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DISCOVER
Radnorshire

Looking for somewhere new to explore? *Roger Butler* reckons the rolling hills of Radnor have plenty to offer those who love long days of solitary exploration



View north from Gwaunceste Hill towards the knobby hills known as Llandegley Rocks

Deep in Mid Wales, Radnorshire is a sparsely populated place of ravishing rolling hills. The old county that went by that name disappeared long ago in one of those much-loved boundary reorganisations – but Radnorshire survives, hanging on, as one of three decentralised areas within the sweeping authority of Powys.

The narrow streets of Kington, hidden away on the west side of Herefordshire, form an old fashioned funnel which flows

west to the Welsh border. There aren't many towns beyond here but it's only a short hop to the villages of Old Radnor and New Radnor.

The two villages, less than three miles apart, sit either side of the A44. Old Radnor looks south to Hergest Ridge – two-thirds of which is in England – and a maze of undiscovered moors beyond Gladestry. New Radnor looks north to the sprawling contours of Black Mixen and Great Rhos, as well as unmistakable pointy Whimble and nearby Water-break-its-

neck. This surely deserves an award for the best-named waterfall in Wales; in full spate, it pummels through a ravine between mossy trees that do their best to imitate a rainforest.

Both villages are perfectly placed to make the most of some splendid wild scenery and two long walks – one arcing north and one swinging south – could easily be combined into a long weekend with one or two overnight camps. You won't bump into many other people. ☑

Black Mixen and Great Rhos from New Radnor

I first saw Black Mixen from Offa's Dyke. It was a raw day when sharp hail showers competed with fleeting shafts of light and, looking west, a dark mysterious hill rose like a beached whale. It remained a jet-black silhouette throughout the afternoon and the map, dotted with names like Three Riggles, Shepherd's Well and Stanlo Tump, convinced me this was an area that deserved exploration. Two words – Radnor Forest – were stamped across the tightly woven contours like one of those online watermarks.

The area was a royal hunting ground in medieval times when the term 'forest' referred to an unenclosed landscape used for hunting deer. Today, not without irony, conifer plantations mask some of the northern slopes but these shady valleys add variety to a walk which is characterised by dense carpets of bilberry and heather.

According to legend, local people built four churches around the edge of the forest

to help contain the last dragon in Wales. He lay sleeping, somewhere up in the hills, and it was thought he would awake, hissing and steaming, if the churches were ever damaged. The only roar you're likely to hear these days will be the unfortunate scream of an occasional RAF plane.

A steep lane called Mutton Dingle twisted out of New Radnor and rose towards Whimble. This perky little summit with a whimsical name stands as an outlier to the main range and a fine grassy track followed the edge of the trees to the western end of the hill. There's no formal right of way or access agreement, but stiles have always implied that walkers are welcome. The views extended east to the pale silhouettes of the Clew Hills and the Malverns and south to the wrinkled escarpments of the Black Mountains.

A steep pull took me up to the top, with fine views west across the deep dark gulch beyond Great Creigiau and north to the craggy flank of Whinyard Rocks and the spidery radio mast on Black Mixen.

Evidence of an ancient tumulus was visible but I wondered what our Bronze Age ancestors would make of the munitions testing range which now nestles at the foot of Harley Dingle. I'm sad to say it will be many years before hiking boots are allowed in that valley again.

The sheltered cleft north of Whimble almost looks manmade but was formed when glacial action carried away some of the surrounding shale and left the small peak to its own devices. It's a shame it doesn't quite reach 2,000 feet but nearby Bache Hill crashes over the barrier by a full 12 inches. The trig point marks another tumulus and the start of the high moorland plateau.

The heather looked completely pathless but I was soon following narrow sheep tracks to the trig point below Black Mixen's radio mast, which is visible from deep inside England, and is dedicated for police use. I cut north to the head of Harley Dingle, past the remnants of a medieval dyke, with views down the valley which



