

## Olchon Valley and the Vale of Ewyas - Some toponymic musings

### Introduction

Toponymy is the study of place names and in many instances offers a potential source of information about the history of landscapes and places within them. Though many place names have a topographical basis, they are not descriptions of places but a word or words that identify a particular place. The doyenne of place name studies was Margaret Gelling (1924-2009) whose basic approach was to connect names to geographical features in the landscape. She highlighted the generally complex nature of place names by warning potential researchers that place name study was a mine-field which should be entered with great caution. This article attempts to follow her methodology and advice while looking at some place names in the eastern section of the Black Mountains. Though mentioned in published literature, these names have undergone little analysis regarding their derivations and in some cases, their locations. Reasons for this situation may be their antiquity and the relative lack of contemporary documentary evidence; the latter is especially problematic because of the need to transcribe documents written in Medieval Latin and their custom of seldom offering location indicators of denoted land, other than names of adjoining landowners.

This article discusses several place names in the eastern Black Mountains from a linguistic aspect allied to both contemporary landscapes and agricultural histories within the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, whilst accepting earlier derivations may exist. Geographically, the study area relates to places on the eastern escarpment of Hatterrall Hill and within the Vale of Ewyas, Fig 1.

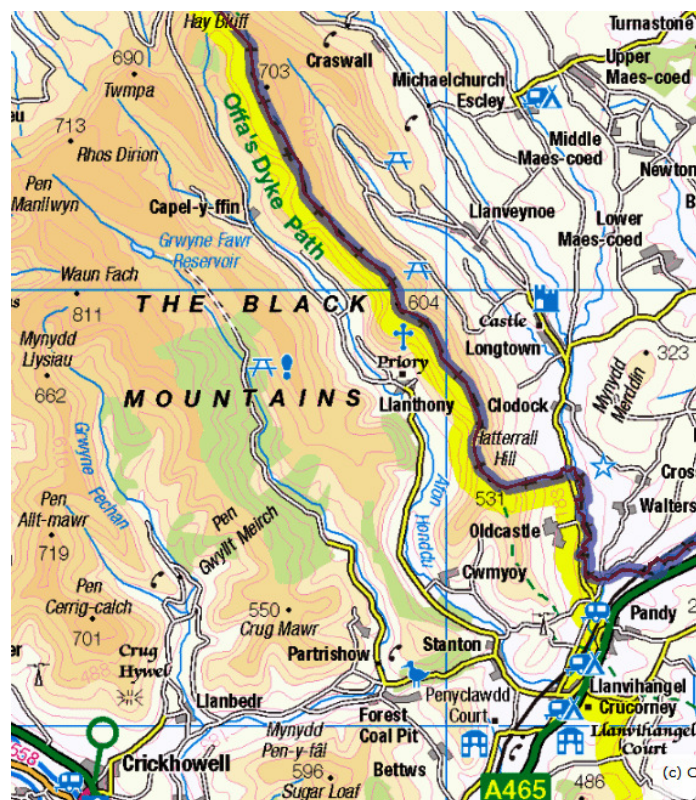


Fig 1

## Place names and the Welsh language

Though the area is now divided by a national boundary between Herefordshire and Monmouthshire, Welsh is the predominant place name language and has a longer history of continual use than English. However, over the centuries it has undergone numerous changes in grammar and spelling; many words that have been lost from everyday speech are now considered as archaic.

Documentary evidence shows the development of the Welsh language can be divided into three main periods. Old Welsh existed from circa 800AD until the early 12<sup>th</sup> century. Middle Welsh emerged in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century and was used until the 15<sup>th</sup> century, after which the language and its orthography was gradually standardised into modern day Welsh. Two important aspects to be understood are that Middle Welsh was the language of nearly all surviving early manuscripts and the language of most of the manuscripts of Welsh law. In addition, the meanings of some potentially recognisable words that often occur as elements of place names and subsequently adopted and recorded, have changed since the names were devised.

Generally alien to non Welsh speakers is the process known as lenition whereby initial letters of words are mutated in order to accord with their linguistic context. For example, the Welsh word for "stone" is *carreg*, but "the stone" is *y garreg* (soft mutation), "my stone" is *fy ngharreg* (nasal mutation) and "her stone" is *ei charreg* (aspirate mutation). Until this is understood, it is futile looking for *ngharreg* under *n* in a Welsh dictionary. Another similar example is the soft mutation for *g* which occurs as the simple deletion of the initial sound. For example, *gardd* "garden" becomes *yr ardd* "the garden". In simple terms, for Welsh speakers the sound of *yr ardd* flows and sounds better than the more phonetically disjointed and now incorrect *y gardd*.

