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Lewis Davies

Excerpt

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## **1. The Peninsula of Fferllys. The Place of Radnor in Wales. The Name—its Origin and Meaning.**

A glance at the map of England and Wales shows that two of our largest rivers—the Severn and the Wye—not only rise within a short distance of each other on the eastern slope of Plynlimmon, but that after wandering sixty miles apart they meet again before entering the sea.

The land included by these streams is thus really a peninsula, and was known to the ancients by the collective name of Fferllys, or Fferyllwg. The greater part of Radnorshire lies within its north-west portion, occupying the same tract as the lordships of Melenydd and Elvael in far-off times. Another district—that of Gwrtheyrnion—a mountainous tract to the west of the Wye—was added to Melenydd and Elvael to form the complete county when its present boundaries were fixed.

This region of hill and dale has always been famous. Its mountainous character has served as an excellent defence in all ages. Its position, too, as a debatable borderland between Dyfed on the one side and Mercia on the other, made its possession, especially in medieval

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times, a matter of great import. All the roads and tracks of Mid-Wales converged on the fords of Wye, and whoever dominated them dominated the country on both sides.

Celt, Roman, and Norman successively mastered and owned the beautiful valleys of Upper Fferllys, and each



**A Radnorshire Moorland Scene**

has left very conspicuous marks of his occupation. The Saxon was not uniformly victorious—his boundary varied from age to age. Now he advanced to the Wye itself, and now he had to retreat to the Severn, until at last the great Offa fixed the boundary that is still connected with his name. The Dane also raided the district, but did not succeed in making it his permanent abode.

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## THE PENINSULA OF FFERLLYS 3

Although this mountain region has a long history, the county of Radnor, as we now know it, is a modern division, dating no further back than 1536, when at the same time, and under similar circumstances as Brecon, Monmouth, Montgomery, and Denbigh, it was created out of the unshired lands of the Borders, or Marches.



Vale of New Radnor

Pembroke and Glamorgan were counties before the fall of the last Llewelyn, and in 1284 Edward I by the Statute of Rhuddlan created six others—Flint, Carnarvon, Anglesey, Merioneth, Cardigan, and Carmarthen; but the remainder of Wales was for two and a half centuries an unhappy territory, where legalised oppressors, the Lords-Marchers, to the number of about

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## RADNORSHIRE

140, held the destinies of life and death over the wretched people, ruling them by the strength of the sword, in virtue of the “Jura Regalia,”—a martial law of the sternest kind.

Henry VIII by his Act of Union in 1536 swept all this away by adding a number of the Lordships to the existing neighbouring English and Welsh shires, and forming the remainder into five new counties, of which, as we have seen, Radnor was one.

Although the name Radnor, as applied to the county, is comparatively modern, the name as applied to the chief mountains of the district, Radnor Forest, and to the villages of Old and New Radnor, is a very old one, *New Radnor* even being at least as old as the Domesday Book. The meaning of the word has long been a puzzle to scholars, but the interpretation most generally accepted derives it from the Anglo-Saxon *rade* = “a road” and *nore* = “narrow,” making it to mean “the land of mountain tracks,” which it most certainly was.

The origin of the Welsh name—*Maesyfed*—is also doubtful, for although *maes* = “a field” is definite enough, there is no satisfactory explanation of the other portion of the word, the various authorities offering as many explanations, ranging from *yfed* = “to drink” and *Hyfaidd* = “a Welsh chieftain,” to *y fedw* = “the birch tree.” The last mentioned has at least the merit of being plausible, especially if compared with the Welsh names of other border towns, e.g. *Pengwern* (Shrewsbury), “the head of the alders,” *Tre-ffawydd* (Hereford), “the town of the beeches,” and *Celyn* (Clun), “the town of holly.”

## GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

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**2. General Characteristics.**

Radnorshire has no coal, and is thus likely always to remain a pastoral county. She has, moreover, no rivers of commercial utility and no sea-coast. Indeed, it is the Welsh county most remote from the sea, and so mountainous is its general character that it has earned the



**A Radnorshire Farm**

name of “rugged Radnor,” though certainly not from the poverty of its elevated slopes. For the crisp turf of the Radnor heights has made it renowned among the sheep-breeders of the Principality, while its sheep-walks are in great request by stock raisers at all times.

Heather is everywhere plentiful in the uplands, and as a consequence grouse abound. The county in ancient

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days contained no less than four royal forests, and its sparse population, and the great extent of its moorland, made it peculiarly suitable for the chase.

