Extinctions caused by man or those due to natural phenomena such as climatic change have reduced the number of large species of mammal in Britain, with the biggest suffering most - either for their meat or because of the danger that they caused to man and his livestock - in fact there has been a steady decline of large wild animals during the historical period.

In the Mousterian (mid-Palaeolithic) period at c. 40,000 - 28,000 B.C., the area of Wales now called Dyfed held a rich fauna both of herbivores and carnivores hunted by is believed to be Homo sapiens neanderthalensis (‘Neanderthal Man’) whose rare cordiform hand axes, found at Coegan, bear testimony to his presence. The landscape would have been different, with regard both to the sea level and the vegetation that clothed the land on which these great beasts wandered.

At the now-destroyed Coegan (‘Coygan’) Cave in the Carboniferous Limestone near Laugharne, a wealth of animal remains were found by antiquaries at the turn of the century; (e.g. the Eccles collection of 1913), the remains were those hunted for food or predatory competitors. The remains include that of Horse, Hyena, Rhinoceros, Mammoth, Giant Ox, Reindeer, Cave Lion, Cervus giganteus - the so-called 'Irish Elk', Red Deer and various sheep and goat bones. As both creatures of warmer and colder climatic types occur in the above list, it is thought that they were intermixed by earlier undisciplined, non-scientific relic hunters. Nevertheless, it makes one think of what once roamed South Carmarthenshire!

The Woolly Rhino (Rhinoceras tichorhinus) with its thick, woolly coat, would have been one of those species that together with the Mammoth (Elephas primigenius) and the Reindeer (Rangifer tarandus), would have inhabited the area in colder periods. The remains at such limestone caves as Coegan - and limestone is a prolific producer of caves - would represent in most cases the dead animals brought back to the caves by these early hunters. Also perhaps their presence in the caves could be due to their transportation there by other four-legged creatures like the Hyena whose teeth marks are found on some bones of rhino, mammoth and reindeer. Bones of both adult and young Mammoths have been discovered at Coegan, indicating perhaps, a breeding population grazing the Tundra park-like vegetation of low plants such as sedges, grasses, mosses and lichens interspersed with dwarf willow, birch and clumps of pine-birch elsewhere. In season, low but colourful plants such as Dryas and various species of Saxifrage, would have brightened the landscape.
At times, the sea level would have fluctuated, for much water would be held up as ice in the glaciers during the colder periods, only to be released as the climate warmed up. The area between Wales and South-west England would have been during times of low sea level, a wide plain with the limestone outcrop of Gower, Coegan and Pembrokeshire forming cave-ridden hills to the North, which man and beast (e.g. the Cave Hyena, Hyaena crocuta var. 'spelaea') retreated for shelter.

Other species have been found, but less frequently, at Coegan - the Cave Bear (Ursus spelaeus) and Cave Lion (Felix leo var. 'spelaea') - the latter was anatomically the same as the lion of the present-day plains of Africa, but its behaviour and ecology must have differed somewhat. The large (over 6 ft high) Giant Ox (Bos primigenius), which became extinct in pro-Roman Britain and a sturdy type of horse, (Equus caballus), were also found. (Species found in the limestone caves of Gower include Cave Bear, hyena, Wild Ox, Bison, Woolly Mammoth, Woolly Rhinoceros, Reindeer, Lion, Horse, Soft-nosed Rhinoceros, Straight-tusked. Elephant, Wolf and amongst the smaller animals, dog, wild cat, mountain hare, polecat, otter, marten, mole, shrew, water shrew and various birds. In March 1984, the remains of an Auroch were found in one of the Gower Bays).

The Red Deer (Cervus elaphus), found also in peat remains at Llanelli North Dock end elsewhere locally, survived the majority of those animals found at Coegan; but deer found in present day Britain represent re-introductions. It is primarily a beast of mature, open forest and those found on the marginal habitat of the rugged, poorly-vegetated North-west Scotland are atypically small compared to the Red Deer of Britain’s past.

Moving into historical times, the great and cultured ruler of South Wales from 920 to 950, Hywel Dda, in his famous Laws - ‘Cyfreithiau Hywel Dda’, implies that Roe Deer (Capreolus capreolus) were not uncommon; their remains having been found or example near St. Ishmaels and presumably it was this species together with Wild Boar, that the inhabitants of Coed-y-Glyn which covered the Gwendraeth Valley in medieval times. Place-names that denote deer (‘Hydd’ – deer; ‘Ewig’ – hind and ‘Elain’ – young fawn) can be found in Wales, and etymologists are of the opinion that Carwe (Carway) - near Trimsaran - is cognate with ’carw', meaning deer.