As a non-Welsh speaker and for part of an earlier research project I learnt what I called *map Welsh* with which I was able to pronounce place names. I soon learnt that many names had local versions which differed from those considered to be the orthodox pronunciations. Following advice from natural Welsh speakers about the grammatical relationship of nouns and most of the qualifying adjectives, problems were usually resolvable and with an ever increasing vocabulary, I was able to read and think about place names and their possible derivations without at first sight, using English pronunciations – a system that is used later in this article.

Dictionaries are a great source of information and the Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru (GPC) forms an excellent base; it often gives dates when a word was first recorded, along with the sometimes numerous alternative meanings. The internet allows access to older often obscure dictionaries and text books of Welsh grammar – some of which were scanned in the hope of finding one example of a word or its variants. My thanks go to all those long gone authors for their work which has helped me to interpret place-names.

## Background history of the study area

The place names are discussed in more detail later so only a brief description is given here. The geographical area under investigation is border country and formed a small

section of what from the 11<sup>th</sup> century onwards became known as the March of Wales, with its own well documented history. This was a frontier area which during the following centuries comprised a complex pattern of overlapping boundaries where social and legal customs had English and Welsh derivations and linguistic regions were clearly undefined. It witnessed the meeting of two primary cultures each alien to the other in terms of language, laws and customs. These cultures were the invading and occupying Anglo-Normans speaking a mixture of Norman–French, Latin and Old English coming up against an indigenous Welsh population with its own much older language and culture. History shows that following 1066, the area in question came under the military control of various Norman lords or seigneurs who in turn granted areas of Welsh land to hitherto unknown religious orders originally based in continental Europe; they too subsequently imposed their own doctrines on the resident populations.

### **Olchon Valley**

Lying to the north-west of Longtown, the Olchon is a small cul-de-sac valley forming part of the eastern escarpment of the Black Mountains, Fig 2. Having a U-shaped profile with smooth sides it was likely formed by a cwm glacier during the last Ice Age, circa 12,000 BP.



**Fig 2**

It is bounded on the eastern side by the Cat's Back Ridge (W. Crib Garth where *crib* is a 12<sup>th</sup> century word meaning crest, top, summit or ridge) and the Hatterall Ridge on its western side. Though the Olchon valley now lies in Herefordshire, it is culturally Welsh according to the predominant place-name language.

The name Olchon, along with the eponymous Olchon Brook which rises in the valley and eventually joins the Monnow, is generally thought to derive from *golchi* (W. to wash); in place names the initial g is usually dropped when written. The name may relate to the medieval and later practice of washing sheep when they came down off the mountains, prior to being sheared or sent to market. Not long after the Dissolution, Thomas Tusser in *Five hundred points of Good Husbandry* (1573) wrote –

*Wash sheepe for the better wheare water doth runne*

*And lette him goe cleanly and dry in the sunne*

However, *golchi* has 16<sup>th</sup> century origins but an earlier similar word *ymolchi* suggests personal hygiene and washing clothes. The name may also have been derived from *golchfa*, another 13<sup>th</sup> century term for washing; according to the GPC, the term *golchfa ddefaid* meaning a sheep wash was a late medieval term. Adding the suffix – *on* gives an adjectival sense so whatever the origin, Olchon may simply have been adopted locally as a reference to a place or area where sheep were washed prior to being sheared or sold.

### **Published sources**

This reasoning has not been mentioned in published sources relating to this place name. Poulton-Smith (2012:99) suggested with no references that the Welsh name for the valley was Ylwy and may have come from an earlier word similar to *olc*, an Old Irish word meaning bad or evil. However, dictionaries show that *Olc* is Scots Gaelic whilst the Old Irish equivalent is *olcc*, see MacIennan (1992:251). He also stated, again with no references, that the stream (Olchon Brook) was recorded as Elchon in 1150, Elkon in 1577 and Olcon in 1586.

Ylwy as the name is not grammatical and this suggestion may be a typo. An alternative is *Llwy* which has 14<sup>th</sup> century origins and refers to a spoon shaped depression which might suggest the name of the valley came from a description of its shape. Though probably based on scribal phonetic transcriptions, an even more remote possibility is that the names Elchon and Elkon may be derived from *llechan*; another early term which has a general implication of a hiding or hidden place or just being hidden. In his study of Herefordshire place-names, Coplestone-Crow (2009:15) only mentioned Olchon as being part of the heartland of Ewyas and gave no explanation of the name, similarly Flower-Smith (2013) who referred to the name several times.

The Olchon valley has the typical landscape type of the Black Mountains comprising dispersed farmsteads set amidst networks of hedged irregular fields enclosed within a once continuous drystone wall. This mountain wall probably dates from the late 16<sup>th</sup> or early 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards and separates the enclosed fields below from the higher open common land. The historical geography shows that two monastic orders owned large holdings of land in the area; the Augustinians or Black Monks at Llanthony Priory and the Cistercians or White Monks at Dore Abbey. Both sites were founded in the 12<sup>th</sup> century whilst in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, a much smaller and later order called the Grandmontines, founded Craswall Abbey.

