsh and English, and are a direct reflection of the underlying geology.

Years of conflict, by the Romans, then the Saxons and later by the Normans, and its aftermath, have led to the construction of significant military structures, notably a network of castles and observation posts (Figure 5), taking advantage of natural rocky promontories wherever they could, for example above the glacially-eroded gorge at Ludlow (Figure 3) and the spectacular setting on the Carboniferous Limestone at Carreg Cennen Castle in the Black Mountains (Figure 4).

Perhaps the biggest, certainly the longest, structure is the ditch and rampart of Offa's Dyke, although this was possibly more a trade frontier than a military obstacle (Figure 6). This is a trend throughout the world, reflecting a clash of culture and consequently conflict where upland meets lowland.



Figure 3. Ludlow from Whitcliffe, 1722, by Isaac Vogelsanck.

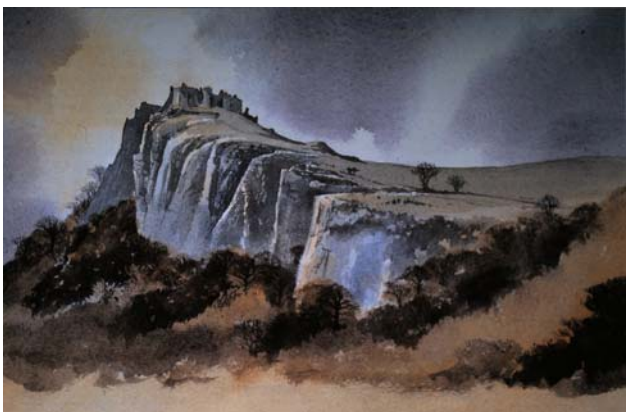


Figure 4. Carreg Cennen Castle in the Black Mountains, by David Bellamy. The castle is perched upon the Carboniferous Limestone, faulted on both sides against Old Red Sandstone. These faults are part of the Carreg Cennen Fault/Llandyfaelog Disturbance, which can be traced north-eastwards towards Church Stretton.

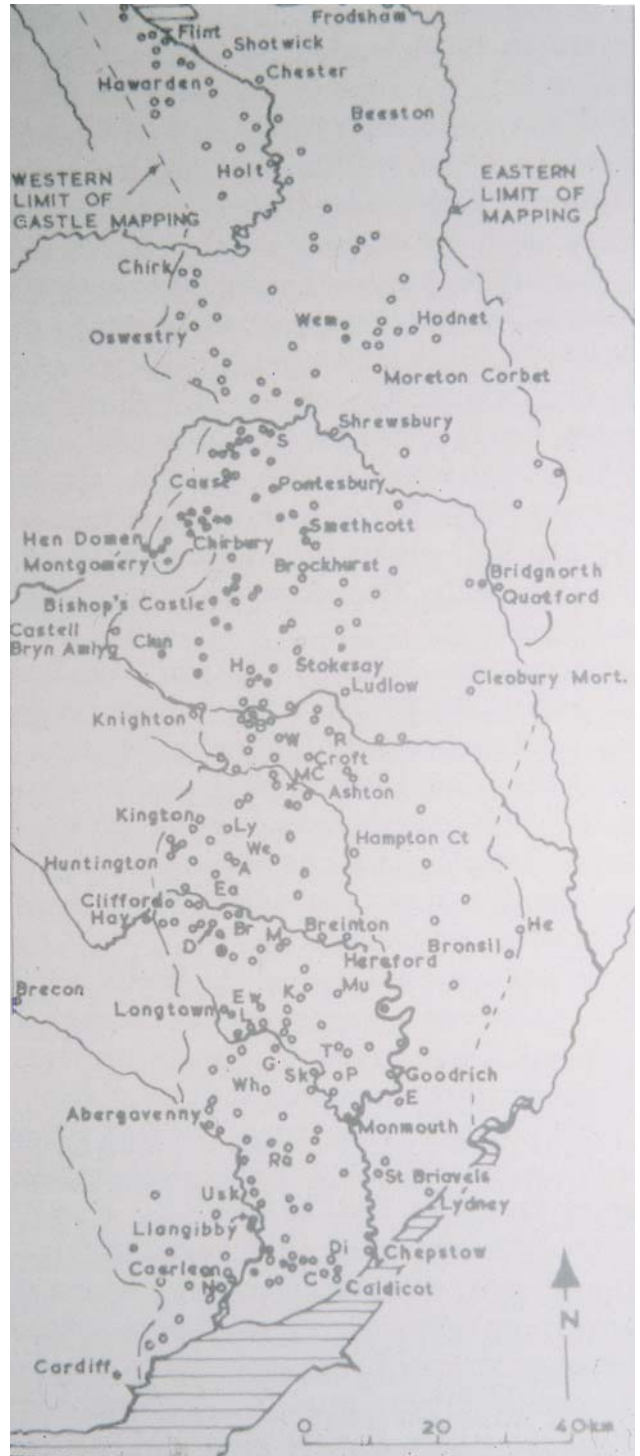


Figure 5. Norman Castles along the Welsh border © Copyright 2007 David Lloyd.



