Discover Nercwys

Welcome to Nercwys

This peaceful, rural village at the edge of the Clwydian Range has a rich and varied history. The land has been farmed for thousands of years, since Prehistoric tribes first began to clear the woodland and establish simple homesteads. Early settlers were drawn by the fertile soils and the plentiful water supply from numerous springs and the River Terrig. Farming continues to be the main land use today.

In the 19th century the area was also industrial, with many local lead and coal mines. The countryside was dotted with pit wheels, brickworks, mine buildings and spoil heaps. A few relics of the industrial past can still be found today, now clothed in vegetation or used for other purposes.

The village grew rapidly during the Victorian era. The population peaked in the 1870s when as many residents were employed in industry as on the land. Many new brick terraces, Church View, Fron Heulog, School Terrace and New Terrace were built. A new school was built during this period, local shops and pubs flourished, St Mary's Church was restored and chapels were established. The dwellings vary from simple cottages nestling on the hillsides and the tightly packed terraces in the village centre, to working farms and stately homes for the gentry.

The Welsh language has always been important in the village, the mother tongue of the farming community and many of the miners. In the 18th century Nercwys church held most of its services in Welsh. By 1874 services were held in both languages but the congregation for the Welsh service was higher. Soar Chapel continues to thrive, holding most services in Welsh, and is an integral part of the community, running numerous events. Within the community the number of Welsh speakers is rising once more, significantly higher than in most Flintshire villages.

The parish is criss-crossed with paths across the rolling farmland, once used by miners and labourers walking to work, but now giving good opportunities for exploring this attractive and tranquil countryside.

In the 20th and 21st centuries the village has seen further changes, including modern housing for the elderly and for commuters travelling further afield. However, Nercwys still retains its rural character and the community continues to thrive.

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This booklet has been produced by the local community to celebrate the rich cultural and natural heritage of the area. Many thanks to all who have provided photographs or shared their memories and knowledge and to the staff and junior pupils of Ysgol Nercwys. The booklet can also be downloaded from www.cadwynclwyd.co.uk or www.flintshire.gov.uk/tourism

Through the ages

2000 -1000BC
Bronze Age tribes settled in the area, building a burial mound below Nercwys mountain.

1637
The building of Nerquis Hall began.

1828
Soar Chapel, the first of three chapels in the village, built.

1855 -1930
Coal mined locally.

1883
The present church renovated.

1930
Last local mine closed.

1963
Coed Nercwys planted by the Forestry Commission.

2004
Trails developed through Coed Nercwys.

1250-80
The church was probably established. Medieval carved stones date from this period.

1664
First mention of a school in Nercwys.

1840 - 1896
The peak of lead mining around Nercwys.