### **Abbey Farm**

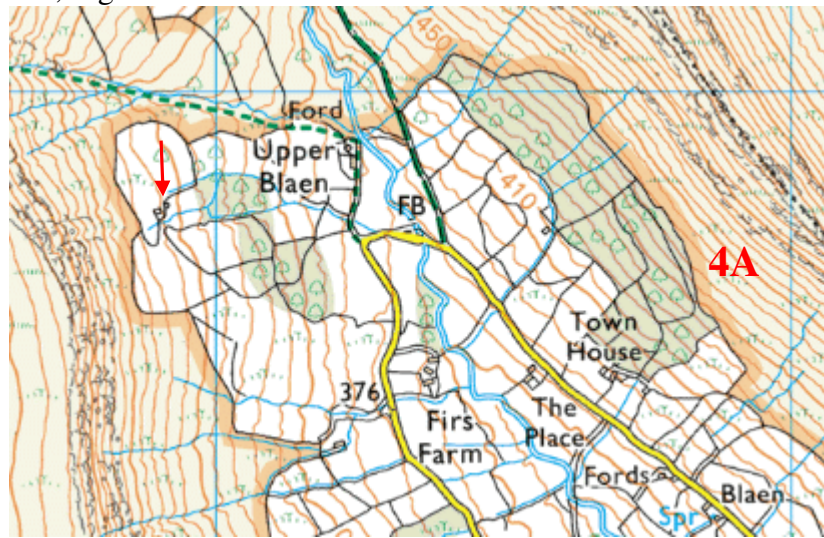
Located within the upper north western enclosed section of the Olchon Valley is Abbey Farm (SO26903379) Fig 3.



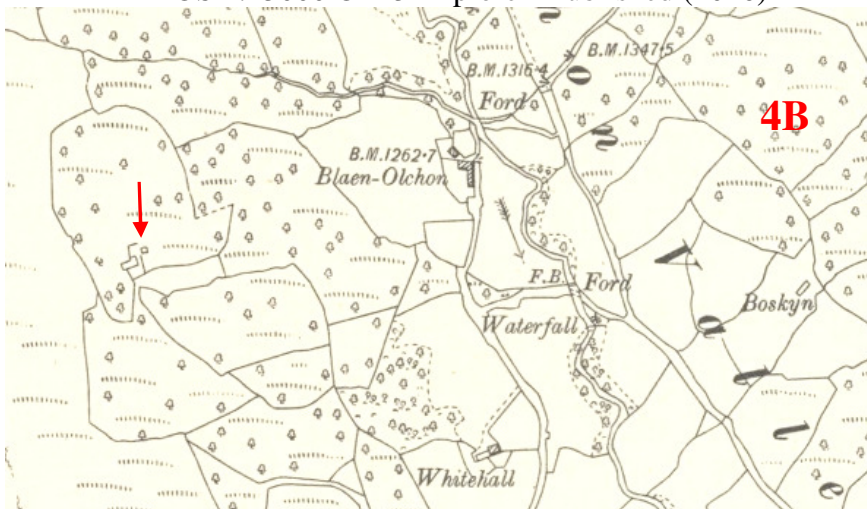


**Fig 3**

Nowadays it is a derelict farmstead and though it appears on some maps it is not always named, Fig 4 A + B.



OS 1:25000 OL13 Explorer -Published (2016)



OS 6 inch to the mile Brecknockshire, XXIV SW - Published (1905)

The usual explanation for the name suggests that the ruins are extant remains of a medieval grange or sheep farm which belonged to Llanthony. However there is no documentary evidence for this claim and the origin of the name has not been extensively researched. This is unsurprising given the proximity of Dore Abbey and the popularity of Llanthony in the neighbouring Vale of Ewyas; both well known sites and in their own right, popular subjects for research and discussion.

If this name and its derivation are correct, for somewhere that was a grange of Llanthony Abbey, it would have been named in a far less secular time than now. Llanthony Abbey was demoted to a priory circa 1136 and subsequently became a retreat house for Llanthony Secunda in Gloucester. As such it was of lower status than the neighbouring Abbey Dore.

Llanthony Abbey had a chequered history and though initially successful, its location and associated climate along with the repercussions of the Black Death and the Glyndwr rebellion, resulted in a steady decline from the 14<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Following the Dissolution, the Abbey and its estate were sold in 1539 to Sir Nicholas Arnold for £150-00. A search through documentary evidence based on 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> manorial surveys showed even then, naming farms was not commonplace in that area. This suggests that Abbey Farm may subsequently simply be a later speculative or even ironic name similar to the derelict Castle Farm above Longtown (SO300297), seen in Fig 5.



