

*"Up the Mountain - A short walk in time "*

*There has never been a time when I could not step out of my back gate and walk over the land north of Beaufort between Llangynidr Road and Beaufort Hill, and until the building of the Heads of the Valleys Trunk Road some forty years ago, choose any route I liked onto the moors of Mynydd Langattock.*

*Of course, it wasn't really a mountain, more a piece of industrial wasteland at 1000 feet above sea level, but the area now protected as the Beaufort Hill Ponds and Woodlands Site has been my happy hunting ground for over seventy years.*

*Remembering it as it was in my childhood is not difficult because it changed very little in the first half of my lifetime. In fact, my children's recollection of the mountain in their early years is very much like mine. They and their friends played, picnicked, wandered or cycled free and without adult supervision, now a thing of the past.*

*We played the usual games, cowboys and Indians, soldiers, cricket or football if we could find a level stretch of ground. There were sticklebacks to fish for in the ponds, frogspawn in springtime, and ice for sliding in winter. We dug out 'cabins' in banks and fuelled our fires with coal which we extracted from the tips, the ground was still being quarried for the shale that went to make the world-famous Beaufort Brick and we walked the back way to and from Beaufort Hill School along the sleepers of the tramways along which horse-drawn trams carried the grey shale to the brickworks. During World War 2 we watched the local Home Guard at their weapons drill in one of the patches and afterwards dug with our hands into the soft ground behind the targets in search of souvenir shrapnel. Courting couples were the focus of our furtive attentions, we followed them with a mixture of hope and dread to discover if the whispered stories of the playground were really true.*

*My grandfather knew the mountain like the backs of his hands, where to find wimberries in summer and skylarks' nests in spring. Up the mountain was a world of adventure, education, and delight, all of which we took for granted.*

*In later life biology was to become my bread and butter, and I have no doubt as to the origins of that interest. Not that the plant life was much to write home about, the rough moor grasses, sedges, rushes, heathers, gorse and mosses covered the bare ground as best they could. Yet, on reflection, it was powerful evidence of the persistence of Nature in ground that had no topsoil; over a century of scouring, patching and mining for coal, ironstone and shale had left little substrate for healthy plant growth, but recolonization progressed against all odds. Historically it is difficult to secure a detailed picture of what the land must have looked like before the Industrial Revolution changed it for ever, such texts as do exist provide scant information of the upland flora and dwell on the more abundant flora of the south of Monmouthshire. I examined, collected and tried to identify every plant that grew on the hillsides, but the prize find was made by my eagle-eyed grandfather who took me to a small green clump of something he had never seen before. It was a patch of Club moss, a tiny direct descendent of the giant tree like plants that had flourished on Earth in the Carboniferous period hundreds of millions of years ago and whose bodies had produced much of the coal beneath our feet.*

*Under the land reclamation scheme that followed the Aberfan disaster in 1966 the mountain was remodelled, patches and holes were filled, ponds drained, contours smoothed, fences erected, and trees planted; finally, a vile smelling mixture of chicken waste and grass seed was applied to the surface. It took years for a new flora to become established, but eventually it provided a medium in which the native plants could sink their roots. The new fences restricted the grazing by sheep and ponies, whose search for anything edible left little to thrive above ground level, and for the first time trees began to flourish, with rowan, willow and hawthorn blending with the conifers and deciduous trees of the plantations.*

*As the years passed by the mountain became a place of leisure and exercise with several dearly remembered dogs, and a granddaughter to introduce to its joys and challenges in all seasons, because altitude and exposure to all the winds that blow can make this piece*

*of land a severe testing ground for all forms of life in winter, as well as a pleasant place to linger on a summer evening.*

*Now the area is to be preserved for the community and its visitors to enjoy. The acquisition of the ponds, the laying of footpaths, new fencing with easily accessible gateways, together with progressive tree planting, has created a delightful environment in which to breathe clean air and watch the play of light and shadow over earth and water, or marvel at the diversity of insects, birds and plants in such a small compass.*

*Nevertheless, we have to accept that, once again, Man has intervened and altered a habitat that was (perhaps) just beginning to resemble the original one to some degree. Upland grassland will become woodland with all the consequent changes to the animals and plants within the community, and this will provide ample opportunity for the diligent naturalist to observe the subtle, but inevitable, changes that will occur. However much it may change in the years ahead, I believe that it will always be worth going " up the mountain".*

*A great deal of thought, imagination, effort and expense has been invested in the Beaufort Hill Ponds and Woodlands project. It is now a case of 'over to you' so that the people of the locality accept the responsibility of caring for it, becoming involved in its development and proper use, and above all valuing it as a part of our heritage.*

*Standing on the hills overlooking the ponds I have often recalled the words of that best-loved psalm:*

*"He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul".*

*May that be the experience of many, many more visitors to the Ponds and Woodlands Site.*

*Eric Smith      September 2007*