1872
Nercwys School moved to the new building.

1869
Nercwys Colliery Company built a branch line to Coed Talon, serving the collieries and oil works.

1963
Railway line closed.

1985
Clwydian Range designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

1995
Village Green and bowling green developed.

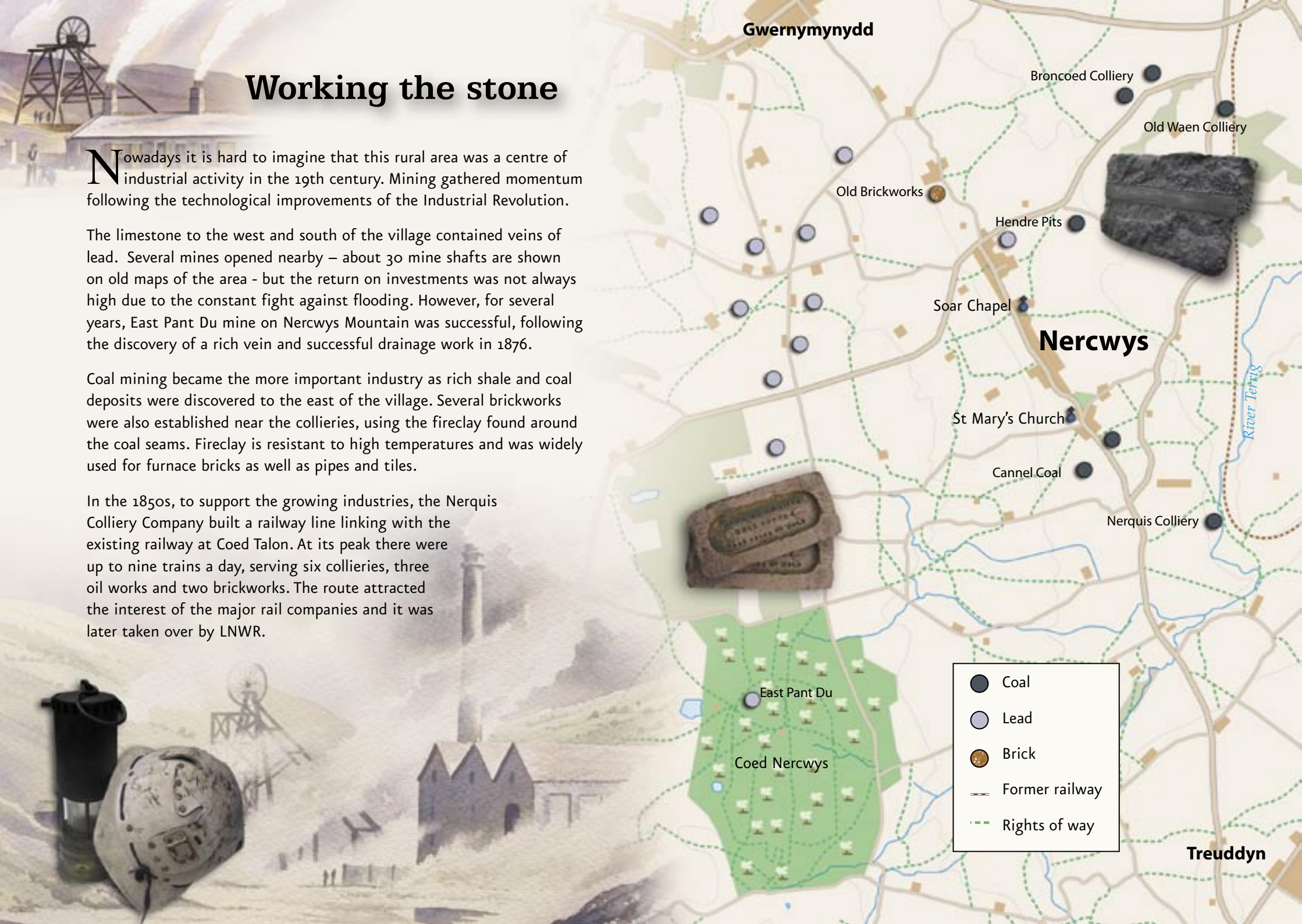
Working the stone

Nowadays it is hard to imagine that this rural area was a centre of industrial activity in the 19th century. Mining gathered momentum following the technological improvements of the Industrial Revolution.

The limestone to the west and south of the village contained veins of lead. Several mines opened nearby – about 30 mine shafts are shown on old maps of the area - but the return on investments was not always high due to the constant fight against flooding. However, for several years, East Pant Du mine on Nercwys Mountain was successful, following the discovery of a rich vein and successful drainage work in 1876.

Coal mining became the more important industry as rich shale and coal deposits were discovered to the east of the village. Several brickworks were also established near the collieries, using the fireclay found around the coal seams. Fireclay is resistant to high temperatures and was widely used for furnace bricks as well as pipes and tiles.

In the 1850s, to support the growing industries, the Nerquis Colliery Company built a railway line linking with the existing railway at Coed Talon. At its peak there were up to nine trains a day, serving six collieries, three oil works and two brickworks. The route attracted the interest of the major rail companies and it was later taken over by LNWR.



Coal and Flintshire oil

Several different types of coal were mined locally. Nearest the surface were the main coal seams, used as 'steam' coal to power steam locomotives as well as for domestic use. Much deeper underground were seams of cannel coal that burned with a slow and steady flame. This was particularly valuable as it could be distilled to produce lamp oil. Numerous oil works were established near the collieries and it was a highly profitable business for several decades, with Flintshire oil illuminating much of Britain. At its peak there were over one thousand retorts erected for the manufacture of oil in the Leeswood and Coed Talon area and it would have looked very different to the peaceful, rural views we see today.

"Twas as if I had fallen asleep on the train at Chester and woken up among the 'oil wells' at Ennisklen (West Canada) or Pennslyvania."