**Fig 5**

Another problem with the name arises when comparing the customs and types of Anglo-Norman acquisitions received by the monastic orders. Augustinians were usually given named manors, typically associated with a church as in the case of Llanthony. Cistercians were typically given land deemed remote to comply with their stated doctrines; at the time remote probably implied previously unexploited or land considered difficult to exploit. Their adopted policies included recognisable forms of boundary definition for their holdings and, though always under Cistercian

supervision, suitable land grants that were converted into granges became self sustaining farms worked by *conversi* or labourers. Granges were usually remote from the Mother house but within a day's ride and based on either arable or pastoral agriculture as appropriate for the landform and location.

Doubts about Abbey Farm being a grange of Llanthony are also based on whether the washing element in Olchon arose from tenant farmers washing sheep prior to being sheared or sent to market; a practice more directly associated with Cistercian policy (Abbey Dore) and one reason why their wool was considered to be more valuable. The location of Abbey Farm accords with Cistercian *vaccaria* (monastic cattle or dairy farms) elsewhere. Sited near to the junction of a flood-plain or valley floor with steeply rising valley floors; there is rich pasture nearby and an ample supply of water. Sheep acquire water through grass whilst cattle require several gallons of liquid water every day, especially during lactation. It appears that the prevalent stock changed according to local and national demands. In the early days, Cistercians seldom ate meat but dairy products and oxen as a means of ploughing and threshing were important factors for economic survival. From the late 11<sup>th</sup> century onwards, European demand for wool increased and the proportion of sheep to cattle increased. Eileen Power (1941) wrote that as early as the beginning of the thirteenth century, the famous fine short wools of Tintern Abbey and Abbey Dore on the Welsh border were already in high repute. However the practice of washing wool was seldom if ever adopted by the Augustinians (Llanthony). Raistrick (1953:7) commented that the Augustinians were not great wool producers and up to 80% of their wool was known as *collecta*; small amounts of wool bought by lay brethren and officials from secular producers probably tenants and then sold on as their own.

Austin (2015:28) wrote '*... there is nothing to support David Robinson's unsupported assertion that Llanthony adopted an agricultural practice akin to that of the Cistercians (Robinson 1980, i, 275). Procter (2007) in his archaeological work on the landscapes of this valley also found, in my view, nothing to support this view*'.

The conclusion is that the true derivation of the name Abbey Farm remains unknown, but it appears unlikely that it was ever a grange belonging to Augustinian Llanthony or based along the lines of those owned by the Cistercians.

### **Place names in early charters**

Early Llanthony Abbey/Priory charters do not mention Olchon or any variants by name but Austin (2015:7) cites Davies (1978:176), *Book of Llandaff*, Charter 81, f.85v who described the eastern boundary of the Vale of Ewyas as running ... *upwards as far as the stones opposite to Nant Trineint, along it downwards as far as into the Olchon....* This suggests that the watershed along the Hatterall ridge was already recognised and that Olchon was not a single place but probably a definable feature such as a valley lying above and adjoining the older boundary of Clodock. However, as most medieval boundary descriptions ran in a clockwise direction, the phrase '*... downwards as far as into the Olchon...*' likely infers the Olchon Brook rather than the valley. The GPC notes that in 1188 *nant* meant a stream, brook or rivulet and in 1200 also meant a steep sided valley, gorge or ravine; the former now appears to be the accepted meaning; Nant Trineint would accordingly imply a valley with three streams. Running down through the area and now known as Turnant (*W.tir*



land), three extant streams converge into one which drains into the Olchon Brook at (SO31560-29252). This location fits that shown by Wedell (2008) in her description of the boundaries of Clodock parish.

### **Unidentified places**

The likely predominant pastoral occupation in the aftermath of 1066 was cattle farming. In 1237, monks and conversi were forbidden to trade in either wool or hides. However there were references in contemporary surveys to tanneries and *vaccaries* (cattle rearing granges), grants of pasture and rights of way as evidence of cattle occupying an important part of Cistercian economy, Donkin (1962:31). Sheep farming was also practised but only came to the forefront from the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century; a history that may offer possible clues regarding land identification in this area.

In 12<sup>th</sup> century charters, two areas of land granted to Llanthony are mentioned but their locations have failed to be convincingly identified by historians. Their names along with the alternative spellings are Rethresanc/ Rederessou and Rethwernan/Rumenou. Williams, (32, 35; *Lands of Dissolved Houses*, iii) tentatively identified Rethresanc/Rederessou as Redcastle but his evidence was based solely on Redcastle Cottage. Named in the 1851 census, this site was situated on the lower eastern side of the Cwmyoy valley where the priory had property at the Dissolution but is nowhere near the Olchon. In addition, the same author did not attempt to identify Rethwernan/Rumenou. It appears that the few attempts at identifying the locations of these land grants are based on initial English pronunciations of the names. If beginning with Red as in the colour, the still obscure but nearby manor of Redcastle as yet unidentified, becomes a too easy and convenient option.

