

Feature County

Farming in Bro Ddyfi

For the increasing number of visitors who reach Bro Ddyfi on foot through the mountains, some of the first man-made structures they see are those built by our earliest farmers. The watershed of the Dyfi is littered with monuments erected by those who started to cultivate the land and graze domestic livestock here more than 5,000 years ago, establishing a landscape, environment and culture which continues to this day to rely on farming.

By the 1200s, the management of many of our upland areas had come under the control of the Cistercian monks of Ystrad Marchell, large areas having been given to the monastery by Gwenwynwyn ab Owain Cyfeiliog - a gift preserved in place names such as Mynachdy and Tirymynach.

Perhaps it's no surprise then that two centuries later Gwenwynwyn's descendant, Owain Glyndŵr, took refuge near Mynachdy, in the south of Bro Ddyfi. The decision was to lead to victory over the English and Flemish at nearby Hyddgen in 1401, his crowning as Prince of Wales in 1404 and the establishment of Wales' first Parliament in the heart of Bro Ddyfi, at Machynlleth.

Farming practices had altered relatively very little in the centuries leading up to Glyndŵr's revolt. However, the following centuries would bring major changes as the agricultural revolution took hold, marked by the enclosure of large tracts of land.

Such enclosures, be it by force or Act of Parliament, could be controversial. Writing in 1854 about Parc Common, on the outskirts of Machynlleth, Evan Jones said: "Puw of Mathafarn once took possession of this Park; he tilled the land, burnt the turfs, planted rye, and hedged around it ...and he let it grow high. But...one day a host of the townsfolk went up and pulled down the hedges, taking them home to burn; they also let loose the sheep, pigs, and mules to make the most of it, and no one again dared lay a hedge there."

While the changes brought about by enclosure were dramatic, they cannot have been more so than those of the 20th Century. The creation of the Forestry Commission in 1919 led to the afforestation of vast areas of agricultural land in Bro Ddyfi, with multiple impacts.

It created work and sometimes provided opportunities for farmers and new entrants to both farm and earn a wage on forestry holdings. It meant, though, that as more land was planted, entire farms and communities were lost forever to what have become vast havens for foxes and crows.

Many of these forests were planted on land put on the market by the estates, but the sale of such land also allowed many one-time tenants to become owner-occupiers for the first time. This changed the balance of land ownership and therefore the social structure of the farming community.

Meanwhile, mechanisation and modernisation continued to revolutionise production and, in 1954, the population of the area saw the latest in cutting edge machinery on home turf, when the Royal Welsh Show was held at Llynllloedd, Machynlleth. It was a Show remembered to this day as one of the wettest and muddiest on record.

Perhaps the greatest change during the twentieth century was the move from mixed to livestock farming. As the need for and economic viability of growing arable crops diminished, thousands of arable fields were turned over to grass, while milk, production once a feature of most farms, has all but gone.

The increasing predominance of livestock production has certainly changed the area, but not so much in the mountains. As we approach the third decade of the 21st Century, it is under-grazing, often enforced through agri-environmental rules, that represents the greatest threat to upland habitats.

The idea of further abandonment, under the guise of wilding, has become increasingly popular. Its proponents appear to be more interested in romantic dreams than their impact on indigenous people and habitats.

Brexit and other challenges looming, mean the coming century is likely to bring even more changes than occurred during the 20th century. In the face of these, the area has an advantage many others would envy.

Bro Ddyfi is blessed with a generation of young people whose passion and enthusiasm for agriculture is unrivalled. They recognise and appreciate the link between their language, their culture and the land on which their forefathers first started farming more than five millennia ago.



Photo: S McKechnie