

# **DERELICT STONE BUILDINGS OF THE BLACK MOUNTAINS MASSIF**

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Cover image: Pant-y-Llwyfan on the Ffwddog ridge in the Grwyne Fawr valley

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Chris Hodges December 2013



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## Preface

This study is a personal account of a longterm investigation of the extant derelict stone buildings located within the valleys of the Black Mountains' Massif, Fig. P.1; an extensive description of these valleys is given in Chapter 2.

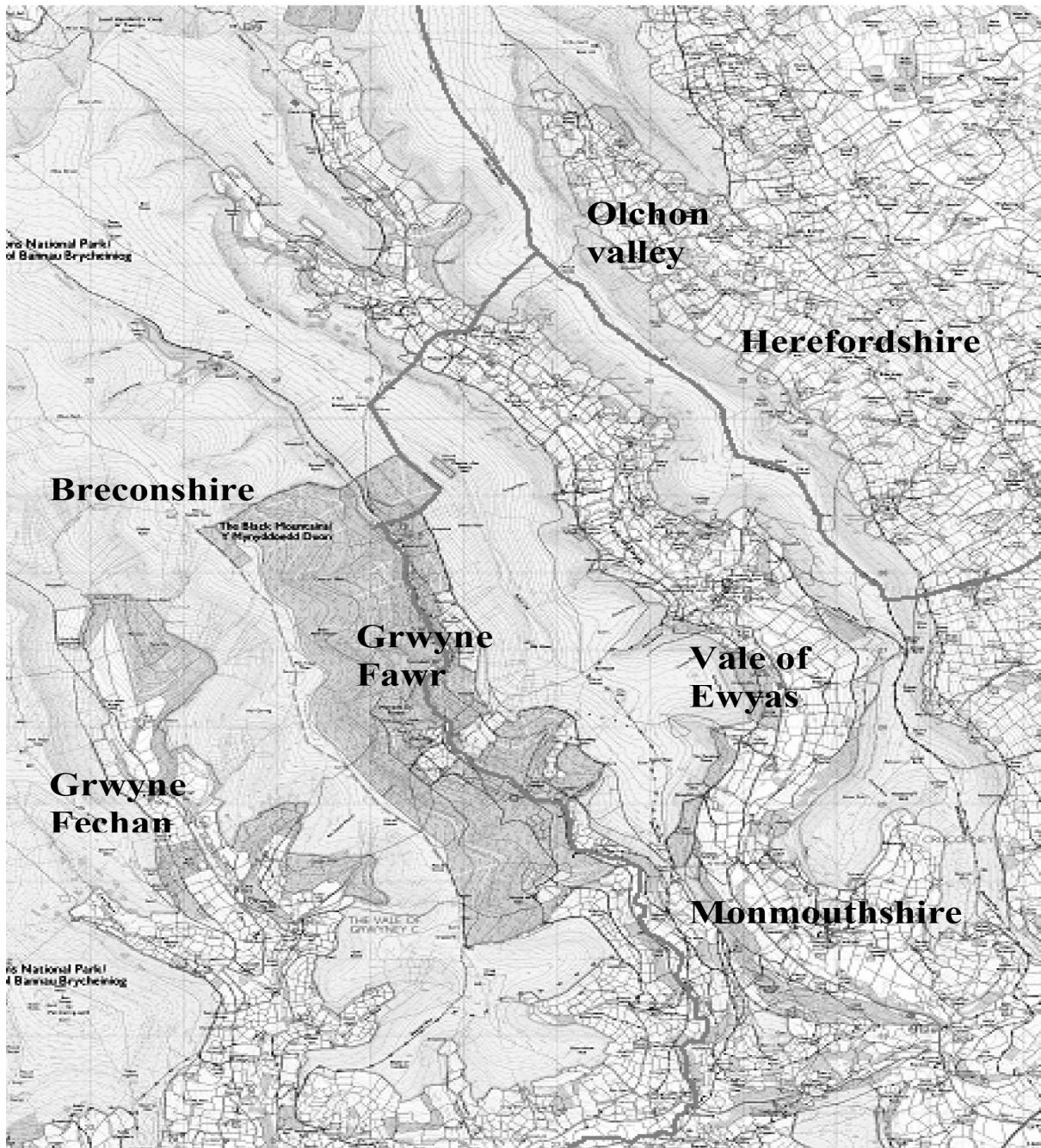


FIG. P.1 THE BLACK MOUNTAINS MASSIF AND ITS VALLEYS BASED ON THE 2005 OS 1:50000 MAP REPRODUCED BY KIND PERMISSION OF THE DIRECTOR GENERAL.

