

To the north of the River Usk between Crickhowell and Bwlch.

- with some speculations on the River Usk as a waterway.

Introduction.

I have discussed some of the roads north of the River Usk in Chapter 7 of Volume 4, "Roads centred on Pen rhiw-calc" (Ref.1). In the present paper my aim is much more localised and was brought about by some work carried out by Roger Burchell and myself as the result of interest being shown in it by Prof. Geoffrey Williams on references he found concerning a "Spiteful Inn" which he believes to have been associated with a fording place across the Usk. That work is still continuing as this is being written and will be reported separately.

When I started this paper the old roads were my main concern but, as I delved deeper into the history of the area the focus widened. I had already started researching the Silures and how they occupied the land including the many hill-forts to be found all over the area, and how they interacted with the Romans. I have also used this paper to explore a long-held belief that the River Usk might have been used as a waterway noting that, apart from the stretch between Pen Myarth and Buckland, the river presents an easy route for suitable craft. If such had been the case then any overland haulage stretch would have needed some protection and Pen-y-gaer seems to be ideally situated. Whether, as is the case of many ancient routes across the land so freely dubbed "Roman Roads", such waterways were used before Roman times is unknown but the seemingly continual hostilities of one Celtic tribe or sub-tribal groups with each other might have made such long-distance routes unfeasible. As it is put by Simon James in his "Exploring the world of the Celts" (Ref. 2):

"Tribes and States.

Recent research particularly regarding central and northern Gaul, suggest that the Celtic societies of the middle and later Iron Age generally consisted of small, territorially-based sub-tribes known to the Romans as pagi. These were essentially kin-groups - extended families and clans - with attached followers and dependents such as slaves and clients. The pagi came together into the large tribal units recorded by Ceasar. Multi-tribal confederations proved distinctly unstable, constantly splitting and coalescing according to political fortune."

At this point I realised that I had become diffident about using the term "Celt" after so much revisionist literature in recent years but, in the end, I decided that Cunliffe had already visited this territory in his book "The Ancient CELTS" (Ref.3):

"There are currently two extreme perceptions of the Celts: The new Celtomania, which provides a vision of a European past to comfort us at a time when ethnic divisions are becoming a painful and disturbing reality, and a politically correct view, which argues that the term is so abused as to be useless except to those who wish to increase the sales of their books. Both views contain some threads of value but in their extremity they are sterile. There were, in Europe and beyond, people who were known as Celts, whose movements and behaviour are reflected in contemporary sources. They spoke a language which spread over a huge area, versions of which are still spoken and taught today in the western fringes of their former territory."

This is a position I feel very comfortable with. As the Celts were not a literate people, relying mainly on the spoken word and memory, we only have two sources of information about them i.e. the Roman historians and the accounts written down by the early ecclesiastical scholars in Wales, and particularly, in Ireland. While undoubtedly influenced to some extent by their Christian beliefs they provide a clear and vivid insight into western Celtic society.

The earlier part of this paper is less speculative and in it I have attempted to understand the area north of Myarth between the time that the Romans would have encountered it as they advanced up the Usk valley and the beginning of the nineteenth century.

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Narrative.

I will start this paper with the Ogilby coach road map of 1645, a section of which is shown in Fig. 1., because it allows quite accurate positioning of the roads and other features discussed. As I have previously found this map (Ref. 4) marked with miles, furlongs and an indication of the destinations of side roads leading off, has proved to be very revealing.

Running west from Crickhowell the first point of interest is the junction leading to Tretower to the north, indicated with the letter "M" with, on the opposite side, a short length of road leading to the river. This is the ford associated with route ("C") which led through what subsequently became the Glan Usk estate to continue up the mountain to the south (see Figs. 2, 3, and 4). This ford is discussed in more detail, together with other fords across the Usk in a paper being prepared to discuss these in the context of the search for the "Spiteful Inn". Clearly, the route north from Junction "M" has become the present-day A479(T). The "Brooke" is the Rhiangol.

This cross-roads, together with the others at "F" and "I", are clearly to be seen on Fig. 2, which has been taken from the first published Ordnance Survey map of 1832 and Fig. 3, which is a similar section of the Ordnance Survey Surveyors drawings of 1817. In both Fig. 2 and Fig. 3 the southerly branch from junction "F" runs around the southern side of Myarth (lined in orange). However it is important to note that between these early O/S maps and the modern one (Fig. 4, 2002 O/S) that there are changes to the routes taken around Myarth by both those from junction "E" and junction "F".

The present motor road from junction "E" is the same as on the earlier maps as far as "Orchard Cottage (approx. SO 1745 2000) but then descended following the route lined in red and designated "E". this diversion re-joined the present day road at approx SO 1646 2030. The route from junction "F" follows a high-level route lined in red and designated as "F". This road also joined the present day road at approx SO 1646 2030. It can be seen that the low-level road ("E") follows a route very proximate to the river and the ford crossings at "Y" and Cyfreddin and this would seem to be its primary function.