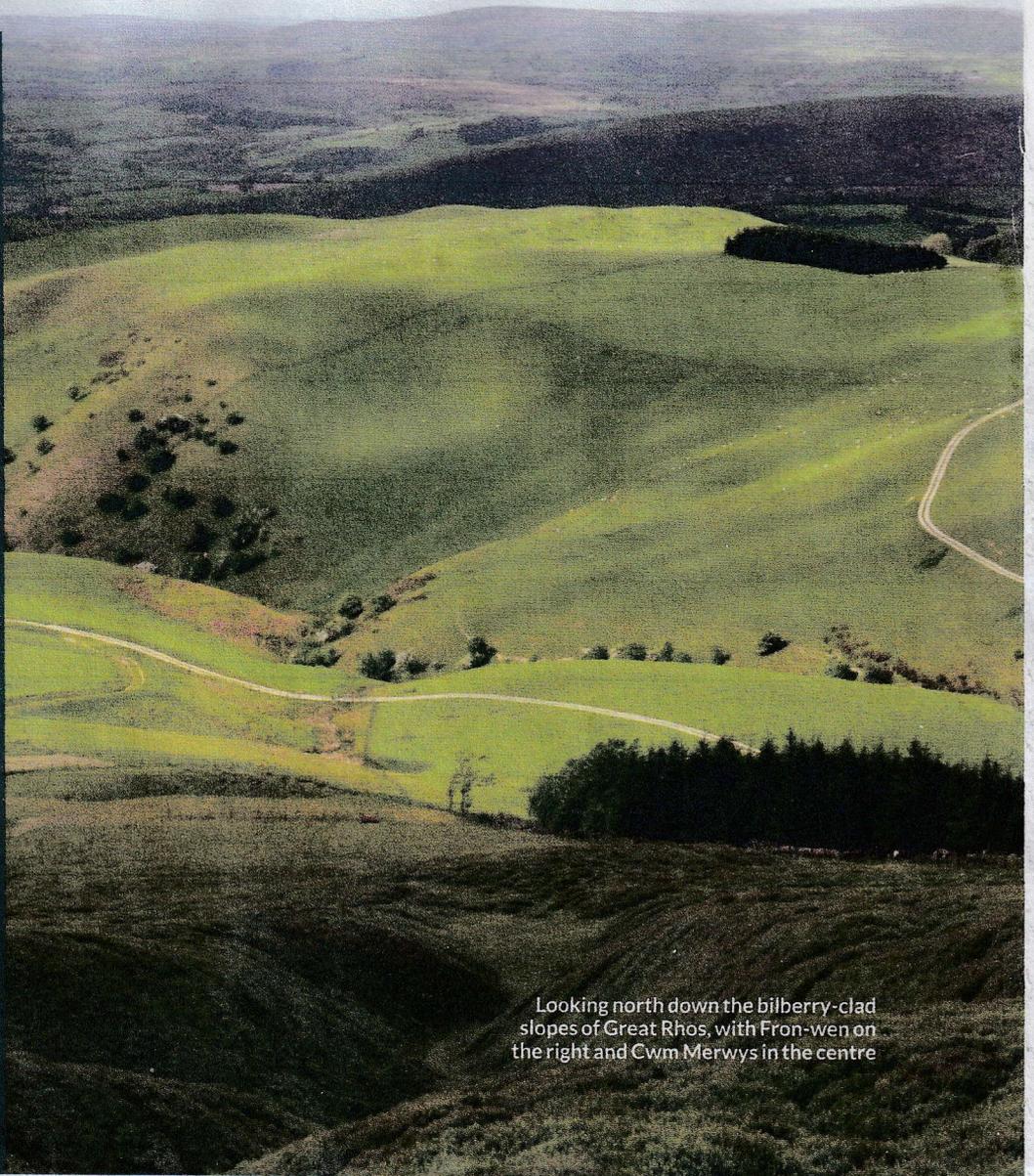
From above Llynheilyn looking to Black Mixen



View north from the moors above Llanfihangel



View into Harley Dingle from Great Rhos



Looking north down the bilberry-clad slopes of Great Rhos, with Fron-wen on the right and Cwm Merwys in the centre

seemed to go on for ever. Thankfully, the convex slopes on the broad col obscured any signs of the firing range.

I had to plough through deep heather and scabble over two or three awkward ravines on the way to Great Rhos. Day-flying oak eggar moths swept over the pathless moorland and the line of minor crags on the far side of Harley Dingle looked particularly impressive. Wispy rowan trees were starting to push their way through a plateau of cotton grass, but if it wasn't for the trig point it would have been impossible to find the top.

I turned west to meet the crest of five bulbous spurs which point to the wild lands beyond Llandrindod Wells. These thumping promontories line up like an angry clenched fist with knobby old knuckles. Each has a name and each is cut from its neighbours by a steep valley: dingle is the local terminology. Take a look at an aerial photo and you'll see how the muscular dome of Radnor Forest thrusts above its surroundings as if to say "I'm in

charge". Nearby tops such as Beacon Hill to the north and Llanbedr Hill to the south must always feel slightly intimidated.