The chosen geographical area had distinguishing features. Being upland with all the implications of altitude, acclivity, climate and access see Chapter 2; the area readily differed topographically from the more extensive, lower and more level surrounding regions. Another distinction from these adjoining areas was that their standing historical housing and vernacular architecture had been extensively studied.

For example, *Monmouthshire Houses* originally published in the 1950's by Fox & Raglan was described by Johnson (2010) as still demonstrating the standard methodology for investigations into vernacular architecture. A wider aspect that became apparent during the fieldwork but indefinable on the ground was a fuzzy boundary between the upland and lowland areas; in the latter, the widespread derelict

buildings of the uplands were absent. In this respect, these buildings might also be described as unknown as they were seldom, if ever, recorded in published regional accounts and studies of the architectural history of the surrounding areas. However there were brief references to three sites included in this study in *Breconshire Houses* published in the 1960s by Jones & Smith; though no longer in existence, one of them has been identified as *Llwyn Celyn*, see Fig. 3.4.

One of the major points made in this study is that some of the recorded buildings were built using the drystone technique. I have working experience in the technique which partially explains the background to this study.

### **Personal background**

I have been actively involved with drystone walling since 1987 and hold the Advanced Certificate from the Dry Stone Walling Association of Great Britain as my professional qualification, see DSWA Accreditation Scheme regulations (2014) in Appendix C.

Having a widespread portfolio which includes working within the Black Mountains using the local stone meant I could offer from the technical aspect, a reasonably informed viewpoint when considering the built structures under investigation. I considered that I was able to appreciate and understand the methods, problems and solutions of the historic builders and admire or criticise the results. My background also suggests that this study has distinctiveness; few writers in the fields of archaeology or history ever actually physically work on a daily basis in the subject(s) they research or write about.

### **Study background**

As part of my craft learning process I read the standard textbooks and manuals on drystone walling, see Griffiths (1999) for bibliography. Apart from gaining technical advice, I also realised there had been little academic investigation into the subject. What existed typically relied on anecdotal evidence and descriptions of traditional techniques based on accepted practices; from an engineering aspect published literature related to experiments based on simulations of retaining walls. Regarding field wall boundaries, the published literature had a distinct regional bias towards walling in northern England; walling in Wales was almost unrecognised.

One example is a general description of drystone walling in mainland Britain which covered South Wales in a single paragraph. Garner (1985:18) was critical of the techniques used and stated that '*The walls could not match the conscious craftsmanship of Scottish walls, the use of stone was more optimistic and instinctive than skilful, the merits of throughstones were often ignored and that the casual use or omission of copestones was a further weakness*'. Brooks and Adcock (1986:14) were equally brief; they covered Wales in two paragraphs, each based on specific regional walling styles outside this study.

Consequently, I sought means to explain this personal conclusion and confirm my somewhat critical view of the published literature. In order to avoid potential accusations of being subjective and derivative, a study required some form of academic supervision. If my ideas and conclusions were subsequently accepted, they would have been based on good research principles, sufficient recorded data as evidence and sound objective reasoning.

### **Choice of study area**

Acknowledging personal time and economic constraints, an appropriate area to base a study project was necessary. South Wales was chosen primarily because it was where I had done most of my professional work and apart from Fry (2009), a geographical area that had largely been ignored in the drystone literature.

The Grwyne Fawr valley in the Black Mountains, see Fig. P.1, was my original choice; I had worked there on several occasions and was aware of extant field boundary patterns and drystone walls. This valley appeared to offer suitable research material. It was both accessible and definable as an area and initial research found that little had been written about this particular valley, reducing any potential repetition.