The track shown running from junction "E" on Figs. 2 and 3 (lined in yellow) is not shown on the Ogilby map but this is not surprising as its purpose clearly was to connect to the Usk fords and might have been flooded at certain times. Today (Fig. 4. 2002 1:25,000 O/S) it is disused and enclosed by Glan Usk Park but the southern branch of "F" is still in use as a minor tarmaced road leading to, and continuing past, Gliffaes however the junction itself has been changed considerably with the road around Myarth now meeting the A40(T) approx. 300m. to the east - changes which are made clear by Google Earth. Today this road emerges onto the road leading from Llangynidr bridge to Bwlch (B4560) but Fig. 2 (1832) shows a spur running down from Llwyn-y-fedw to a position closer to the bridge - today this has become a footpath (Fig. 4) but at the time of the Ogilby map this route provided a direct route to Llangynidr as indicated on the map as "To Llangonyder". It is also significant

that a more western section of the 1832 map shows this route as continuing beyond the present Bwlch road (B4560) to a possible earlier crossing of the Usk as I discussed in Tracks, Volume 4, "Roads Centred on Pen rhiw-calc" (Ref. 1).

The road off to the north "To Kethden" and that immediately preceding it pass the Roman fort of Pen-y-gaer and continue to meet the present A479(T) at Cwmdu. Whether "Kethden" is some corrupt form of Cwmdu is speculation but no other explanation presents itself.

The coach road presented a dating problem as the first Turnpike Act in Breconshire was in 1663 but it seems that the first record of roads was in 1767 - however these records are lost. The first records available are from 1787 but, although it mentions some roads, including the Crickhowell to Blaen Onnau section, I cannot find anything relating to the stretch from Crickhowell to Bwlch.

Fortunately, as I was searching for something to throw some light on this problem I found, on the internet, a copy of one of the Beaufort Estate Tretower maps dated 1587 (Fig. 5). I have matched this image with a similar section of the First edition O/S (Fig. 6) and the road past Myarth is clearly shown. To be certain of this I printed a carefully scaled transparency of the O/S map and overlaid it on the estate map and showed that the correspondence was without doubt. This shows that the road we drive on today, the A40(T), follows closely a route which was in use in 1587.

It is also of interest that if one compares the 1832 O/S (1828, Fig. 2) with the Surveyors map (1817, Fig. 3) the two roads around the south of Myarth make sense. The route from junction "F" from Tretower via Heol Draw, takes the high level road (lined in orange) i.e. the one used by modern traffic. So that from junction "F" we have the southern branch around Myarth labelled as "to Llangonyder" and the northern one "To Castle Dinas". The low level road (lined in yellow) is not considered on the Ogilby Map as it was not a through road but one linking to the three fords (Cyfreddyn, that serving "C" and that serving "D") across the Usk from the mountains to the south.

This brings us to the Rees map of Wales in the 14th. Century (Fig. 7. Ref. 5). On this map he does not show the present road along the north side of Myarth which, at face value, would seem to indicate that it was not built at this date. The other unexpected feature is that he shows the Julia Strata arriving at Tretower from the west but his road continues to Crickhowell and the east by using the present A479(T) road to Nantyffin (not named but a parish church is indicated on the map at the expected spot), as did the Beaufort Estate map. He does not show the accepted Roman road east via Cwm Gu yet this road is still driveable today. His chosen route has been lined with orange dots as his treatment of roads on his otherwise valuable map is not as clear as might be desired.

The problem with the Rees map is, as Roger Burchell pointed out, if a feature is shown it is very likely to be there but if not shown this might simply be the

result of being unknown to him, and I have found this to be true as my researches into old roads have uncovered many such. It is very regrettable that Professor Rees's papers were lost when he died.

The modern A479(T) north from Nant-y-fin follows the alignment of the turnpike road constructed in 1830 under the Act of 1830. It started at Nant-y-fin (SO 189 199) and run over Pengefford to the west of Castell Dinas . The "A History of Brecknock" (Ref.9) gives the account - "... *under the Act, a new road was made through the Cwmdu valley, from Nant y fin, the boundary of the Crickhowell parish, to Talgarth. A sum, amounting to £8,600, was advanced , chiefly by Mr. Hotchkis, for the formation of this roadUnder the 1842 Act the road was purchased by the County and the turnpike gates removed.*" The antiquity of the earlier road cannot be given with certainty but it is shown on the map of south/east Wales in the 14th. Century by Professor William Rees (Ref.5) As this road connects the river Usk and the river Wye by one of the few means of passage through the Black Mountains and from the position of Castel Dinas at its highest point it seems probable that it is of great age. I discuss Castel Dinas in Tracks, Volume 4, "Roads centred on Pen Rhiw-calch." in Chapter 7 but it has a history going back to pre-historic times. The old road can be seen running up the Cwm Ddu valley roughly parallel and to the east of the present main road (based on the turnpike) and, after crossing the pass near Castel Dinas, continuing in a remarkably straight line to Talgarth.

What do others say about the Roman Road from Crickhowell to Bwlch?