In his history of Llwyn Celyn and the surrounding area, Austin (2015:20) cited Carpenter (2013). In this extensive account, Carpenter transcribed sections of 12<sup>th</sup> century charters containing the names of various land areas granted to Llanthony Priory. Firstly dated as circa 1120's, '*... in elemosinam dederunt scilicet Commiou et Rethresanc et Rethwernan et Veterem uillam...*' and secondly circa 1131, '*...inferius in eadem ualle Rumenou, Cunnou, Rederessou et uetus castellum*' as lower down in the same valley *Rumenou*, Cwmyoy, Redcastle and Oldcastle'.

A possible clue emerges in the original wording orders regarding location and may have been overlooked. In the earlier text, Cwmyoy is the uppermost with *Rethresanc*, *Rethwernan* and *Veterem Uillam* below. In the later text, different names are given in a different order with *Rumenou* above Cwmyoy and *Rederessou* below; *Veterem Uillam* has been replaced by *Uetus castellum*. The question arises as to which is the true order. Carpenter described the earlier text as being fabricated but that *it gave a good guide to the early benefactions to Llanthony*. In Austin's account he commented about a confirmation of the charters in 1324 by Henry III, *ibid* (2015:20); this should have been Edward II. According to a version of the charter found in the Toronto University dataset and designated as Charter document 03781748, the order of the 1131 charter is *...Conuon et Rethresanc et Rethwernan et Veterem uillam...*; note yet another different spelling of Conuon (Cwmyoy).

Looking at the term *Further down the valley*, these named areas including Cwmyoy, may suggest that they were already individually distinct and settled by farmers



exploiting at least some of the sparse riparian arable ground, though still perhaps largely pastoral in their economy, Austin (2015:22). If so, then it is reasonable to assume that given the geographical indication of being *lower down in the same valley* in relation to Llanthony, these four place names may have been listed in geographically descending orders. If this is correct and the later text is the more accurate, Rumenou lay somewhere between Llanthony and Cwmyoy; whilst Rederessou and *uetus castellum* may have been located below Cwmyoy but all the areas or places were still within ‘the same valley’.

Latin words often had several meanings; *uetus* or more correctly *vetus castellum* means old village as does *Veterem uillam*. Though *castellum* and *villam* can both be translated as castle or fort, this is misleading and has probably been used as another convenient means of introducing the names Redcastle and Oldcastle. In which case, Redcastle and Oldcastle as translations of Rederessou and *uetus castellum* are misguided; Redcastle has still yet to be formally identified and may relate to a lost structure or manor in or adjoining Bwlch Trewyn. The extant Oldcastle lies on the eastern escarpment of Hatterall Hill, so neither place can be correctly described as being in the ‘same valley’ as stated in the charters.

The suggestion that the prefix Red in Rederessou relates to Redcastle, a sub-manor whose location is still a subject of debate, is not convincing. Red Castle in Latin is *Rubrum Castrum*, a name that does occur in the 13<sup>th</sup> century Taxatio of Pope Nicholas IV (1291); in Old English, red as a colour was *read* whilst *redd* meant to clear a space; in Norman-French the colour was *ruge* with several variants. This alone surely obviates the colour red from these place names. It is possible that ‘Red Castle’ relates to the outward appearance of a long gone sandstone building that once existed in Bwlch Trewyn.

### **Identification of locators**

Within any landscape, locators are definable points or places such as watercourses and valleys. To understand the following explanation, a brief description of the local geography is given here.

The Black Mountains Massif is divided by three river carrying valleys into a series of generally flat topped ridges. In this instance, the element of mountains in the accepted name is a misnomer as there are no readily discernible peaks or summits. Fig 6 shows the lower end of the Vale of Ewyas also known as the Honddu or Llanthony Valley; it is the largest of the three almost parallel valleys within the Black Mountains Massif.



**Fig 6**

*Vale* is an old term used for descriptive purposes to describe a river valley with a flat bottom or floor. One example is the Vale of Ewyas which conveniently starts above an inconspicuous stream called the Nant Ddu (W. Black or dark stream). Despite its size this stream has long been used and recognised as a political and ecclesiastical boundary marker. It rises from a geological anomaly forming a minor watershed in Cwm Coed y Cerrig (SO2970-2125) and runs eastwards for approximately 2km into the Honddu at (SO 3119-2152). This anomaly is also why the Honddu flows eastwards into the Monnow whilst the Grwyne Fawr and Fechan flow westwards towards the Usk. Austin (2015:10) commented that this small stream was recorded in early post-medieval documents as the Nant Ddu ('Black Brook') and in one early medieval text (the Book of Llandaff) as the Nant Fechan (W. Small stream).