Extract from 'Petroleum in Flintshire' in Rylands Iron Trade Review Circular, 1864

Not all the collieries were so successful. The owner of Hendre Pits, John Thompson, spent £30,000 on trial workings, sinking deep shafts and laying miles of rail track, but little coal was discovered and he was forced to admit defeat.

The imports of cheap oil from the newly opened North American oil fields killed the Flintshire oil industry by end of the century. The Nercwys collieries suffered and gradually closed. Some small-scale mining continued into the 20th century, including some drift mining, extracting coal from near the surface, but the last Nercwys mine fully closed in 1930.

The former railway line

It was a hard life for the lead miners and colliers as underground work was dangerous, wages were low, accidents happened and they could be laid off at short notice.

In addition to assistance provided by some of the wealthy landowners, Nercwys Friendly Society was established in 1827 to provide the working men with financial support in sickness and old age. Meetings were held at the White Lion and funds were raised through subscriptions. The Society played an important role in the community and their annual gathering and procession was a much-enjoyed occasion in the village.

"In some of the lanes the snow drifts are six to eight feet deep and the sickness and poverty here is something awful. The colliers are only working two terms a week and the labourers are begging, indeed the door is scarcely an hour free."

Mrs Jane Hughes, Plas Onn, 31st January 1895

The Friendly Society procession

Working the land

Farming has always been an important part of village life and, until the mines opened in the mid 19th century, it was the main source of work. In 1801, 126 residents were employed in agriculture and only 7 in other trades or crafts.

The fertile soils in the Terrig valley grew cereals, potatoes, lush grass and a variety of other crops. The heather moorland and rough grassland of Nercwys Mountain were less fertile and let for grazing to a number of local farms. This is reflected in its alternative name of 'Shepherd's Mountain'.

Most of the land was owned by the large estates, particularly Nercwys Hall, Plas Ucha, Plas Onn and the farms were tenanted. During the early 20th century much of the estate land was sold and many tenants were able to buy their farms.

At busy times like haymaking, harvesting or potato planting, adjoining farms pooled their labour and many other locals helped. Entries in the school log book show that children were also involved.

July 19th Children working in the hay

July 27th Meagre attendance, whinberry gathering at Mynydd Du.

Oct 25th Boys potato picking

1872 school log book entries

Nercwys Cheese Factory was set up in 1919 in a former colliery engine house near Waen Farm. Local farmers brought their milk on horse and cart to the factory for cheesemaking. The collected milk was warmed in vats and rennet added to separate it into curds and whey. Farmers bought the whey to feed to their livestock and the curds were put into wooden vats and compressed to form cheese. It ran successfully for over ten years, giving employment to local girls and a large sales outlet for the dairy farms.

"Haymaking in the 1930s was a busy time, needing lots of extra hands, especially for piling the hay into a big haycock with pitchforks. All the family helped but also casual workers, mainly out-of-work colliers. They were strong and willing but were used to working underground with picks and shovels and weren't skilled wielding a pitchfork – you needed to stand well clear!"

Thos Roberts, Hendre Isa Farm

Nercwys smithy

The smithy is over 300 years old and has been run by the same family at least five generations. In the 19th century, the blacksmith was an important figure in the village, essential for sharpening tools and shoeing the farm horses. Work declined following the closure of the pits and the gradual replacement of working horses by tractors. However, an increase in the popularity of horse-riding for pleasure brought new work. The present farrier, Ian Hughes, travels far and wide, working with racehorses and shoeing horses for international competitions.

Daily life

Edward Buxton, the village postman, circa 1930s

Until car ownership became widespread in the 1960s, few travelled far from the village and most goods could be obtained from a selection of local shops. All sold a similar range of goods - groceries, sweets and tobacco, paraffin and candles, pots and pans, brushes, mops, shovels and all manner of household goods.

The last Post Office

The Post Office and Griffith's shop were both on School Terrace but were later combined. Schoolchildren used to enjoy the treat of buying a halfpenny's worth of sweets from old Mr Griffiths after school. From 1940-1980, Nathan Roberts ran the grocery shop and many remember his painstaking delivery service across the parish.

> *"As teenagers in the 40s, we'd occasionally take the bus to Mold for the evening, sometimes to dances at the Assembly Hall, but we often had to walk home as the last bus left so early!"*
>
> Norma Evans

Siop y Capel, as its name suggests, was held in the house adjoining Soar Chapel until it closed in 1956. Ty Cerrig, known as 'Dorothy's shop' and Challoner's shop at Hendre Foilen both closed in the 1960s. The last Post Office was at Meadow Place but finally shut in 1990s.