The proposed research intended to investigate the extant wall types and their extent; then seek reasons apart from function why they were there and possibly offer a date for their construction. By submitting the results of that study to academic discipline and scrutiny, it was hoped that it would not be another simply descriptive text often considered definitive.

Early in my initial research I was fortunate to meet Isabel McGrath who at 94, sadly died in 2011. In the early 1960s she and her husband restored Blaen-y-Cwm, then a semi-derelict house situated in the upper reaches of the Grwyne Fawr valley. Though subsequently being widowed, she continued to live there until the early 1990's when she moved to Abergavenny. For many years her primary but unpublished research interest had been the social history of the Grwyne Fawr and the adjoining Vale of Ewyas, see Fig. P.1.

At the time of our first meeting, I was unaware she had published - *Ancient Ruined Houses in the Ffwdog* McGrath (1982). During that meeting I was shown her extensive photographic collection of derelict buildings in these two valleys, taken in the late 1960s and early 1970's; I have since inherited this collection. Though no longer in existence, *Upper House* Fig. P.2 is one example of the buildings Isabel had photographed.

Isabel had been shown these sites by the late Johnny Morgan who was born at Blaen-y-Cwm in 1904; in 1933 he was employed as a forester when the Forestry Commission started the Mynydd Du coniferous plantations in the Grwyne Fawr valley. I met Johnny once and his



FIG. P.2. UPPER HOUSE IN THE GRWYNE FAWR VALLEY: PHOTOGRAPHED IN THE 1960S BUT SINCE DEMOLISHED.

recollection was of a sympathetic policy towards these historical sites during the initial planting. As a result only a few sites have been subsequently destroyed and are amongst those annotated as NS (not survived) in the database, see Appendix A.

Before meeting Isabel, I was unaware of such buildings and had not read about anything similar in the literature. My initial impression on seeing her photographs was that some buildings appeared to be drystone and offered accessible evidence of the technique used in a completely different situation outside my own craft experience. Accompanied by Isabel as a guide, who was then in her late eighties, further visits to the sites confirmed this initial belief. This present study subsequently evolved from that first meeting and then visiting the buildings *in situ* that Isabel had photographed. However, what also soon became apparent was that some sites had a mortared construction. As a result in this respect the title of this study is non-specific; any potential investigation claiming to be comprehensive to any degree had to acknowledge that fact.

#### **Reasons for the study**

Being unaware of these buildings, they intrigued me as a waller and hill walker who thought he knew the valley. My early thoughts were that they formed part of an extensive historical landscape which was not readily visible. They lay in both open and overgrown areas and enigmatically, quickthorn hedges not drystone walls typically formed the field boundaries.

These buildings offered an opportunity for a research project; an investigation into when, why and how they were built and what part they played in the historical landscapes. In addition they were, in part, tangible evidence of an historical use of the drystone technique to build structures inherently more complex than the familiar field walls. I also considered that site examination could reveal possible insights into this aspect of the craft which was lacking any published detailed analysis.

#### **Derelict versus standing**

Derelict stone buildings which included all derelict stone structures apart from boundary walls in the Grwyne Fawr valley were chosen as the initial subject matter. Dereliction alone suggested age and significantly, they were unlikely to have been altered by modern techniques, enabling close examination of their potentially original masonry. There appeared to be a significant number to record and compare; sites typically exhibited differing ground plans and dimensions. On a practical basis, I would be able to visit them at my convenience and not have to move anything other than occasional branches.

The buildings were indicative of an era when builders in the valley used techniques and materials with which I was familiar, to build structures that formed an important yet apparently unacknowledged part of vernacular architectural history. In addition, many were built on open typically sloping ground and had survived for centuries in a region with a documented chronic history of landslides; the physical background of the study area is discussed in Chapter 2.