His description was of a tiny, almost imperceptible watercourse which formed the southern boundary of the parish and manor of Cwmyoy, the southern boundary of the ancient territory of Ewyas and the medieval lordship of Ewyas Lacy which also became after its foundation, the southern boundary of the lands of Llanthony called Hothneyslade. These lands also included the two sub-manors of Oldcastle and Redcastle described as being **to the east**, *ibid* (2015:11).

The small linear valley known as Cwm Coed y Cerrig is part of a much larger linear and continuous geological feature approximately 16 miles in length known as the Crickhowell-Deveraux Vale (Clarke 1936:157); a feature that may also conveniently have delineated geographically the lower boundary of the Vale of Ewyas which runs obliquely away northwards. Fig 7 shows a view of this valley looking west towards the Llangattock escarpment in the distance.



As Cwmyoy is also approximately 2km away, it might indicate that Rederessou and uetus castellum were in that vicinity; something that has not been considered in the published literature to date.

### **Place name analysis**

Many old Welsh place names have a topographical basis and trying to work out the constituent elements in the hope they contain identifiable indicators of known features, is a way of deciphering these names and identifying their location. If the linguistic context at the time of documentation is considered and the names are broken down into their constituent elements, three of the names contain similar prefixes namely Rethre, Reder and Reth. Medieval and later spelling in Welsh was not standardised and variations were very common as shown by McGraghan's account of Tredunno, see below.

At that time in the eastern Black Mountains, four contemporary and distinct languages and their dialectal variants were likely involved; these were Latin, Norman-French, Old or Middle Gwentian Welsh and possibly Old English. It is unlikely that 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century clerks/scribes who wrote royal charters were fluent in all four. All charters were written in Latin using a contemporary script. Existing names would have been used to identify land or places being recorded; they would have only been known locally and thus initially identified using the indigenous language, which in this area was likely Middle Welsh. This meant that whenever such place names were being recorded, they were spelt phonetically using the Latin alphabet of 23 letters, not the Welsh alphabet with 29 letters; an oft repeated process involving recurring typographical errors and variations according to individual clerks' interpretations.

Using this historical situation to examine Rethre and Reder in the first list of names and Reth in the second list, the first point to consider is that in Welsh grammar, adjectives normally follow the nouns they qualify. Accepting the same syntax in place names would suggest that Rethre, Reder and Reth are all nouns. They are all spelt with a single R which in itself is unusual; searches through several Welsh dictionaries of varying ages show that words beginning with Rh are far more common; two letters like this are known as digraphs, combinations of two letters representing one sound; *dd* and *ll* are very common digraphs in Welsh but unknown in either Latin or English. However, Strachan (1909:10) commented that in the Middle Welsh period, an initial Rh was often written as R, so the mutated and unmutated forms were often indistinguishable.

Now consider the single e following the upper case R; in Welsh, this can either be a long e written as ê or the short and more familiar e. Clerks listening to members of the local population and writing in Latin what they heard, would likely be unaware of this difference. The resulting confusion is whether Re as the first sound of the place names is phonetically ree, ray or more correctly rhee or rhay with the rolled r sound which is still unfamiliar in English; an additional sound would be similar to the re in revolt. Followed by a single d would then give rheed, rhaid, read or red. However, if followed with the digraph dd, would likely be rheeth, rhaith or reth.

An English simulation is that Rederessou pronounced with a medieval Gwentian Welsh accent, may have sounded like raytheressou or reetheressou. In Welsh, dd sounds to English ears like th as in the (definitive article), so rêdder would sound in Welsh like rayther whilst in English it would be pronounced and sound like redder. In addition, the change in Welsh spelling at some time from a double d to a single d was likely part of repeated transcriptive processes. To further complicate matters, the old English letter eth written as ð (capitalised as Ð) was also used as an interchangeable letter with *dd*. This explanation might then be applied to Reth which in Welsh could be *redd* or *rêdd*. According to the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) the correct sound of dd in Welsh is noted as /ð/; the English sound th as in *the*, is only an approximation.

Complex problems like these for clerks and subsequently for non-Welsh speaking researchers centuries later, when trying to understand and then spell or transcribe these probably unknown names into a completely foreign language, would result in repeated phonetic transcriptions; a situation now recognised as having occurred in many instances; some names are now recognised as being tautological, for example the old hendre.

Removing red the colour from the equation, the next stage is to determine from which word (noun) the prefixes are derived. Fitting within the current landscape context, a well recognised and common feature within Welsh place names and dating from the 9<sup>th</sup> century is *rhyd* (W. ford); often wrongly pronounced reed without the rolled r sound. These names indicate what must have been at the time, significant local features on access routes crossing rivers, minor watercourses or even wet ground. However, there is another possibility which may also be contextually related; they may be derived from *hrȳðer* (OE oxen or cattle). According to Coplestone-Crow (1989: 82), the name of Rotherwas, a site with similar antiquity near Hereford, has this derivation. If this speculative interpretation is correct, then land areas with names



beginning with Rethre, Reder and Reth may possibly be Old English/Mercian terms in origin that were transcribed subsequently into medieval Latin.