When a regular bus service was introduced it widened opportunities for work, shopping and leisure. The buses were packed on market days and also gave villagers the chance to go to dances or the cinema in the evenings.

Griffith's Stores, School Terrace

> *"The outlying farms were the last to get electricity. It wasn't connected to us at Pen yr allt until the 1960s."*
>
> Winifred Griffiths

Mains water and electricity were supplied to new properties and the centre of the village before the Second World War. Prior to that houses were lit with oil lamps and water collected from wells, springs and the river.

> *"In the 1930s, on their way to school some children carried water containers to the village tap and left them there to fill after school and take home for their family."*
>
> Ray Davies

In the 1882 water was piped from a well by Pant y Betws farm to the centre of the village, funded by the Fletchers of Nerquis Hall. For many years locals used to collect water from the standpipe.

There have been at least three pubs in the village. The Feathers has long been a private house but was formerly a roadside inn. The recently closed White Lion in the centre of the village dates from the 18th century and was once at the hub of village life, hosting meetings of the Nerquis Friendly Society. The Butchers Arms on the edge of the village is named after the butcher's shop that stood there in the 1800s. It has been run by the same family for over 100 years and remains a popular meeting place for locals and visitors (Tel: 01352 752514 for opening hours).

The Butchers Arms

The former Feathers

Church and chapel

The first reference to a church in Nercwys is in a taxation document in 1291 when it was a chapel-of-ease to the mother church of St Mary's in Mold. The oldest part of the present church is around the tower base, where there is a clearly visible Norman arch. Several fragments of carved stones, dating from the mid 13th century, have also been found. These are now set in the south porch.

The most special Medieval feature is Cadair Fair, an intricately carved and richly painted seat to the right of the altar, originally part of a rood screen that divided the church from the chancel.

The church was greatly altered and enlarged in 1874 and again in 1883, with funds largely raised by donations from local people, particularly the owners of the large estates who funded many features, including the fine stained glass windows. Many have plaques and monuments in their memory.

Not everyone chose to worship at the parish church. From the late 18th century visiting preachers across North Wales were drawing large crowds to hear their inspiring sermons. This simpler, Non-conformist worship, conducted in Welsh, appealed to many local people. Initially John Davies and a few other Nercwys Methodists walked regularly to chapel in Mold but, as support grew, it was decided to build a chapel in Nercwys, funded by the local worshippers. Soar Chapel was completed and opened in October 1828 and a chapel house added later. The congregation continued to grow and the chapel was renovated and enlarged in 1874.

Soar Chapel

Soar Chapel continues to thrive today and remains a focal point for the Welsh speaking community in Nercwys. The chapel house was pulled down in 1982 to make way for a new schoolroom. This is well used by both chapel-goers and as a venue for other village events and meetings.

" Every Sunday I went to church in the mornings with my mother but to Sunday School in Soar Chapel in the afternoon."

Winifred Griffiths

Music has always been an important part of the religious and social life in the village. In the 1950s, Soar Chapel had a thriving Penillion/ Cerdd Dant party and both the men's group, Hogiau Glannau Terrig, and a ladies' group, Parti Merched Glannau Terrig, competed in eisteddfodau throughout Wales.

Both church and chapel still have choirs today and concerts are always well supported. There is a friendly relationship between the two and at Christmas singers from the chapel choir sing in the church and vice-versa.

"As a child, I loved going to the Band of Hope meetings in the chapel one evening each week, learning songs and meeting my friends. There weren't many other activities for young people in those days so we really looked forward to it."

Norma Evans

School days

The first school was a charity school, endowed by local benefactors interested in giving poor children a Christian education. Griffiths Roberts was the earliest recorded benefactor in 1664, followed by Catherine Wenlock of Holywell in 1708. In the mid 1700s, Mrs Hyde of Nerquis Hall funded the building of a school house and two classrooms and her successors continued to support the school.

Pupil numbers rose when the mines opened and the original building became overcrowded. A new National School was built on land donated by Mr Lloyd Fletcher of Nerquis Hall and it opened in 1872. The same building still houses the school today.