### Academic guidance

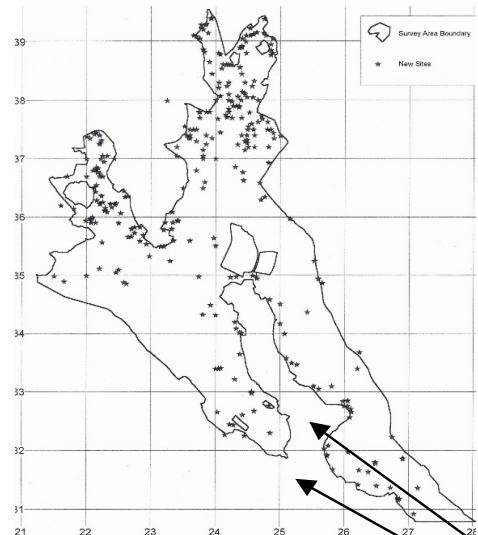
Though I had found a suitable subject to research, I had no experience in how to proceed with such a study and sought advice. Dr Greg Stevenson invited me to the Archaeology Department at Lampeter and at our first meeting an initial protocol was drawn up for me to apply to the university to carry out my research under academic guidelines.

The protocol was accepted and during a subsequent meeting I met Professor David Austin who later became my supervisor. At that meeting he asked me whether there

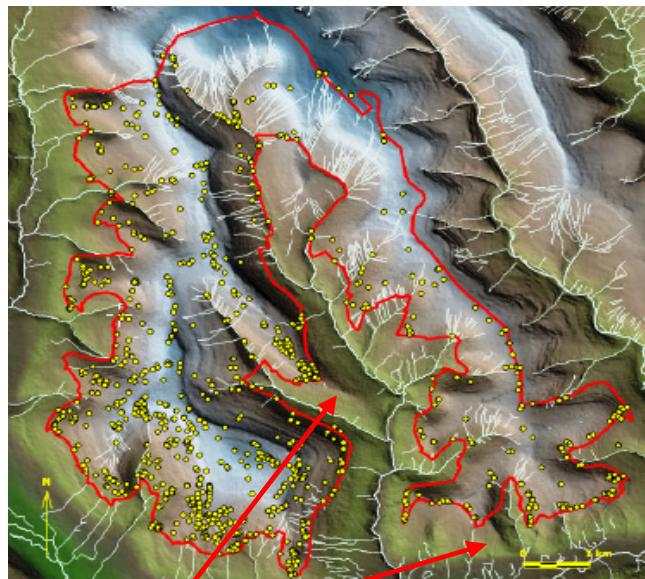
were similar sites in the valleys adjoining the Grwyne Fawr. Though I thought there were likely to be similar sites in the Vale of Ewyas from information Isabel had given me, in reality I did not know the answer to that apparently simple question. He considered it was unlikely that the Grwyne Fawr sites were unique to the area and given their proximity, it was likely that similar sites existed in the adjoining valleys and that I should investigate that possibility.

Following this advice I visited the other valleys within the Black Mountains' Massif and found similar sites in each.

### Details of previous surveys

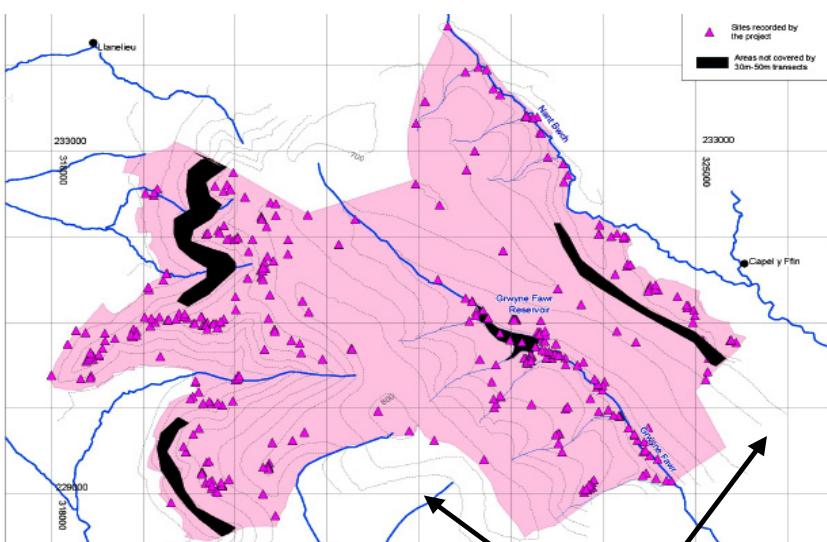


A Jones & Dorling (1997)



Study area

B Vaughan et al (2007)



C Hall & Sambrook

Study area

FIG. P.3 MAPS A, B AND C SHOWING THE AREAS COVERED BY PREVIOUS SURVEYS AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PRESENT STUDY AREA.