V. E. Nash-Williams. - in his "The Roman Frontier in Wales" (Ref.6).

The section of Roman road eastwards from Bwlch, delineated as such by the O/S (1947 1" and 2002 2:25,000) is accepted by Nash-Williams but he makes no comment on the section between Pen y Gaer and Crickhowell. He suggests that Pen-y-gaer was abandoned in A.D. 140 due to the demands in the north of Britain. He make only some general mention of roads.

I. D. Margary. - is much more explicit.

p.133 (I. D. Margary, "Roman Roads in Britain" (Ref.7).

"About a mile before Crickhowell the old course appears to follow a side road which climbs higher up the hill to Cwmgo before turning to a more westerly alignment that is well marked by an existing road through Tretower, where the castle ruins stand close beside it , and then by hedgerows towards Gaer, where it is lost for 1/4 mile. Then other lanes and tracks carry it to Bwlch."

William Rees.

"An Historical Atlas of Wales from Early to Modern Times." (Ref. 8).

His map (Plate 14 of that Volume) shows a section of the road (some parts dotted) from Abergavenny to Y Gaer at Brecon but no useful detail although it

does appear to take the present A479(T) from Nantyffin and neither the present A40 route immediately to the north of Myarth nor the believed original Julia Strata via Cwm Gu.

Theophilus Jones.

"A History of the County of Brecknock". 1909 (Ref. 9.)). His map of "The Ancient provinces of Demetia and Siluria or Dyfed and Syllwg - with the courses of the Roman roads thro' these Countries.", shows "Y Gaer in Cwmdu" but no useable detail on roads.

RCAHMW. "Brecknock - Hill-forts and Roman Remains," (Ref.10.) "(RR3). Roads. Abergavenny to Brecon Gaer". p.167. says:

"The existence of a road between Gobannium and Brecon Gaer is undoubted but very little positive evidence of its exact course is extant."

They mention and seem to favour the route suggested by Margary. They continue:

"In 1803 Thomas Payne recorded a length of causeway, destroyed by a local farmer, which ran from the vicinity of Lower Gaer Farm (171 218) to a point very close to the S. W. corner of Pen-y-Gaer Roman fort (RF3) and continued west for some distance. The juxtaposition of this evidently old causeway and the Roman fort suggests prima facie that it was the line broken up by the farmer, but unfortunately there are no surface indications at present of the present course. There is no visible structural evidence of a Roman road or of any possible alignments between Tretower and Pen-y-Gaer but the narrow sunken lane between 1746 2179 and 1716 2188 immediately N. of Lower Gaer Farm possibly continues the alignment recorded by Payne."

This position by the Royal Commission is clearly shown on Fig. 4 which is taken from a 2002 1:25,000 O/S map and a view of the same area as the map is shown as Fig. 8, taken with Google Earth. These maps will be referred to again as the discussion develops.

A good summary of our knowledge regarding the Roman fort at Pen-y-gaer can be found under "RF 3" in the Royal Commissions book (Ref. 8). Their description relies heavily on the 1966 excavation by D. W. Crosley (Ref. 11.). They show a very poor site plan and, having read H. T. Payne's account of the devastation wrought in past times, there would seem to be a good reason for this . It is just as well that he took such pains to record what he clearly.

H. T. Payne. "Parochial Notices" 1806 Vols. 1 and 2.

In Volume 1 of his journals (Ref. 12.) H. T. Payne includes a sketch map of the Deanery of the Third Part of Brecknock but this has little detail although it does seem to show the road from Crickhowell to Bwlch passing well south of both Tretower and Pen Y Gaer i.e. similar to the present main road. He

records (Vol. 2. P.17 on) that the Roman camp was still traceable and that fragments of brick, pottery and cement have been found. He describes Pen-y-gaer and lists various finds (page 25. Volume 2) and also gives a map of the site. In particular he mentions that the local farmer recalls that *"In the time of his father he recollected the foundations of some thick walls, which were taken up, and the material employed for building"*. He also mentioned other finds such as an inscribed tablet, bricks marked with letters and numbers and coins. He continued that, in seeking for treasure, they found large worked stone slabs with concrete of such hardness, *"as to resist for a considerable time, the strike of an iron bar"* - also an urn with bones and ashes.

Of significance to the road he remarks - *"The roads marked "H" (on his map) are not visible - but the lines were pointed out to me by a respectable farmer, who about 25 years ago (this would have been about 1780), had himself assisted in breaking up that part of it which lies to the east of the camp, and perfectly remembers his neighbour, who is now deceased, similarly employed on the other side - he describes it to have been a causeway of considerable breadth and solidity being formed of pebbles deeply embedded in gravel and so hard, that it was with great difficulty separated with an iron bar and pickaxe"*

I have reproduced his map of the fort (Fig. 9. from Volume 2 of his Notebooks) because it is clearly of great importance and helps to make sense of other reports such as that of the Royal Commission and because it records features now lost forever. Essentially the same map (undated) is also to be found in "A History of Brecknock" as Plate XIII (Ref. 9) attributed to a drawing by D. Davies.