Continuing in a similar combined topographical and phonetical vein, the prefix Ru may be derived from *rhiw* which sounds similar to the pronunciation of rue in French. Rhiw has 12<sup>th</sup> century origins with a primary meaning of a slope often concave, an ascent or the side of a hill whilst a later and now more commonly quoted meaning is path or track. However, in Welsh there is another possibility; the letter u is pronounced ee; Cymru is pronounced kumree and not kumrou and the prefix Ru may be pronounced ree or more probably rhee and possibly relating back to rhyd.

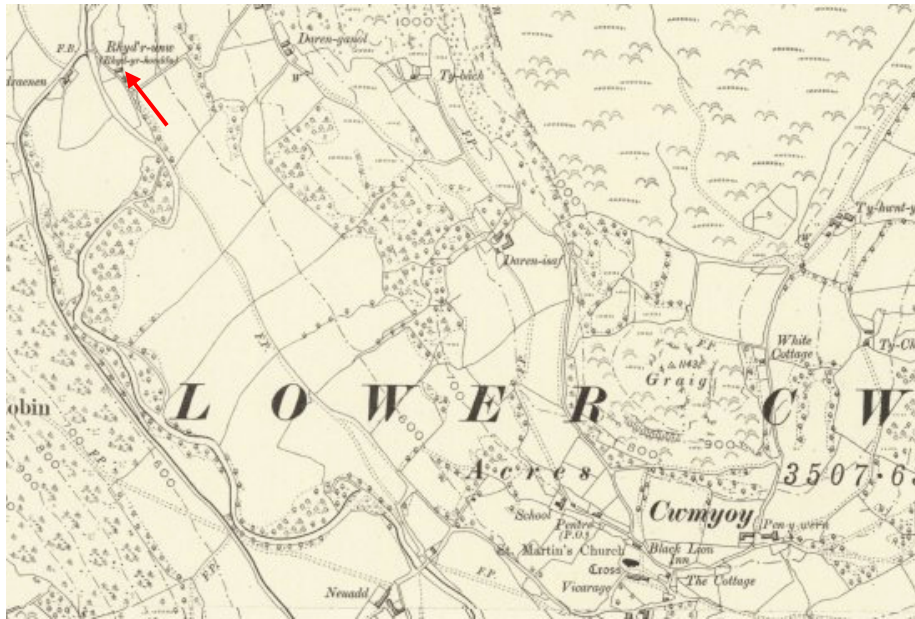
To summarise, red indicating a colour has been dismissed and it is possible that each name has a potential derivation based on one of two nouns often found in Welsh place names, namely *rhyd* (ford) and *rhiw* (slope or path etc). Both words fit readily into the local topography of sloping hillsides intersected by small streams; the latter forming natural boundary markers.

Looking at the suffixes in Rethresanc/Rederessou and Rethwernan/Rumenou, one explanation could be that if these are alternative spellings of the same places; esanc and essou may have similar meanings as would wernan and menou. However, this may be mistaken because of the Welsh system of mutating words according to their syntactical context. Consider the second element of the names; in Rethwernan, the suffix *wernan* may derive from *gwernan* which the GPC defines as a 12<sup>th</sup> century word meaning alder grove or marsh, a swamp, quagmire or damp meadow. This again fits with the topographical nature of Welsh place-names in which initial g's are often dropped and the landscape context of Cwm Coed y Cerrig, where an extensive alder grove still exists.

The derivation of *menou* is more obscure. Russell (2015:8) stated that the ending *-ou* pronounced oi was an old Welsh plural ending which changed in the Middle Welsh period to *-eu* so *menou* became *meneu*. Lewis (1913:226) suggested the word *meneu* or *mynneu* is a plural of *myn* which meant a young goat or kid in archaic Welsh. If this is the case then Rumenou may relate to a hillside or slope where goats grazed. However, *gafr* with 12<sup>th</sup> century origins is the Welsh for goat and there are no recorded place names in this area incorporating that term in any form.

### **Tredunno**

The late Isabel McGraghan, who lived at Blaen-y-Cwm in the Grwyne Fawr for many years, compiled an extensive but unpublished family history of the Vale of Ewyas including Cwmyoy. She recorded the inhabitants of a house called Tredunno located across a ford on the eastern side of the Honddu (SO2900-2424), above Cwmyoy, Fig 8.



**Fig 8**

Her opening comment was that this house had the older name of Rhydenew which she translated as *pebbly ford*. This spelling which may have local dialectal origins, does not sound correct phonetically and it is possible that the name was Rhydyrenw. The confusion is also found on early 20<sup>th</sup> century OS maps; Fig 9 shows the given name as Rhyd'r-unw or Rhyd-yr-honddu.