This discovery meant that it would be mistaken to come to any conclusion regarding the buildings based on a study of the Grwyne Fawr in isolation. The study needed to be expanded in content and area and become regionally based. Extending the study area and subsequently involving differing topographies, aspects and histories, enabled the collection of a numerically much larger database and any conclusions would be deemed more statistically significant. The resultant study area now comprised all the valleys of the Black Mountains' Massif.

### **Previous surveys**

To avoid repetition, a search was made for previously published surveys involving my study area. As part of the Uplands Initiative project for the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Wales (RCAHMW), archaeological surveys of the Black Mountains had been carried out independently by Jones & Dorling (1997) followed by Vaughan et al (2007) and Hall & Sambrook (2008).

Using *Coflein* the online site database for the National Monuments Record of Wales (NMRW), the published records of these surveys were consulted to establish whether the proposed search area had been surveyed previously. The areas of the Black Mountains covered by these previous surveys and their relation with the area covered in this present study are shown in Fig. P.3.

### **Study area**

Fig. P.3 shows these published surveys covered the open common land adjacent to the north and west of the field patterns in the valleys enclosed by the mountain wall, see Fig. 2.1.10. The area under investigation by the present study largely comprised land adjacent to the mountain wall and the enclosed land in the valleys below. This area had not been surveyed and my work would hopefully complement the published information about the Black Mountains.

### **Survey results**

Jones & Dorling (1997:4) identified 260 previously unrecorded sites which they considered '*clearly demonstrate the value of surveys of this type*'. Hall & Sambrook (2008:6) commented that there was ample evidence of past settlement consisting of longhouses, long huts and platforms as well as more recent farms and cottages.

The published survey records and the Coflein database were consulted again later during the fieldwork to compare their findings with the database compiled for this study. A small number of previously recorded sites lying in the vicinity of the mountain wall have been included in this present survey, see Figs. 6.5.8/9. However, the consensus was that these sites were all post-medieval and formed part of the more recent structures referred to above Hall & Sambrook (2008:6).

Results of the published surveys also indicated that there was widespread evidence of exploitation of the upper regions from prehistoric to modern times which is acknowledged in other similar areas of Wales, RCAHMW (2003). Whilst many of the structures were related to transhumance or post-medieval quarrying, there was very little evidence of medieval buildings. This latter finding correlated with the absence of medieval buildings recorded in this present study.

Potential benefits to researchers of this location type had been identified in a desk-based study of early modern Breconshire:

*'Remote country parishes have the advantage their landscape has been so little altered by the industrial revolution that they can be searched for signs of settlement in the 16th and 17th centuries, even though documentary evidence is not forthcoming'*, Redwood (2001:33).

The survival incidence of the buildings was likely due in part to being considered as valueless in a financial sense but causing no inconvenience to the farming process by incumbent landowners. Evidence will be given that since their original abandonment, some buildings had retained a residual value due to change of use from dwellings to barns and opportunist animal shelters.

The literature review in Chapter 3 found that buildings like these, as well as the drystone technique in building construction, had received scant recognition in the published literature of either vernacular architecture or drystone walling. With regard to the latter, the term drystone masonry was adopted to differentiate it from drystone walling which typically refers to free standing and not structural load-bearing walls.

### **Aims of the Study**

I stated earlier that I wished to avoid being subjective and descriptive by simply compiling a list of sites, then describing them and their whereabouts accompanied by additional personal comments. Though valuable, to be a true study of the buildings such data had to be put into a historical socio-economic context with regard to their construction and very existence. To achieve this, the buildings needed to be investigated from different reference points, each of which originated in separate academic disciplines, most notably archaeology and landscape history but as shown in Chapter 2, physical sciences were also involved.

Using a personally devised site examination protocol discussed in Chapter 4, the search methodology and subsequent results of this study were based on a combination of extensive personal fieldwork and documentary research.