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Herbert A. Evans

Excerpt

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## I. County and Shire.

From the time of Edward I to that of Henry VIII, the only part of the country now called Wales which was directly governed by the English king was, roughly speaking, that which now forms the modern counties of Flint, Anglesey, Carnarvon, Merioneth, Cardigan, and Carmarthen. The rest consisted of the Marches, a term comprising numerous districts, each of which was governed by its Lord. These "Lords Marcher," as they were called, had been permitted to conquer their territories from the Welsh from Norman times onward. Each ruled his own domains like a petty king, administered justice in his own courts, and owed allegiance to no one but the king of England. Edward IV was the first to interfere with the power of the Lords Marcher, and under Henry VII a Court of the Council of Wales and the Marches was fixed at Ludlow. To this Court the jurisdiction of the Marcher Courts was gradually subjected, until in 1535 Henry VIII finally abolished the authority of the Lords Marcher and distributed their Lordships among five new counties<sup>1</sup>, though some of them were added to the older Welsh or English shires. In this way

<sup>1</sup> Monmouth, Brecon, Radnor, Montgomery, and Denbigh.

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part of the Lordship of Striguil, viz. the parishes of Tidenham, Lancaut, and Woolaston, being east of the Wye, were added to Gloucestershire.

The twenty-four lordships which occupied the ancient Gwent as well as Gwynllwg<sup>1</sup> (Wenllwch), the county between the Rhymney and the Usk, were then taken to form the county of Monmouth, which was declared for the purposes of jurisdiction to be an English county, and placed under the courts of Chancery and Exchequer at Westminster. About the same time a court entitled The King's Great Sessions in Wales was established for the rest of Wales and the county of Chester. This court lasted down to 1830, when the North and South Wales Circuits took its place, but Monmouthshire had already been placed on the Oxford Circuit by Charles II. The result was that from a legal point of view the county became, and is still considered, an English one, but in all other respects it remained Welsh, and to this day in statutes affecting Wales, the words "and Monmouthshire" have to be added. This awkward addition would have been saved if the framers of the Act of Union had accepted the facts and boldly made their Welsh counties thirteen instead of standing out for the round dozen.

Thus we see that the Mercian shires had been in existence some five or six hundred years, and the counties of Wessex for about a thousand years, before Monmouthshire was heard of. Like the other new counties it was divided into hundreds on the English pattern, and

<sup>1</sup> That is, the district of Gwynllyw, just as Morganwg is the district of Morgan.

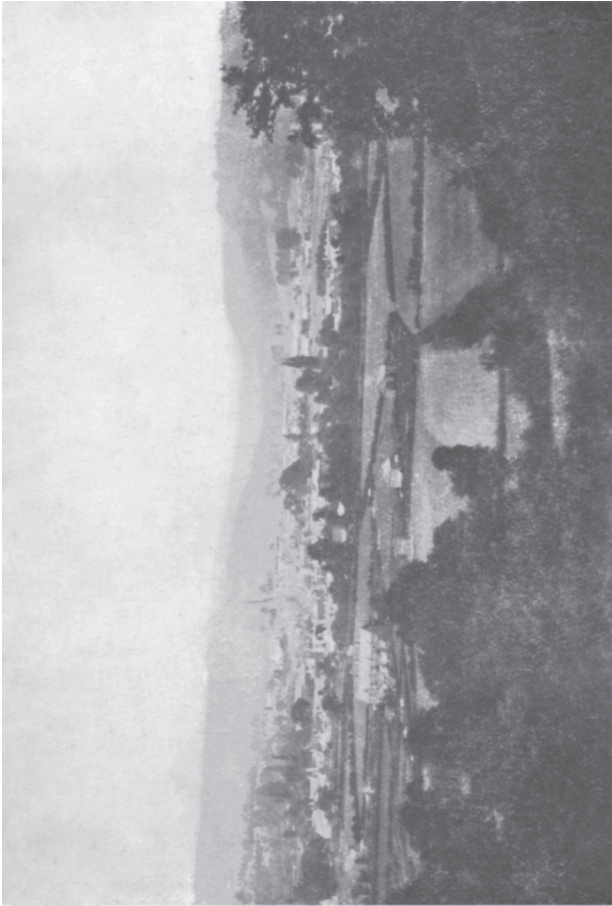
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Excerpt

[More information](#)

4

MONMOUTHSHIRE

Gwent and Gwynllwg (Wenllwch) with their ancient divisions into cantrefi and cwmmwds were forgotten.