**Fig 9**

Further evidence for this speculation comes from Isabel's notes sourced from various registers of births and deaths which show a history of different spellings at different dates. These are - Rudynw (1770), Rhydynow (1799), Rhydyrynw (1809), Rhydenow (1814), Rydrunnon (1819), Rydyrunno (1821+1844), Rhydrynw (1822), Rhydyrynnw (1826), Rhydrhw (1828), Rhydrunnwr (1835), Rhydunnw (1841), Rhydyrunno (1841) and Rhydrunw (1854). Consistently occurring throughout this extensive variety of names is the prefix *rhyd* meaning ford. This place name history and its location historically adjoining a ford and later replaced by a bridge over the Honddu and a concave topography, fits the order of place names given in the charters mentioned earlier and so might tentatively be identified with *Rumenou*, if it is derived from *rhyd*.

The same place is shown on a map of medieval Wales drawn up in 1932 by William Rees, a renowned medieval historian whose work has been cited many times. Available on the ELSG website Ref: rs\_ewy\_0343, the map was based on Rees's extensive research into the medieval place-names and known boundaries in Wales at that time. Fig 10 shows the Llanthony Valley in the 14<sup>th</sup> century according to Rees.

**Fig 10**



Following the Afon Honddu upstream from Cwmyoy, a ford is clearly marked. Unfortunately the printed name is not clear but appears to be Rhydwyenna.

I have been unable to find any meaning for –essou other than it is a plural or esanc. Esanc may have a religious derivation. In the 1612 Cwmyoy manorial survey there are references to *Ryw Chapell* and *Rue Ferren* or *Ferrien* ; the latter may refer to a place where Mass was held. E-mails were sent to two Welsh place name specialists asking for help; neither bothered to reply.

The final place names to be examined are *Veterem uillam* or *Uetus castellum*. Using the same methodology as above, each of the constituent words has to be examined in terms of their various meanings. One consideration is that U was often written as V so that uillam may well be villam and Uetus may well be Vetus. Latin dictionaries show the following meanings - *Veterem* means old, *uillam* means town whilst *villam* means farm, *uetus* means The old, *vetus* means old and *castellum* means castle. This information suggest that though both place names include old, this may simply imply existing; the first name relating to a town or more likely a farm whilst the second relates to a castle, fort, stronghold or most likely, a form of shelter.

Taking a closer look at *uetus castellum*, in his account of the relevant charter, Carpenter stated that it was probably a forgery but he had included it because it gave some valuable information on ‘the gifts in the immediate vicinity of the priory’. This could mean that the name *uetus castellum* was fabricated by the compiler or that the

site had developed from a farm into a small settlement, hamlet or village. However, Oldcastle lying on the eastern slope of the Hatterall Ridge is difficult to describe as being 'in the immediate vicinity of the priory' and *uetus castellum* is differentiated by being written with lower case letters, unlike *Veterem uillam*. This grammatical difference from the other acknowledged place names might suggest that these two notations may be only descriptions of a place but not the acknowledged names.

Both these 'names' are Latin based and there appear to be no Welsh connection. For reasons given earlier and that there has never been a castle in the Vale of Ewyas, I do not think they refer to either Oldcastle or Redcastle and now suggest that they could refer to the hamlet of Stanton, located on the eastern side of the entrance into the valley (Fig 4). Geographically, Stanton lies at an intersection of two valleys, each of which offered routes through the Black Mountains for travellers and herdsmen moving stock. In his study, Beeston (1988:16) suggested fairly convincingly that in 1188, Archbishop Baldwin and Gerald of Wales travelled from Brecon down the Usk valley and then turned at Glangrwyney into the valley which continues into Cwm Coed y Cerrig; they did not visit Llanthony. If this is the case, Stanton may have been a known resting place and watering hole for travellers. The nearby hamlet of Bettws has a similar meaning.

The name Stanton has Old English derivations and across England there are several other hamlets with the same name. The elements are *stān* meaning stone or rock and *tūn* meaning an enclosure, a farmstead a village or an estate.

In summary, this article has attempted an analysis of various place names, some locations in the Olchon valley were known whilst others in the Vale of Ewyas that were possibly older were unknown. Though elements of doubt exist, some interpretations have been offered and how they arose been described but they likely remain simply interpretations; the extant problems awaiting future researchers have been highlighted. The Olchon Valley is an enigmatic and hidden corner of Herefordshire. Though research suggests that this small remote area has been continually inhabited since Neolithic times and even contributed to the evolution of a branch of Christianity, it still holds secrets which at some time may hopefully be unravelled. However it may also simply remain part of a beautiful and unspoilt area visited by a lucky few.

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Chris Hodges March 2022