If any predator has acquired an undeserved bad reputation, it is the wolf (Canus lupus), but undeniably it must have been a formidable foe to early keepers of livestock and lonely winter travellers, with Wales' thick forests and rugged terrain providing a refuge for the wolf until 1576. It survived another century in the vast Caledonian pine forests of Scotland (to 1680), and until.
perhaps 1770 in Eire. Due to this beasts' hungry wanderings and depredations, January was known as the 'Wolf Month' to the Saxons; the Celts of Wales no doubt likewise feared this magnificent animal.

Wolf pelts were valued at 8d by Hywel Dda - the same as paid for Otter, Fox and Stag, whilst the Saxon King Edgar imposed a fine of 300 Wolf skins per annum on a subservient Welsh king. The figure of 300 suggests that the Wolf was frequent, and other Welsh kings paid their taxes in Wolf skins too.

During the warring years after the Norman Conquest when Norman, Saxon and Celt fought each other for domination of Southern Britain, the Wolf was able to re-establish itself and in 1166, 22 persons, many of whom later died, were said to have been bitten by a crazed wolf in Carmarthenshire! Dyfed's last Wolf was said to have been killed at Reynoldston in Pembrokeshire and Wolf pads, together with the remains of a Wild Boar and the horns and hooves of a Roebuck are reputed to have been found at the pre 1500 Island House at Laugharne. Some place-names refer to the Wolf e.g. 'Cil-y-blaidd' (Wolf's Refuge) near Lampeter, but 'blaidd' may be a reference to a person of fierce disposition.

The omnivorous yet formidable Wild Boar (Sus scrofa) must have been very frequent in the widespread oak forests of Wales, feeding on autumnal mast (or anything edible!), and as already stated it was hunted in the medieval Cwm Gwendraeth where the skull of a Boar was found in an early adit. Like the Wolf and the long-extinct Bear (believed to have become extinct in the so-called 'Dark Ages'), the Boar figured prominently in Celtic mythology and subsequent Welsh legend. Perhaps the most famous tale of all comes from the story of 'Culhwch ac Olwen' in the Mabinogi. The magical boar known as the Trwch Trwyth, with an equally magical golden comb between its tusks, is hunted by Arthur and his 'warriors of the three realms of Britain', through what was later called Pembrokeshire, past Aber Tywi (St. Ishmaels), through Dyffryn Llwchwr and Dyffryn Amanw. The hunted Trcwich Trwyth embarks on a swath of death and destruction, killing many of its pursuers until it is finally cornered near the headwaters of the Hafren or Severn.

Another Wild Boar legend concerns Cadifor, Lord of Cilsant on the Carmarthenshire/Pembrokeshire border, when he hunted a 'monstrous red-headed boar' and tied it to a tree at 'Llain-y -baidd' ('area of the boar') east of Cilsant. Large herds of domesticated swine were let loose in Welsh woodlands to graze and for 'panning' of acorns until the early
19th century, (the 'boar' skull found in a Gwendraeth mine may belong to one of these; semi-domesticated beasts). The last Wild. Boar of Wales is said to have been killed sometime in the 16th century.

The Beaver or 'afainc'/'efainc' ('water monster' - again mythological connections), or the descriptive 'llostlydan' ('broad-tail') was mentioned as occurring on the Afon Teifi by Geraldus Cambrensis in c. 1198, "Hic fluvius solus in Britannia castores habet" ('in this sole river of Britain is the Beaver to be found'). It is now totally extinct in Britain, and persecution has resulted in a fragmented distribution in Europe. It still survives in the Rhône Delta and parts of the River Elbe and Scandinavia.

A predator that might have survived extinction in Wales (as did the Pine Marten and Polecat), is the Wild Cat, but unfortunately this species died out about 200 years ago. Finally, Hywel Dda mentions Wild White Cattle with red ears at about 940 A.D. and semi-wild cattle are still to be seen on a few large estates in Britain today, but their origin as 'wild Cattle' is said to be dubious.

**Important Note**

The information on which this article is based has been gleaned from various periodicals and publications including the early numbers of the 'Carmarthenshire Antiquary'. Some of the findings/identifications as published at the turn of the century may now not be considered acceptable by modern palaeontologists and historians, also a few of the scientific names may have been changed by taxonomists. Furthermore, it must be realised that a few references are obviously legendary rather than factual in character.

Thanks are due to Messrs. R.H. Davies of Llanelli Public Library and D.H.V. Roberts of Pontyates for advice regarding, sources of material.

P.S. Many specimens from Coegan can be seen in Carmarthen Museum, at the Bishop's Palace, Abergwilli (admission free).