

George Owen of Henllys

**Understanding our diminished
inheritance**

The Slow Death Of The Countryside

- ▶ Over a quarter of all British birds are under threat, eight species of particular concern, including puffin.
- ▶ Three-quarters of all flying insects have disappeared since 1945, including a staggering 60 different moths.
- ▶ Orchid ranges have shrunk by half - summer lady's-tresses *Spiranthes aestivalis* considered extinct.
- ▶ The State of Nature 2016 report described Britain as being “among the most nature-depleted countries in the world”.
- ▶ The world’s 7.6 billion people represent just 0.01% of all living things. Yet we have caused the loss of 83% of all wild mammals and half of plants

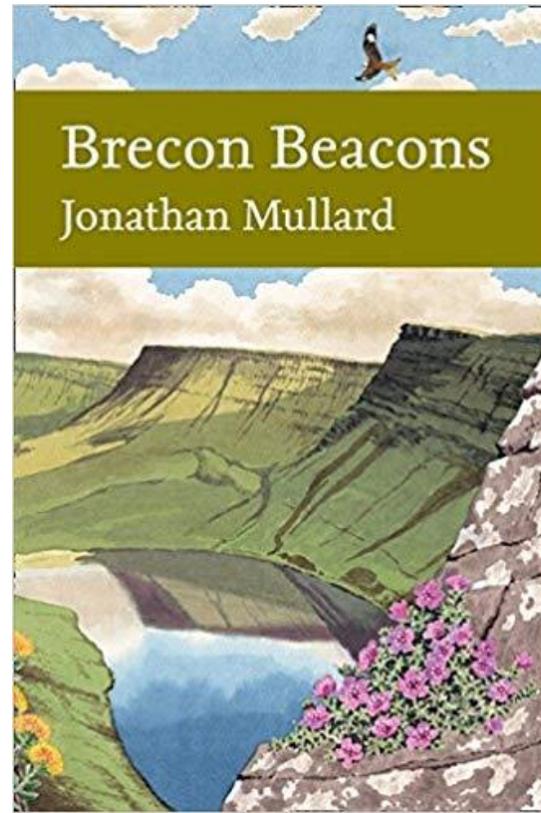
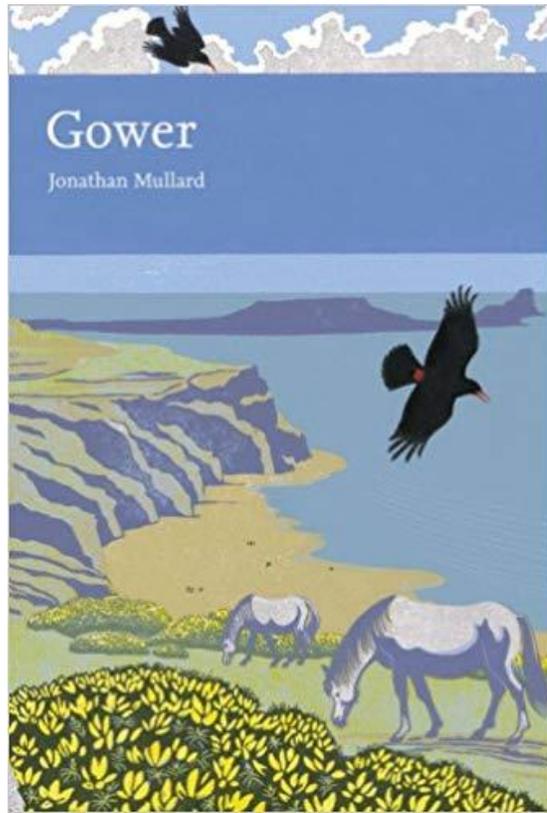
Ref: The British countryside is being killed by herbicides and insecticides - can anything save it? Kevin Rusby The Guardian May 2018

The Loss of Memory and Knowledge

- ▶ ‘Shifting baselines syndrome’ - term introduced by fisheries expert Daniel Pauly in 1995.
- ▶ Defined as ‘our generational blindness to environmental destruction’.
- ▶ Past information is viewed by many scientists as anecdotal.
- ▶ If you want to fight the loss of memory and knowledge about the past, you have to rely on past information.
- ▶ Past anecdotes are data. Have to get rid of the notion that ‘the past is a provider of anecdotes and the present is a provider of knowledge’.