It would take quite a while to up-down-up-down from the thumb of Shepherd's Tump in the north to the little finger of Fron-goch in the south, but at least the steep rough pasture is criss-crossed with a network of grassy tracks. The huge open hillsides were more Scottish Borders than Welsh Marches and much land has been reclaimed from the original moor.

The exception to the rule was Mithil Brook, which tumbles through a steep gorge as it leaves the high ground and is significant enough to appear as a craggy feature on the Landranger map. There are more interesting names here: Llan-Evan Dingle, Cwm Blithus Rocks and, just over a ridge, Davy Morgan's Dingle. No doubt Davy and his mates once strode along the high track between Dolau and New Radnor with their sheep and cattle.

They probably never bothered to climb nearby Nyth-grug – the name might have

been enough to put them off – but may have wandered over the gentle hump of Crinfynydd on the way down to Water-break-its-neck. This means 'withered mountain' in Welsh but is covered in forestry at the moment. Elevated Nyth-grug, however, offered a good view back to Whimble, which from here resembled a perfectly formed giant molehill. Radnorshire dialect has some wonderful phrases – molehills are 'oonty-tumps'.

Water-break-its-neck became a popular visitor attraction in Victorian times and efforts were made to transform the waterfall and its surrounds into fashionable picturesque woodland. It cascades down 60 feet of tiered rock and the dashing Persil-white water makes a striking feature at the rear of a dank moss-lined basin. Sweet chestnuts lined the track out to the A44 and what looked like a well-weathered Welsh longhouse. Its angular corrugated roof was in sharp contrast to pudding-like Mynd, where an isolated plantation could have been a blob of curdled custard. 



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STAGE-BY-STAGE
ROUTE DESCRIPTION**



Hergest Ridge and Colva Hill from Old Radnor

It's hard to imagine the hamlet of Old Radnor could ever make the national news, but back in the 1830s a famous Scottish geologist spent time here as he carefully mapped the borders of England and Wales. Roderick Murchison's work came hot on the heels of William 'Strata' Smith who, 15 years earlier, had painstakingly completed the first groundbreaking map of Britain's geology. Murchison became the first person to describe the Silurian system – named after a powerful Welsh tribe called the Silures – and his investigations revealed 140million-year-old layers and fossils which were unknown at that time.

His research and watercolour drawings showed how geological outcrops had not only shaped the land but also the ways in which we took to the rolling hills of Radnorshire. And, right behind Old Radnor, is one of the best examples of all. Here, on Hergest Ridge, Murchison showed that good old King Offa used the lie of the land, rather than a dyke, to prevent Welsh raids whilst also trying to foster trade. Further south, he sketched the Black Mountains as another natural barrier where the dyke-diggers could again put their spades to rest.

It was my turn for a breather when I reached the top of Hergest Ridge and the strange clump of monkey puzzles. The trees, which can easily resist the nibbles of the semi-wild ponies, were established about 30 years ago and apparently – in a sort of landowner's riposte – another clump was then planted on a nearby hilltop. I've used binoculars more than once but haven't spotted them yet.

Offa's Dyke Path runs across the top of the glorious open rollercoaster. But, remember, there's no dyke and early maps of Wales confirm that the border ran, unencumbered, along Hergest Ridge. There was an airy racecourse up here in the 1830s and there's other geology too: nearby Hanter Hill, which I'd already crossed on the way from Old Radnor, is only a stone's throw into the Principality but this

volcanic outlier is scattered with gabbro and granite from at least 700 million years ago. These are, quite simply, the oldest rocks in Wales.

I walked out to the rocky pimple above Gladestry for a kite's eye view of the hills to come. Colva Hill and Llanfihangel Hill rose in rumbling waves and, to the south-west, Newchurch Hill marked the start of the moors that eventually form the long finger of Llanbedr Hill.

The view from Disgwylfa Hill, as it dropped towards two-church Newchurch and the alder-clad banks of the Arrow, was included in an 'Along the Dyke' slide show that I attended as a teenager. It looked utterly bucolic, and soon afterwards I tried to convince our Scout leader that a weekend away would be necessary.

Beyond the village, a horse rider wove between clumps of gorse and already I felt I had moved further west. Carmarthen Fan now shimmered on the far horizon like a lost world, just out of reach, and I thought of the drovers who used to plod this way en route to the Midlands and further afield. Many of their racks still weave through these hills and they stand out like pale green snakes when the bracken reaches its zenith of gold in mid-October.

I could have been easily seduced by the empty heights above Glascwm but turned north to Cloggau and the miniature ridge of Yr Allt, where an enterprising fruit farm had set up camping pods above the Glasnant valley. These hobbit-houses are sprouting up everywhere, but here they are way off the beaten track. The farm is home to the cross-bred chuckleberry – I'm not joking.