The old English word was “shire” (a part *shorn* off), the division of the country administered by a shire-reeve or sheriff; but about the beginning of the fifteenth century the Anglo-French word “county” (*comté*), the territory of a comte or count, came to be used as its equivalent. Hence we may now speak indifferently of “Monmouthshire” or “the county of Monmouth,” but not of the “county of Monmouthshire.” The hundreds (in some counties represented by “wapentakes,” in others by “wards”) were subdivisions of the county for administrative purposes. The origin of the term is disputed, but a commonly received explanation is that it denoted a district inhabited by a hundred families. As applied to Wales it is of course an exotic.

Our county following in the wake of the Mercian “shires” has taken its name from its chief town. The word Monmouth means, of course, the town at the mouth of the Monnow, Welsh Mynwy, just as Plymouth and Exmouth are the towns at the mouths of the Plym and the Exe. The Welsh name of the town is Trefynwy (the town on the Mynwy).

**2. General Characteristics.**

A modern Welshman, especially if he hailed from Morganwg, might object that there was something anomalous about the geographical constitution of the county of Monmouth. He might urge that the eastern

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

5

extremity of the great mineral-producing mountain system should not be cut off from the rest, and should rather be included in his own county of Glamorgan. Nor would such a contention be unsupported by existing facts. The Usk, or at any rate the Afon Lwyd, seems to form a more natural boundary than the Rhymney. In our day considerations also of language as well as geographical conditions alike point to this conclusion. West of these rivers the country is mountainous and the language Welsh; east of them Welsh is rarely spoken, and the country is undulating only, or rising at most to 1000 feet. Nevertheless, at the time when the shiring of South Wales took place, one at any rate of these distinctions had less force, and the Rhymney remained as before the eastern boundary of Glamorgan, while the two ancient districts of Gwynllwg (Wenllwch) and Gwent were taken to form the new county of Monmouth—a combination which has to-day given Monmouth its place among the industrial counties of South Wales together with its industrial capital of Newport, the latter advantage one which Glamorgan, with its Cardiff and its Swansea, need not grudge us.

A hundred-and-fifty years ago this mountainous region was hardly to be distinguished from the wide stretches of hill and pasture north of the Usk, and it was only here and there that the valleys were marred by the smoke of the charcoal then used for smelting the iron ore, but the woods which had furnished the charcoal had gradually been cleared or destroyed by the numerous herds of goats which ranged through them at will, and about that time the discovery was made that pit coal answered all the

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The Usk and the Sugar-loaf

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS 7

purposes of charcoal. The iron industry then took a fresh start and these valleys soon became the home of a teeming population of miners and mechanics. At the present day the number of inhabitants is hardly less than that of any area of the same size throughout the South Wales coalfield.

The rest of the county is wholly occupied with grazing, agricultural, and wood land. The hills of the east and south-east are covered with heathy commons, vast woods, and modern enclosures which, under the various names of Penallt common, Trellech common, Wye's Wood common, Chepstow Park, Earlswood, and Wentwood, stretch from Monmouth to Caerleon. The mountains of the north-west, above the line of cultivation which struggles up their lower slopes, are grazed by hardy flocks of small Welsh sheep, while the undulating tracts of the centre and the rich levels of the south are covered with small farms. Lastly the Severn Sea, which forms the southern boundary of the county and receives the tidal estuaries of the Usk and Wye, constitutes our claim to be considered a maritime county.