Comparing Payne's plan with other maps I have used it is possible to see that the line of causeway broken up by the farmer, as he describes, would seem to be a direct continuation of the Roman Road as indicated on the O/S map (Fig. 4) running east from Bwlch as far as the "ford" and its continuation via the section of "other routes with public access" - as designated by the Ordnance Survey - and the footpath shown leading directly to Tretower. Before moving on it is worth mentioning an oddity - the Tretower Estate map (Fig. 5) and all others since, up to the present day, show a road running North East from Tretower via Penylan. The oddity is that the 25 inch to the mile map of 1904 labels this road as the "Heol Saeson" - the Saxon Road. As it is a linear continuation of the high-level road running around Myarth and crossing the turnpike (and A40(T)) at the cross-roads labelled "F" on Figs 1, 2, 3 and 4) and continuing to Tretower through Heol Draw (Yonder or away) this seems to be significant. I shall return to this when I discuss Myarth.

There is more of interest in H.T. Payne's journals but it is clear that very concentrated efforts were made to destroy the roads and the fort itself, either to extract useful stone or ballast, to clear ground for the plough or to seek treasure. This being so it is understandable that so little of either remains today.

The believed route of the Roman road, endorsed by Margary, from Crickhowell via Cwm-gu ("n") and Tretower, can be seen on Fig. 4 (1:25,000 O/S 2002) and the topography can be seen of Fig. 10, which is a Google Earth image of a similar area to Fig. 4 and, if it is true, then it would imply that the route alongside the north of the Myarth was not present although it does seem that this was the route, followed later by Ogilby, the turnpike and the present day main road (A 40(T)) and is also shown on the Tretower Estate map of 1587 (Fig. 5). The present day road to Talgarth (A479(T), past Tretower is also shown on the Ogilby map (Fig. 1) where it is captioned "Castle Dynas" and the Tretower Estate map (Fig.5) and it is not difficult to understand the logic of this road for the continuation, either up the Cwmdu valley to Talgarth or, via Pen-y-gaer to Bwlch and beyond. What is difficult to understand is the Cwm-gu route as it entails a climb of from 80m. above mean sea level to some 195m. and then descending again to Tretower. Logic would suggest that, in Roman times, there was an unknown factor in their decision unknown to us - could this have been the hill-fort of Myarth?

Henry Thomas Payne, writing about Myarth, waxed lyrical about the scenery he saw as he climbed and urged his readers to- *"....direct his footsteps to the summit. Having reached that Eminence, he will readily perceive the outworks of the old British Fortress, of considerable extent - from where...."*. He then discusses the view (Vol. 2 p.203). This hill-fort was shown on the First Edition O/S map and can be seen in Fig. 2 where it is portrayed as being very large. It was continued to be portrayed up until the 1947 O/S map but not subsequently. What has happened to it?

I can do no better than to quote from the R.C.A.H.M.W - "Hill-forts and Roman Remains" (Ref. 10) where it is listed as HF 41 Myarth. They describe how, in 1947 Dr. H. N Savory found traces of *"a partly bivallate system of dry-stone ramparts"*. He continued to describe an entrance at SO 1741 2061 on the E.S.E. side and observed - *"...On the eastern side of the hilltop traces of a partially bi-vallate system of drystone ramparts which appear to end at the precipitous face on the S. but possibly continue around the N. side."*. However visits between 1973 and 1982 by the Ordnance Survey and the Royal Commission failed to find *"any unequivocal trace of ancient construction."* They continue that the area was heavily afforested and had many quarries and spoil dumps but they sum up with *"Despite the complete absence of positive traces of a defensive work at the present day, the evidence of the early O/S surveyors and Dr. Savory's observation seems to point to the former existence of a hill-fort on Myarth which would have been the largest in the county"*

They give the dimensions of the central enclosure as 354 m. W.N.W. by 210 m. E.S.E. - which is a considerable area but they continue that the surveys carried out between 1948 and 1973 suggest *"A defensive circuit based on this line (just under the 900 ft. contour) would entail a fort of about 630 m. long by 260 m. wide which is larger than the enclosure indicated by the 1" O.S. map, but better adapted to the local topography."*

This is an astonishing size and would seem to indicate an area of approx. 14 hectares or 35 acres. To put the size into perspective the great Garn Goch hill-fort at SN 691 243 with an elongated oval shape of some approx. 700 by 200 metres has an area of 10 hectares (Wales - An Archaeological Guide. Christopher Houlder (Ref. 13.), Pen-y-Crug at SO 0293 3037 is described by the RC as HF 33 is only 1.86 hectares , Slwch Tump (SO0562 2840 (HF 30) is of 3.8 ha. and Hillis (HF 55, SO 1140 3273) is 3.6 ha.