Figure 6. Offa's Dyke near Oswestry © Copyright 2007 David Lloyd.



Figure 8. Wenlock Edge © Copyright 2007 David Lloyd.

Other sites retain significant amounts of the original structure, as at Wigmore Castle, in particular revealing the construction materials that had been used, many of which are no longer quarried in the area and thus invaluable for geological study (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Wigmore Castle, by Samuel and Nathaniel Buck, 1732.

## MINERAL WEALTH

Initially the economic wealth of the region was largely derived from agriculture: crops and livestock, especially sheep (Figures 9, 10 and 11). The wool trade brought great wealth in medieval times, reflected in the elaborate ecclesiastical buildings of the day (e.g. St Laurence's Church in Ludlow) and the manorial houses, one of which was even permitted to be fortified (Stokesay Castle, Figure 12).

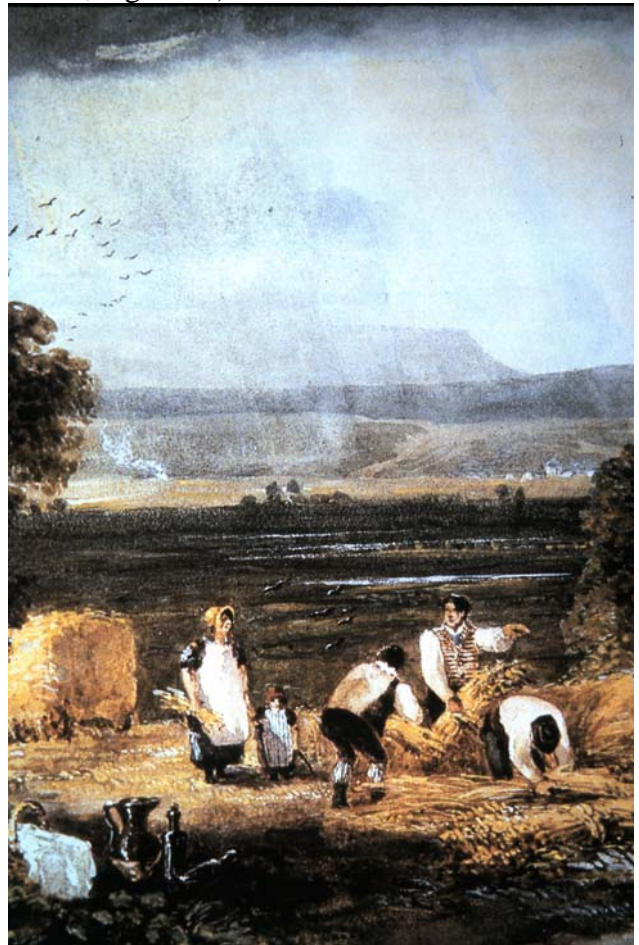


Figure 9. Harvest Scene, looking to Hay Bluff, by Joseph Murray Ince (1806-59), probably near Presteigne where the artist lived.

## GEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

The Marches are world-renowned for their sedimentary rocks of Silurian age, laid down as essentially horizontal beds beneath the sea. Subsequently these have been tilted by tectonic forces so that they now tilt, often eastwards as with the iconic Wenlock Edge (Figure 8), and immortalised by Housman [*Last Poems*, XII] (1922):

‘Wenlock Edge was umbered,  
And bright was Abdon Burf,  
And warm between them slumbered  
The smooth green miles of turf’

The associated landscape reveals how the geology is determining the individual pays. Each sub region has its own distinctive character, together giving the region its distinctiveness. Considerable diversity exists within a very small area, so characteristic of the Welsh Marches.



Figure 10. Llanidloes Pig Fair, 1847, by Hugh Hughes, typifying the market towns, so important to the economy of the Welsh Marches and epitomising the essence of country life in the region.