### **3. Size. Shape. Boundaries.**

The shape of Monmouthshire is that of an irregular parallelogram with a projection on the north comprising the valley of the Honddu. The extreme length from the house called "The Monmouth Cap," once an inn, near Grosmont, to Goldcliff on the Bristol Channel is about

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

8

MONMOUTHSHIRE

30 miles, and the breadth from Bigsweir on the Wye to the Rhymney is about 23 miles. The area, excluding water, is 347,600 acres, or about 543 square miles.

A perambulation of the county boundaries would conduct us through varied scenes of hill and vale, seashore and forest. Starting on the Wye some three miles north-east of Monmouth at a point opposite to the Herefordshire hill called the Great Doward, famous for its prehistoric caves, the boundary may be followed southward in a zigzag line through the outskirts of the Forest of Dean down to Redbrook, where it again meets the Wye. In this part of our course we have traversed the depression which separates the Buckstone (915 feet) in Gloucestershire from our Monmouthshire Kymin (840 feet). From this point the Wye itself forms the boundary dividing our county from Gloucestershire. On either side of the river lofty wooded hills, interspersed below Tintern with precipitous limestone cliffs, give characteristic features to the valley, and only cease altogether less than a mile from the river's mouth.

From the mouth of the Wye the Bristol Channel forms the boundary as far as the mouth of the Rhymney, which lies nine miles south-west of Newport, and about one mile east of Cardiff. The sea wall and the other features of the coast are described in a later chapter. It may be noted here that the width of channel which at the mouth of the Wye is only two miles, is nine miles at the mouth of the Usk, while the mouth of the Rhymney is eleven miles from Weston-super-Mare, and twenty from the estuary of the Parret. The counties of Gloucester



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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## SIZE    SHAPE    BOUNDARIES            9

and Somerset on the opposite coast are divided by the river Avon.

The Rhymney forms the western boundary of the county from its mouth to a place called Rhyd-y-Milwyr, close to its source, where the three counties of Glamorgan, Monmouth, and Brecon meet, and the last named becomes our frontier till it marches on Herefordshire in the moun-



**Valley of the Clydach, Breconshire Border**

tains above Llanthony. At Rhyd-y-Milwyr the boundary strikes across the open mountain for two miles and a half<sup>1</sup>, and then turns south-east and east as far as Careg Maentarw, leaving Brynmawr and the Clydach to the north of it. Here it turns northward once more, crosses

<sup>1</sup> This piece is a modern extension of the county at the expense of Breconshire. The boundary formerly turned east at Rhymney Bridge, and is now resumed about half a mile west of Brynmawr.

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the canal, and reaches the Usk at Aberbaiden, two miles above Abergavenny. It then ascends the Usk for two miles, when it turns to the north-east up Cwm Gwenffrwd, and crossing the western flank of the Mynydd Pen-y-fal (Sugar-loaf) arrives at Pont Newydd in the valley of the Grwyne Fawr, an affluent of the Usk. It then ascends this valley—a wild and remote glen—climbs to the summit of the Chwarel-y-Fan (2228 feet), and in another mile descends into the valley of the Honddu at a point just below Capel-y-ffin, and three miles above Llanthony. It then climbs the opposite hill to its summit (2091 feet), turns south-east, and follows the ridge for five miles, when it descends the steep slopes of Hatteral Hill into the valley of the upper Monnow.

Thus after passing through the heart of the coal district up the valley of the Rhymney, and threading a devious course up hill and down dale for some twenty miles, we find ourselves again in the basin of the Wye at the Honddu. Another ten miles brings us to its confluence with the Monnow, and this river now forms the northern boundary of the county as far as Perthir (Perth-hir, the long brake) two and a half miles above Monmouth, except for a mile at Skenfrith, where the boundary line diverges for a mile in order to include in the county that part of the parish which lies on the left bank of the river. The course of the Monnow when it first becomes the boundary is north-east, but at the Monmouth Cap, less than a mile to the south of Pontrilas station, it bends to the south-east and falls into the Wye just below Monmouth. But at Perthir, in order to