As Myarth is so large and seemingly had strong defences (of course, any timber work is long gone) and it clearly held a commanding position over the proximate stretch of the Usk and of traffic east and west north of the river and up and down the valley of Cwmdu. Its size suggests that it might have been the centre for a large population either for living in and/or as a refuge for the people and their livestock and it is a pity that it seems that it is no longer of any value for modern archaeological research. Certainly at the time when the Romans were advancing up the Usk valley it must have proved to be a major challenge which would have to have been subdued.

We can get an interesting insight on this, again thanks to Henry Thomas Payne who, in Volume 2 of his journals (p.218.):

"With respect to the Gaer, which is the subject of our present notice, I conceive it to have been one of those subordinate stations which the Romans found necessary to plant in different parts of the Country of the Silures, to repress the ardour of these brave people whom indeed had cost them so much blood and treasure to subdue and that it was garrisoned by a detachment from the grand Silurian Metropolis of Caerleon, where the Second Legion of Augustus was for a time stationed - and this conjecture may perhaps receive some weight from a tradition which even within my own memory was current among the Natives, that a great battle was fought near this spot, between their early Ancestors, and some invading Enemy, which was attended with such carnage, that the channel of a neighbouring brook was choaked with dead bodies - To the present day they indulge in a credulous belief, that the Ebulam or Dwarf Elder, which grows abundantly in the place, was then first produced from the blood of the slain - They call it Llysiau-Gwaed -y-Gwyr, the Plants of the Blood of Men.

Could this be why the Romans originally took the circuitous and steep route east from Crickhowell via Cwm-gu? This would have been abandoned when the route through Tretower via Nantyffin - used by the present A479(T) became possible. Whether the route taken by the present trunk road (A40(T)) existed in these early days is unknown but once the route via Nantyffin became possible and became the route on which the fort of Pen- y-Gaer had been built it might not have been considered very valuable,

This brings us back to Pen-y-Gaer which not only protected the area from any adventure from un-subdued Silures to the south but provided a marching camp between Abergavenny and Brecon. It may also have had another purpose which I will discuss presently.

To get some perspective on possible dates for the Roman advance up the Usk and how this might have come into conflict with the Silures in general and those on Myarth in particular we can only look at what dates we can find. It is unlikely that any significant advances up the Usk valley could have started before the establishment of the Legionary Fortress at Caerleon. Manning in his "A Pocket Guide to Roman Wales." (Ref. 14.) shows two maps of Roman forts in Wales and the Marches - one before A.D. 75 and the other after. The earlier one shows Caerleon, Usk and Abergavenny only but the later map, after A.D. 75, shows Pen-y-gaer and Brecon Gaer as well as a chain of forts running north from Cardiff i.e. Caerphilly, Caerphilly, Gelligaer, and Pen-y-darren as well as Neath and Coelbren. This is, more or less, in line with general acceptance of the establishment of Caerleon by Frontinus in 74 or 75 A.D.. Here the earliest structures were largely of timber with more substantial building following later. But Brecon Gaer is believed to be of a only a slightly later date i.e. 75 to 80 A.D. The Royal Commission seems to be uncertain of the date of its establishment - *"The chronology of the fort has been the matter of some debate"* but Nash-Williams says *"It seems clear that the fort at Y Gaer was built in the period 75-80, and received stone defences in 140 and stone principal buildings there a little later."*

The fort at Usk (Burrium) was early. Manning (Ref. 14) says *"In the south the Twentieth Valeria was moved forward to the point at which the main road from England, which then ran north of the Forest of Dean, entered the Usk valley. It was a site which controlled the route south to the central lowlands and north to Abergavenny and the hills of Breconshire. The road to Usk from Gloucester, where it crossed the River Severn, was secured by forts at Monmouth and, possibly, Weston under Penyard."*

Howells (Ref. 16) suggests that probably this was in the time of Didier Valens. He further suggests that it was originally approached by the Romans from the Wye valley by two possible routes - one up the Wye from Chepstow and the other down the Wye from Monmouth crossing to the valley of the Usk via a route following the Olway Brook. He further suggests that the construction of Caerleon began in the mid-70s at which time the importance of Usk declined and it was subsequently abandoned. Usk has been dated by finds as earlier than Caerleon at 49 to 54 A.D. Abergavenny was believed to have been dated as 75 to 100 A.D. but finds of Claudian materials would appear to take this back to around 50 A.D. So a degree of uncertainty all round but a pretty narrow range indicative of a rapidly developing situation.

Nash-Williams suggests that Pen y Gaer might be 80 to 130 A.D. but clearly there is much uncertainty so we seem to have a time frame of perhaps 50 to 100 A.D. and that it was during this period when Myarth was subdued by one means or another.