A steep shuffle was needed to get down to the minor junction at Bwlch. It felt like the middle of nowhere but I was now standing on the old turnpike road which linked Gladestry with Builth Wells. This was once an important throughfare which gave safe passage into the dramatic green bowl of Glascwm. I complained, with venom, when the village Youth Hostel closed its doors. Perhaps traditional local tales about the nearby killing of the last wolf in Wales had worried the Health and Safety Executive.

Paths and tracks up Colva Hill were like the pick'n'mix in a sweet shop. I was definitely spoilt for choice: one led up from a church with 8th Century origins; another climbed above Cwm Griffin. The views south were now pure borderland with interlocking spurs, patchwork fields and lots of sheep. Another local characteristic is the shallow mawn pool, a name derived from the Welsh word for peat, and two or

three of these were dotted over the smooth summit. Border terminology calls bodies of water 'pools', slopes are called 'banks' and tops are called 'hills': all English words but usually with Welsh names attached.

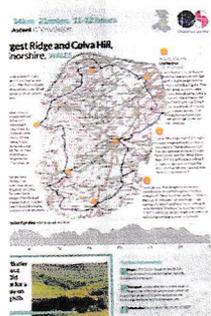
It was hard to tell whether the trig point belonged to Colva or Llanfihangel. These two tops sound like a pair of rugby teams and maybe they could slog it out until we get a winner. In the build-up to the match the players could check recent internet comments on the current state of the pillar: "Deep cracks, surface crazed, two smallish chunks missing"; "Some damage to the top and small lumps out of one side"; "Top screed missing with signs of a previous attempt to repair it". And I thought summit tick-lists were bad enough!

The wide valley to the north appeared to have no way in and no way out. It doesn't have a name either and it's one of those places you really feel you should keep to yourself. A drover's track ran east through damp pastures from a low col at Four Stones, where druids are thought to have once followed a processional route towards Black Mixen. The valley is now the fiefdom of a tiny smallholding and the remote off-grid resident once told me how deep snow had cut off his jeep tracks for weeks on end.

Gilwern Brook squeezes its way east through Cwm-y-bont, but I had one more wedge to go. Pentre Tump was in jolly mood because the long-running application for three giant wind turbines had finally been dismissed at appeal. The inspector stressed the negative visual impact that would have been imposed upon footpath and bridleway users. My final top was The Smatcher. Pasture had been snatched from the original moorland but the excellent 360° panorama allowed me to look back on two long days in ravishing Radnorshire.

There was just a bit more geology. The wide bowl of fields to the east is known as the Walton Basin and a huge lake once developed here at the end of the last Ice Age. Melting ice had gouged the deep valleys across Radnor Forest and the water built up until it burst its banks and poured east through a gap below Herrock Hill. And archaeologists have now found evidence of an astonishing Neolithic culture in the centre of the fertile basin.

These early settlers will have looked up to the hills as they gathered to worship below Whimble. It's a special landscape and the tag-line of the quirky Radnorshire Liberation Front sums it up quite nicely: "Neither in Wales nor England but simply in Radnorshire." 🏔️



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Wales

WALKS



Dramatic sunlight over Hergest Ridge



Ponies are often seen on Hergest Ridge



A small knoll at the western end of Hergest Ridge looks down into Gladestry – England has been left behind and the hills of Radnorshire now beckon!

MORE GREAT DAYS OUT IN RADNORSHIRE

MAKE A WEEKEND OF IT: The two walks described here can be combined into a two-day backpacking route by using lanes and paths between the villages of Old and New Radnor. An alternative would be to continue south from Water-break-its-neck to carry on over Colva Hill to return to, anti-clockwise, over Hergest Ridge.

THE GLASCWM HORSESHOE: A straightforward circuit climbing north out of the deep green valley at Glaschw to sweep over Gwaunceste Hill, via two subsidiary tops – both called Little Hill.

Start/finish: Glaschw, GR: SO158533

RHOS-GOCH AND RED HILL: Follow the fabulous old drover's tracks around and above the Bachawy valley, with just red kites for company.

Start/finish: Rhos-goch, GR: SO186477

LLANDEGLEWY ROCKS: one for a lazy summer's day – take a picnic and enjoy the views towards the great western escarpment of Great Rhos.

Start/finish: Llandegley, GR: SO140629

Accommodation: There are campsites by the two villages and wild camping spots are easy to find in the hills, though water can be difficult in dry weather. For camping pods, with a stunning view, see www.powyspods.co.uk.