Ref: Oceana: Daniel Pauly and George Monbiot in conversation August 14, 2017

New Naturalist: Gower / Brecon Beacons



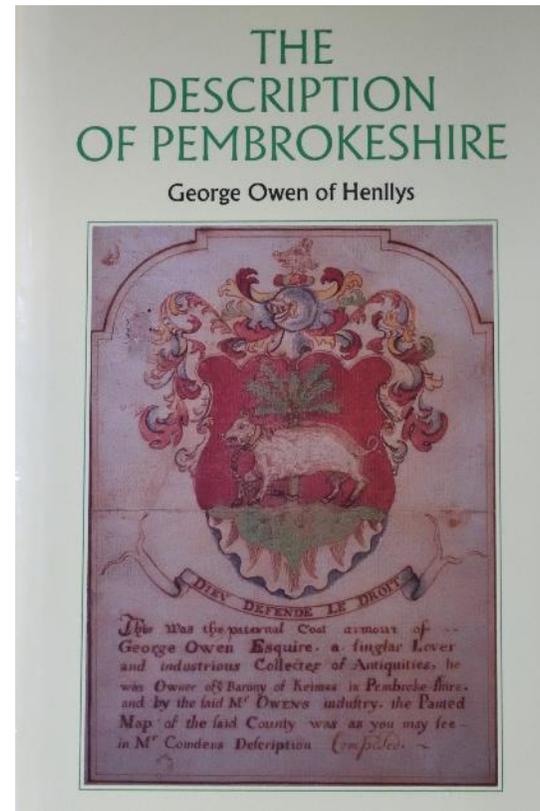
R. M. Lockley In Pembrokeshire



Ronald Lockley, with Edgar Sturley, off Skokholm in 1939

George Owen of Henllys 1552 -1613

- ▶ No portrait survives of this remarkable man and perhaps none was painted.
- ▶ ‘This county groans with the general complaint of other counties of the decreasing of wood, for I find by matters of record that divers great cornfields were in times past great forests and woods’



'Of divers wonders of Penbrokeshire'

- ▶ Covers life in Pembrokeshire during the sixteenth century
- ▶ A polymath who covered matters ranging from geological formations to heraldic details
- ▶ He never lost his sense of wonder, devoting a chapter to the divers wonders of the county
- ▶ Limited these to nine - 'lest I might become too wonderful'
- ▶ 'Of the several sorts of fish' and 'abundance of fowl'

‘Of the several sorts of fish’

- ▶ Fish weir on the Teifi at Cilgerran has ‘oftentimes taken’ up to 140 salmon a day
- ▶ Trout ‘are slaughtered in great plenty, especially in March and April’
- ▶ ‘Eels and lampreys are found in every river’
- ▶ Herring ‘sometimes ten meises, sometimes twelve, sixteen or twenty meises in a boat, each meises containing 620 or 600 herrings’ [i.e. around 6,000 - 12,000 fish per boat!]

Sacred Eels: Llandeloy Church

- ▶ Until quite recently eels found in holy wells and streams were considered sacred, being used to foretell the future and cure the sick.
- ▶ The patient stood in the well and it was believed that they would be cured if the eel coiled itself around their bare legs.



‘Of abundance of fowl’

- ▶ ‘In the bogs breed the crane, the bittern, the wild duck and teal, and divers others of that kind’
- ▶ ‘On high trees the heronshaws, the shovelard and the woodquist’
- ▶ ‘The heronshaws are also found in many places of the sea cliffs’
- ▶ ‘The curlew...fly in small herds together’
- ▶ ‘Woodcock... no strange thing to take a hundred and six score in one wood in 24 hours...’, [i.e. 2,120 birds!]



Return Of The Crane To Wales

- ▶ In 2016 a pair of ‘common’ cranes *Grus grus* bred successfully on the Gwent Levels for the first time in around 400 years
- ▶ Adult birds originated from the Great Crane Project reintroduction scheme on the RSPB West Sedgemoor Reserve in Somerset



Past Information - Place Names

- ▶ *Place-name evidence for the former distribution and status of wolves and beavers in Britain* C Aybes and D. W Yalden *Mammal Review* 1995
- ▶ *The history of eagles in Britain and Ireland: an ecological review of placename and documentary evidence from the last 1500 years* Richard J. Evans, Lorcán O'Toole and D. Philip Whitfield *Bird Study*, 59:3, 335-349 2012
- ▶ English *Eagle* Old English *Erne* Manx *Urley* Welsh *Eryr* Cornish *Er*
- ▶ There are probably some names that are disguised because they are referred to in a local dialect
- ▶ For example, laverock, laverack or lavrock are variations of an old word for the skylark

Shifting Baselines But Which One?

- ▶ 1970 - baseline year for State of Nature Report (their long-term period)
- ▶ 'Biodiversity Intactness Index' - score in the year 2000 is about 84%: in other words, averaged across all plant and vertebrate species, populations have declined to 84% of their presumed pre-modern levels
- ▶ 2002 - baseline year for State of Britain's Hedgehogs
- ▶ 1880 - 'an important date because it's the first time we used fossil energy to go after fish' (Daniel Pauly)
- ▶ 1600 - the baseline year for Pembrokeshire, for George Owen?

Ref: Scholes RJ and Biggs R (2005) *A biodiversity intactness index* Nature 434: 45-49

Is This Abundance, Or Recovery?



(72,000 gannets *Morus bassanus* nest on Grassholm each year)