It is worth remembering that the Romans had great problems subduing the Silures and this difficulty was probable exacerbated by the believed propensity for the Silures to continually be in a state of hostilities with other tribes and clans. This belief seems to be borne out if one looks at Fig. 12 which is of a section of a map of hill-forts taken from a paper in which I am

attempting to find some definition on the territory occupied by the Silures. Dr. Ray Howells believes that they occupied an area largely bounded by the River Usk and the River Tywi but others believe it to have been much larger and to have included the Black Mountains, i.e. well into present-day Breconshire, and even into Herefordshire. It might have been any of these at different times as the tribal and inter-tribal conflicts leading perhaps to the abandonment of some and the consolidation of others. The original map from which this is taken covers a much larger area bounded by Carmarthen to the west, Gloucester to the east and Llandrindod Wells to the north. It is not a simple task accurately to define their territory as different authorities seem to hold different and often conflicting views and preservation of low-level strategic sites are likely to have been lost. Written records are few and I am finding it difficult to get a definite picture but the extract used in Fig. 11 will give some idea of the challenge the Romans faced in their invasion of the Usk valley.

As to the Silures - as Tacitus says in Book 2 of his Annals (Ref. 15) when discussing Ostorius's annexation of considerable districts - *"This annexation at once excited alarm among the Icini on the east, the Brigantes in the north and the Welsh tribes in the west.*

It was however only from the latter that at this stage any serious opposition was encountered. But on the Welsh border the strife was long and bitter." He then continues to describe the struggle which lasted for 25 years which included - *"At another encounter, the whole legion sustained a reverse, and the Silures, rendered only more desperate by threats of extermination, are again masters of the country and draw other tribes to join them."*

It seems clear that for a long time the Romans resorted to the strategy of using the river valleys of the Severn, the Tawe and the Usk to sub-divide and to contain the Silures. Subsequently this strategy entailed creating a line north from Cardiff via Caerphilly, Gelligaer, and Merthyr to Brecon. As William Manning says in his "A pocket guide to Roman Wales (Ref.12) - *"The Usk valley was the key to the system in South Wales, with a chain of forts running north from Caerleon."*

Ray Howells, in valuable book "Searching for the Silures - AN IRON AGE TRIBE IN SOUTH WALES" (Ref. 16) - *"The general Manlius Valens, presumably in an effort to gain personal glory, struck into Silurian territory before Didius (N. B. the replacement for Ostorius) arrived on the scene. The Silures defeated the legion. Tacitus attempted to play down the significance of the event"*. It was not until Frontinus became governor in A.D. 73-74 that the Silures were eventually subdued.

The different symbols and colours relate to the reference numbers used and the different sources of material e.g. 63, coloured in pink, is HF 63 as referenced in the Royal Commission book "Brecknock - Hill-forts and Roman Remains" (Ref.8) for Crug Hywel and 41 is Myarth. They place Myarth in Category 1 - "The larger multi-vallate forts in positions which are naturally

strong". I do not intend to explain coding for all the symbols in this paper but I think it well illustrates the sort of challenge faced by the Romans in this area.

The Usk valley and the surrounding area was clearly to be regarded as a military zone at least until the Silures were subdued in around A.D. 74 - 78 by Frontinus and it is probable that any use of the river for transport would have had to post date this. By about A.D. 120 the area was largely pacified and troops were being drawn away to the north of Britain to first Hadrian's Wall and later the Antonine and the campaigns in Scotland. Between perhaps A.D. 80 or there about until near the end of Roman occupation which as Nash-Williams puts it - "*Traditionally the abandonment of Wales is linked with the usurpation of Magnus Maximus (383-8), who certainly removed troops from Britain to the continent to support his claim to the throne.*". Perhaps for some time afterwards the Usk might have a period of value for traffic from the whole of the Brecon area to the coast.

There is considerable uncertainty among experts as to the function and interrelationships of hill-forts. This, it seems, can be largely explained by Ray Howells who points out, in more than one work, that very little excavation has been carried out and that that this leaves a great deal of room for speculation. Reading the literature it is clear that there are many, sometimes conflicting, opinions concerning this matter but those wanting a sound modern insight will find Ray Howells book on the Silures (Ref.16) and the chapter by W.H. Manning in the Gwent County History, Volume 1 (Ref. 17) both to be rewarding

Fig. 10 is a Google Earth image of the area of Crickhowell, Bwlch, Llangynidr and Cwm Ddu which gives a very good view of the area which has been discussed and an interesting feature catches the eye which might be clearer in Fig. 8. Today when the road to Tretower from junction "F" reaches Tretower it crosses the Talgarth road and climbs uphill by the road shown on large scale maps as the Heol Saeson but the field patterns uphill to the north east suggesting a succession of fields contouring and climbing in succession until they reach the mountain. It will need a lot more work on the ground to give any certainty but the impression is of successive filling in of the large funnel shaped exit off the mountain commonly found where animals were customarily moved between high ground and low. It can be seen even more clearly by zooming in closer with Google, that above the topmost cultivated fields there are similar bands encroaching on the mountain which have been abandoned. This is a well known feature, for example Oliver Rackham in his "The History of the Countryside." (p.313) (Ref.18). "*The pressure on land in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries pushed cultivation again into the moors*" and Richard Muir in "The New Reading of the Landscape", (Ref 19.) on page 39, remarks when discussing colonisation of the land by early people, "*Instead, we would witness a pulsing pattern as settlers entered an area, enacted transformation, and then withdrew in response to climatic change or the subsequence of the damage they had inflicted on the setting.*" or, on page 41, quoting Dyer, "*he noted the assumption that by about 1300 many of the inferior marginal lands into which surplus populations had expanded were producing poor cereal yields and being abandoned*".