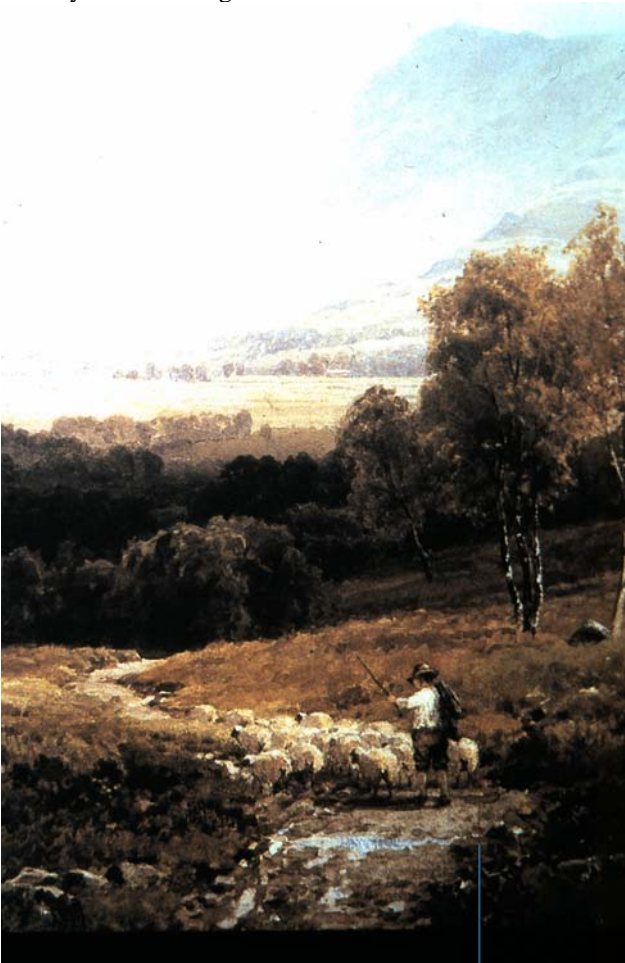


Figure 11. Sheep Farming in Herefordshire, by T.H. Palmer. Shropshire was the most productive county for wool, which was considered to be of the highest quality.



Figure 12. Stokesay Castle, built by Laurence de Ludlow, wool merchant, c. 1290, its fortifications reflecting the status of the family derived from the importance of this industry © Copyright 2007 David Lloyd.

It was the occurrence of natural minerals (iron ore and limestone flux) in close proximity together with sources of power within the Welsh Marches that fed the early iron foundries and led in turn to growth of the industrial revolution, with energy drawn first from the fast-flowing waters of subglacial gorges such as Downton and Ironbridge, and later from charcoal, then coal.

Contemporary paintings of the Ironbridge Gorge in Shropshire (Figure 13) give a flavour of the contemporary polluted landscape. Ongoing development has subsequently led to migration of industry elsewhere, and nature is slowly reclaiming the landscape, for instance in Downton Gorge (Figure 14). Here, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, iron was smelted using locally produced charcoal rather than coal. The iron ore was brought by packhorse from the southern slopes of Clee Hill; the limestone was local.



Figure 13. Bedlam Furnace, Madeley Dale, 1803, by Paul Sandby Dunn.



Figure 14. The River Teme near Bringewood Iron Works, by Thomas Hearne, 1786, revealing the rapidly flowing water ripe for harnessing as power for the iron foundries.

## BENEFACTORS

In an article on landscapes, indulgence is sought to conclude with a brief consideration of portraits, which help us understand the interest in, and support of, the early studies of the natural world and the wider benefaction to which the profits were put.

The Knight family earned their wealth from the charcoal-fuelled iron industry in Bringewood, west of Ludlow. The profits enabled construction of a new family seat at Downton Castle and a number of town houses within Ludlow itself (e.g. 14 Castle Street, in 1728).

It was Richard Payne Knight (1751–1824) (Figure 15) who used his considerable wealth inherited from the iron foundry business of his forebears that enabled him to lead the life of a gentleman of private means, pursuing local studies and the arts more generally. He became a Fellow of the Geological Society of London (referred to in his personal correspondence, now housed by

Hereford Heritage Service). This was typical of the period, and many such amateurs were able to play a vital role in collecting specimens and facts concerning the exposures of their local geology, facilitating the broader interpretations by geologists such as Sedgwick and Murchison.



Figure 15. A portrait of Richard Payne Knight (1751–1824) © Copyright unknown

## CONCLUSIONS

The landscapes of The Marches have been described through the works of local artists, providing an insight of the region at the time it was visited by the pioneer geologists. Diversity is the principle characteristic of the landscape, perhaps with views no longer visible or accessible due to vegetation or land ownership. It has been shown that such paintings can sometimes reveal details of the ground that have since been lost, or features whose importance might otherwise have been overlooked, and of building stones and, occasionally, their sources.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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