Its valleys, though generally narrow, are of extreme beauty, “no turf being greener or fresher,” and “no streams being clearer, and more buoyant” than those which form the groundwork of the dales around the foot of the Great Forest. Byron and Shelley felt their charm, for the former was a constant visitor at Kensham, near Presteign, and Shelley took up his abode in the Elan Valley during a period of his fitful career. There is an old distich which says,

“Blessed is the eye  
’Twixt Severn and Wye,”

in allusion to the acknowledged beauty of this Mesopotamia of the Welsh Border, and Shakespeare himself has sung the same theme when in *King Lear* (I. i. 65) he describes Fferllys as

“With shadowy forests and with champains rich’d,  
With plenteous rivers and wide-skirted meads.”

Radnor is becoming increasingly the playground of South Wales, not only for those who can rent a shooting or fishing, but for all classes.

Anglers come in great numbers, for although most of the streams are preserved, there are still many left where fishing may be had free, or on payment of a small sum. Latterly, the well-stocked chain of lakes formed in the Elan district for the domestic needs of Birmingham have

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## GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

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greatly added to the fishing value of the county, and anglers from far afield regularly visit them to fish.

Radnorshire is very rich in antiquities of all kinds. The county indeed may be summed up as a curious mixture of the very old and the very new; where Offa's Dyke, with a story of 1200 years, lies in the path



The Pump House, Llandrindod

of the Birmingham Aqueduct of yesterday, and where Roman camps, castle-mounds, and prehistoric graves are lit up every evening by the electric light of Llandrindod Common.

Lying, as it did, right on the Mercian border, and, moreover, being halfway between North and South Wales, Radnor, as may be surmised, was constantly the

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battleground of the contending forces. But, throughout the ages of fierce strife, it remained Welsh in tongue and character until within a century ago, when in times of peace it forgot the Cymric language. It is the only Welsh county that has entirely done so, but it can never be other than Cymric in character as long as its place-names survive, and its traditions of Llewelyn and Glyndwr linger in the land.

The greatest modern development of the county has undoubtedly been Llandrindod, which at a bound has become one of the foremost of British spas, and incidentally a much-needed meeting-place of North, Mid, and South Wales for national and provincial purposes.

### **3. Size. Shape. Boundaries. Detached Portions.**

Having seen how Radnor came to be formed into a county, and examined its general characteristics as a shire-unit, we must now turn to the map to note its size and boundaries.

Of the Welsh counties, Radnor is the tenth in size, Anglesey and Flint alone being less in area. Carmarthen-shire, the largest, is about twice its size. The English county which most closely approximates it is Bedford, while Huntingdon, Middlesex, and Rutland alone possess smaller acreages.

Its length from north to south is 26 miles, and its breadth from east to west measures 29 miles. Its widest part is in the latitude of Rhayader, and its greatest length



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## SIZE    SHAPE    BOUNDARIES    9

extends from Glasbury in the south to the Kerry Hills in the north. In shape it bears a remarkably close resemblance to Africa.

The lines of demarcation between our counties in many cases follow natural boundaries, but quite as often are purely artificial. Sometimes it is difficult to see why shire boundaries take unlikely courses. In the case of Radnor it is not so difficult of explanation, for the boundary of the county is merely the outside boundary of the different lordships from which it was made in 1536. In other words, the line was the compromise of the relative strength of the opposing lordships at the time.

A large river is from a defensive point of view a very good boundary; hence the number of Radnor lordships that rested on the Wye. This river, from its confluence with the Elan as far as Rhydspence on the Hereford border, forms almost the whole of the southern boundary of Radnorshire, dividing it from Brecon and Hereford. A little beyond Rhydspence the boundary line turns northward, and keeps the same general direction in a jagged line as far as Knighton, a deviation to the west giving the town of Kington to Hereford, and another to the east adding Presteign to Radnor. This section cuts the valleys of the Arrow and Lug almost at right angles, and also intersects Offa's Dyke, near Lower Harpton. And although the general courses of both the ancient and modern boundary lines are substantially the same, from south to north, the Dyke is the more easterly of the two to the south of this point, and the more westerly north of it.

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After striking Shropshire near Knighton, the Radnor boundary makes a sharp turn to the north-west, following the course of the Teme for about 15 miles, after which it ascends the highlands to meet Montgomeryshire under the shadow of the Kerry Hills, when it turns westward, and follows the watershed between Severn and Wye until it touches Cardiganshire in the solitary wilds drained



The Wye at Hay

*(Radnor, Brecon, and Hereford Boundary)*

by the Talog, Gwny, and Nantfigen. It follows the last-named stream to its confluence with the Claerwen, the Claerwen until it meets the Elan, and the Elan till it meets the Wye.

In the Wye section of the boundary, there used to be a little deviation into Brecon from the river bed