There is similar, and possibly even clearer, feature to be found on the south bank of the river funnelling traffic from the mountain to the south to Dyfnant and the ford at SO 17632 12893 (Fig. 4 and Fig. 10). This will be discussed more fully in another paper being prepared on the search for the "Spiteful Inn". Whereas the feature to the north-east of Tretower would have brought in the animals to a well-defined point i.e. either to Tretower itself or, as has been suggested, to the hill-fort of Myarth the funnel on the south of the river is less clear once the ford is crossed. It is also uncertain whether :

- 1) It led to grazing land south of the river and the mountains beyond or from even further afield i.e. long-distance droving.
- 2) On reaching the river bank the traffic could have turned west towards Tretower and Crickhowell and further afield or, again a possible connection to Myarth. Better resolution of these matters will depend on dating evidence - of which there is little.
- 3) It might be significant that, whereas the funnel to the north-east of Tretower has been infilled by small fields, that to the south of the river has not been significantly encroached upon- the funnel rises essentially to meet the open mountain.

Although the name "Heol Saeson" suggests an actual road it is worth quoting from the " A History of the County of Brecknock", Vol. 2, page 26 (Ref. 9) -

"The Roads of the Saxons.

(After describing their ferocity etc. and their aim of plunder) They were governed only by momentary rapacity or sanguinary revenge, and looked not for future advantages to their prosperity, consequently when we hear of Rhy-y-Saeson, Bwlch-y-Saeson i.e. the Saxon ford, the Saxon pass, etc. we must not conclude that there were roads near them, but that those situations only preserve the memory of the irruptions, perhaps of a victory gained near the spot of these depredations."

Landscape archaeology is a well developed discipline and I do not intend to pursue it further here but, if this observation has validity, it could mean that the Iron Age inhabitants of Myarth did not have great distance to go to reach the mountain grazing and the large "funnel" entrance would greatly have assisted in gathering their animals speedily. It is probable that, in peaceful times, they might have had a farming centre at the present site of Tretower. If they had a lot of animals it might help to explain the great size of Myarth hill-fort.

The River Usk as a waterway.

I have long nurtured the idea that the River Usk could have been used by the Romans as a waterway whenever river conditions allowed. They certainly did whenever they could all over their empire. One of best books on this subject,

particularly in northern Britain is "On the Trail of the Legions" (Ref. 20) by Raymond Selkirk and I have been greatly indebted to this work.

I will start with a quote, also used by Selkirk, from "Navigation on small rivers in Central Europe in Roman and Medieval times (Ref. 21)

"It is generally accepted that the only way the Romans could have transported cut-stone from quarries was by water, even if there was only a small river nearby. Votive reliefs belonging to the shipbuilders guilds provide evidence that even small tributaries were included in the Roman transport system. Very often these sources refer to a river which today is not considered a navigable. It seems impossible that these little rivers or brooks could ever have carried shipping. The view that the river had more water in those times is often advocated, but there is no proof. It is time that this problem be explored in every aspect."

Dr. Eckoldt continues to describe the ways in which the river could be rendered more navigable by dragging the bed with rakes to deepen the channel and constraining the banks to use the greater water flow to flush away debris. He adds that navigation in places might have been restricted to flat bottomed punt-like vessels.

Other respected writers have similar opinions e.g.;

Michael Aston in his "Interpreting the Landscape" says (Ref. 22. P.139) *"Water transport, when that was available, was cheaper and easier to use for moving bulky loads. We tend to forget in our highly motorised society how important even the smallest rivers were for transport in the past."*

It is most important to dispel any notion of anything like the canal barges of the 18th. and 19th. century but it must be remembered that even small boats, such as the naval 6 man "whaler" could carry 10 tons. Specially constructed flat bottomed boats with strong bottoms enabling them to be dragged over shallows would have been very suitable. Remember that the Viking longships only drew some 2ft and were dragged over land. Clearly there were times of drought or flood when use of the river might have been impossible except perhaps by man-hauling (and the Romans could command lots of labour) or in extreme case by portage. Both of these techniques were considered normal by such as the explorers in Canada - the voyageurs. John Peddie, in his "Conquest - the Roman Invasion of Britain", (Ref. 23.) points out that the Silures had significant sea-going capability and moved freely in the Bristol Channel. He suggests that they might have had two types of vessel - one being of a sewn-plank type examples of which have been found elsewhere in Britain dating from the same period and which appear to have had the capability of carrying a sail, the other type similar to the Curragh. The Currach, still to be found on the west coast of Ireland. and its smaller relation, the Coracle, was in regular use in Wales until very recently. The Curragh was not uncommonly made of approx. 24 feet long and it is believed that even larger ones on perhaps 36 foot, as has been suggested was used by the Irish missionary, St. Brendan in his voyages. Such craft would equate readily with

the Canot du Maitre used by the Voyageures to open up Canada. He also mentions that the Romans used flat-bottomed river craft. Those interested in early craft would find much of value in "The Brendan Voyage" by Tim Severin (Ref. 24). In this book he narrates his how he researched the voyage undertaken by St. Brendan. Using research material and the experience of the Curragh builders of Dingle Bay he constructed a very large vessel covered in Oak-bark tanned ox hides and, following the historical accounts, sailed up the west coast of Britain and, eventually, to Newfoundland. Such a feat might give cause for thought as to the capabilities of early craft.

