



Jules Hudson

COUNTRY ESCAPE

Well-known for its moist climate and lush land, Wales is harnessing the power of its water and its communities are taking action to keep it green, says Jules

It's wet in Wales, and it's really wet in the Brecon Beacons, one of my favourite parts of the country. To put it into context, when you look at the average rainfall across the rest of the UK, the Beacons are over four times wetter than London, and although it's often seen as a standing joke to both visitors and locals alike, the Welsh have been making good use of their water for centuries.

Since the late 19th century, England's growing industrial centres such as Birmingham have been searching for water. In 1893, serious men in long coats and bowler hats ventured out west to set about buying up enough land to create reservoirs that would quench the thirst of Britain's second city, 73 miles away. The building of the Élan Valley dams was a marvel of late Victorian engineering, and they are still keeping Birmingham watered in exactly the same way today. For the Welsh, there really was money in the mountains, and power too. For most of us, combining electricity and water isn't something we should try at home, but, as I discovered recently at a reservoir above Talybont-on-Usk, it's been going on in Wales for years.

In 1930, following Birmingham's lead, yet more men in long coats, now with stylish Trilby's, appeared in the hills. They too wanted land upon which to capture water but in designing their dam, a small stone hut was built at its base into which they put a turbine. Hydroelectric power had arrived in the Usk Valley and it helped to run the dam long before the national grid covered the county.

By the 1950s, the grid had taken over and the turbine was removed. The beautifully built stone building remained as a reminder, but in truth, was now little more than a shed. However, eight years ago an enterprising local couple, Alison Kidd and Peter Williams, thought again about the old hydro house. Could it be put back into use, and if so, what might be done with the electricity it generated?

The short answer was yes, and in terms of the power produced, as I discovered whilst filming for *Escape to the Country*, it's potential to help the community of Talybont has been huge and the initiative has turned the village into a green scheme dream. After persuading Welsh Water to lease them the old turbine house, they installed a new system that would power some 70 homes. And, if that wasn't enough, they also tapped into more funding and

covered the village hall in solar panels. The result is that, under the government's green initiative, they create power which they sell to the grid and the profits go to support the local community.

They're also making it fun. Without exception most of the people I know who live in the area, myself included, are wedded to their 4x4s, and for good reason. Yet this enterprising duo have taken on the challenge, not just of converting rainwater into cash, but also challenging the way most of us

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get around. They've started a growing trend to use electric vehicles. Not only has the scheme funded a community van and mini bus powered by little more than a household plug socket, the pair practice what they preach and get about in a Renault Twizy, which is something akin to a four wheeled two seater motorbike (www.ecotravelnetwork.co.uk). Having persuaded local businesses, pubs and shops to offer free battery charging, the growing fleet of ten are set to become a familiar sight around the Beacons. What's more, these vehicles are quiet, and eerily so. Driving one up to the old dam, I felt somewhat disconcerted, but not for long. Soon enough, the pleasure of a near open-top ride, with the sound of wind and birds, was a welcome change to the thud of a diesel.

So next time it rains, let's not all moan as usual. Not only does it keep our region a green and pleasant land, it's also topping up a potentially limitless supply of power that's bringing a refreshing sound to the roads up in the mountains and valleys that surround Brecon. It's the sound of silence.

JULES HUDSON was born in Essex but stayed in Wales after studying archeology at Lampeter University. He has worked in television since 1996 and is a member of the *Countryfile* team, but is best-known as the leading face of *Escape To The Country*. He moved back across the Border in 2012, to Herefordshire.

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