Teaching styles have changed enormously. Many former pupils describe the strictness of the teachers but some are remembered with fondness. Ysgol Nercwys today is a happy place, filled with laughter, and children are disciplined in very different ways.

"The headmaster hit me very hard on the back of the head because he didn't think my drawing of a daffodil was very good. My mouth hit the desk and the impact pushed my tooth through my lip! I was pouring with blood but the headmaster ignored me and just kept on teaching!"

Ray Davies, pupil Ysgol Nercwys, 1928-1934

"Miss Morgan was a very kind teacher. She warmed cocoa for us on the fire and took us along the lane to learn about nature."

Winifred Griffiths, pupil Ysgol Nercwys, 1926-1932

"If we're naughty we have to miss a minute of Golden Hour on Friday afternoon, sitting in silence on our own instead of playing with our friends. Nobody wants that to happen to them."

Tilly Horrigan, pupil Ysgol Nercwys 2010

"We used to walk to play Gwernynmynydd and Treuddyn Schools. We didn't have any kit and just marked the goals with our jackets."

Ray Davies

Ysgol Nercwys football team, 2010

Both former and present pupils talk with enthusiasm about the school football team, although the equipment has improved over the years!

In 1927 the new headmaster started a gardening class for senior boys. For many it was the highlight of the week. Ysgol Nercwys restored the school garden in spring 2010 and it is once again a popular part of school life.

"Our great uncle, Ken Lewis, enjoyed growing vegetables in the school garden and we enjoy doing the same today."

Celyn and Gwyneth Parry

Junior pupils with Ray Davies, Winifred Griffiths and Norma Evans

A place for wildlife

Coaltit

Nercwys lies on the border of the Clwydian Range Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), designated in 1985 in recognition of its nationally important landscape quality. It is one of only eight protected landscapes in Wales, five AONBs and three National Parks. There are superb views of the Clwydian ridge from many parts of the parish, particularly from Nercwys Mountain. A good network of footpaths and quiet lanes enable easy exploration of this picturesque and peaceful area.

The rolling farmland that makes up most of the parish is edged with mature hedgerows and wildflower-strewn roadside verges. To the east of the village the land descends to the River Terrig in its wooded valley. Dippers, perky brown birds with white bibs, are often seen hunting for insects on this fast flowing river. Otters have been sighted on the nearby River Cegidog and there is a good chance they have returned to the Terrig Valley.

To the west the land rises gently to Nercwys Mountain, once open moorland but now partly wooded. In 1963, it was planted with conifers as part of the national move to become more self-sufficient in timber, following the shortages of the Second World War. Nowadays the Forestry Commission Wales and the Clwydian Range AONB manage Coed Nercwys for wildlife and recreation, as well as timber production. A lot of work has been carried out to improve the forest for wildlife by creating more varied habitats. Patches of woodland have been cleared and thinned creating more open grassy areas to attract ground nesting birds, flowers and butterflies.

Nightjar

Flocks of tits and finches are often seen flitting between the trees, particularly siskins and coal tits. The conifer seeds are an important source of winter food and the forest floor is littered with eaten cones, including some that have been stripped by crossbills. One notable summer visitor is the nightjar that breeds in the open cleared areas at the forest edge. Look for them flying at dusk and listen for the churring-jarring song – like a small engine revving!

Siskin

Coed Nercwys now has an excellent all ability trail for walkers, cyclists and horseriders and there are also plenty of other forest tracks and footpaths for exploration on foot. www.clwydianrangeaonb.org.uk

Dipper

Pentrehobyn
Mold
Yr Wyddgrug
A541
Tower
Tŵr
Leeswood Hall
Plas Coed Llai
Nercwys
Soar Chapel
Capel Soar
Church
Eglwys
Butcher's
Arms
Leeswood
Coed Llai
Pontybodkin
Coed Talon
Coed Nercwys
Treuddyn
Parking/ Parcio
Pub/ Tafarn
Church or chapel/ Capel neu Eglwys
Right of way/ Hawl tramwyo
Rural Walks in Flintshire No 24/
Cerdded yng Nghefn Gwlad Sir y Flint Rhif 24
Flintshire Leisure Tour, Llanasa - Caerwys - Cilcain
Taith foduro Sir Y Fflint, Llanasa - Caerwys - Cilcain
Paintings by junior pupils of Ysgol Nercwys
Paentiadau gan ddisgyblion iau Ysgol Nercwys.