Fig. 12 is a graph of the level of the River Usk from Newbridge on Usk, where it ceases to be tidal, to Brecon. This is distance of 48 miles (77.5 km.) and the height of some various places, and their distance from Newbridge on Usk is shown. The average gradient over the whole distance is 1:590 ft. but the significant point is that the rise over the section from Crickhowell to just above Llangynidr is some 139 ft.. This section has the steep gradient of 1:182 and would have presented problems as it did for the much more recent canal builders but all other gradients are lower i.e.

Newbridge on Usk to Chain Bridge -	1:376.
Chain Bridge to Abergavenny -	1:368.
Abergavenny to Gwlangrwny -	1:924.
Gwlangrwny to Crickhowell -	1:1056.
Llangynidr to Scethrog. -	1:812.
Scethrog to Brecon. -	1:717

It must be observed that Y Gaer at Brecon and the crossing point of the Sarn Helen is some 2.5 miles (4km.) upstream of present day Brecon town where, today, there is a weir which directs water through a tunnel to the canal basin - was there an earlier structure? Certainly a map of Brecon, surveyed by Meredith Jones and dated 1744 is shown in "A History of Brecknock" (Ref. 9) shows no such feature.

For suitable boats and plenty of manpower there appears no stretch of the river, except past Myarth, which is not useable. The following quote from "Odd item on Wye navigation (1840?) taken from Knight's "The Land we Live In".

"At Coedithal weir above Brockweir we counted 32 men dragging one barge. The men were harnessed 8 at a time to a rope by a chest band. The strain was so great that at times the men went down on their hands and knees clinging to the stones to get a better grip. We heard that further upstream that no less than 50 men were required."

A quote like this requires some revision in our thinking.

Similarly a quote from "An Illustrated History of Canal and River Navigations" by Edward Paget-Tomlinson (Ref. 25), when discussing navigation of the rivers Wye and Lugg, described how in medieval times the river had become obstructed by mills of various sorts and that it took an Act of Parliament in 1727 to clear the way again for navigation. He explains that not only was Hereford considered a normal destination but that even Hay was achievable if water was high. Trade went on the Lugg to Leominster on a regular basis.

It appears that Nash-Williams was in broad agreement that the Romans used rivers when possible. In his "The Roman Frontier in Wales" (Ref. 6.) he states in his Chapter on "The Invasion":

"Water transport may have been important to the Romans in their campaigns in Wales. If the Demetae were friendly, and a fleet available, a pincer movement up the Usk and the Tywi would represent a serious threat to the Silures." Even more specifically in his section of Usk he says, "Shallow draft vessels might well have been able to navigate the Usk as far as the town in Roman times"

Clearly many years have passed and it might be difficult, if not impossible, to find any evidence for its once value as a transport route along the Usk today but it might not hurt to look at things from a different perspective.

I alluded earlier to another possible reason for the siting of Pen-y-gaer and it is that it lies on the over-land route between the vicinity of Pen Myarth and the river above Llangynidr (perhaps near Buckland or Scethrog) , to avoid this section of the river which falls considerably with attendant rapids. Such a section would require portage and Pen y Gaer is ideally situated.

I have, so far, found no direct evidence that River Usk was used for transport and perhaps it will remain so because it is a false trail or because any such use was not recorded but I wanted to air the possibility. I have been also been interested in the use of the Taff and, particularly, the River Neath. I have discussed the Neath as a potential waterway in "Tracks", Volume 2. "Dowlais Top to Bwlch ar y fan." (Ref. 26) where, in the Discussion. Here I pointed out that this river has a gradient of only 1:600 to reach a high of 63 m. (207 ft. at Glyn Neath. I believe that it is significant that the Roman fort of Coelbren on the Sarn Helen is less than 5 km. away. Such a waterway could have been a supplement to the Sarn Helen for the transport of heavy goods.

Discussion.

I intend no lengthy discussion. My purpose in writing this paper is firstly to attempt to stitch together some of the things of historical interest of the area and secondly to air a few speculations which some might find of interest.

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Fig. 1.

Fig. 2.

Fig. 3.

Fig. 4.

Fig. 5.

Fig. 6.

Fig. 7.

Fig. 8.

Fig. 9.

Fig. 10.

Fig. 11.

Fig. 12.

Fig. 13.

Fig. 14.

Fig. 15.