Notes for an article in the May issue of the BBC “Wildlife” magazine

Ross-on-Wye is situated in the ancient kingdom of Ergyng (Welsh) and called 'Archenfield' by Anglo-Saxons invaders. Apparently, Archenfielders were seen to be ‘prickly characters’ - independently-minded and adaptable but also unreliable and lacked loyalty. These characteristics were deemed to be the nature of the wild hedgehogs. Hence the name: Archenfield = Land of Hedgehogs.

Where is Archenfield?

Archenfield sits between England and Wales, and is bordered on two sides by the Rivers Wye and Monnow. Geographically, it was a small kingdom stretching from Ross-on-Wye (east) to Hay-on-Wye (west), and from Monmouth (south) to Hereford (north).

After the Romans left the area after 409 AD, Archenfield (then referred to as Ercing), was reclaimed and re-settled by the Welsh. Archenfield was a semi-autonomous Welsh district whose inhabitants could choose to follow either Welsh Common Law or English law.

There are a few very old documents that give an insight into the unique position of Archenfield. They provide a glimpse into the various conflicts the Archenfielders had with the Welsh and English (and with each other). ‘The Ordinance concerning the Dunsæte’, which was written in the tenth century, sets out the agreements and procedures of trade between the Archenfielders (Dunsæta – the hill-dwellers) with those living across the river after the theft of cattle and homicide. The Anglo-Saxons were the overarching authority at the time but the Ordinance reveals that because the Archenfielders saw themselves equal to the king, they demanded that they should also receive hostages from Gwent (Wales) like those being given to the West Saxons\(^1\).

In the Middle Ages, Giraldus Cambrensis, otherwise known as Gerald of Wales (1146 – 1223), reports Archenfielders were impetuous and volatile, lacking in loyalties and ferocious fighters. This reputation made the Archenfielders rather attractive to the kings of England, who commissioned them as mercenaries in their armies. In turn, these Archfielders were given special privileges and are referred to as ‘Kings-men’.

Image of 13th century woodcut of Welsh Archers

\(^1\) George Molyneaux (2011). The Ordinance concerning the Dunsæte and the AngloWelsh frontier in the late tenth and eleventh centuries. AngloSaxon England, 40, pp 249272
doi:10.1017/S0263675111000111
So, what about hedgehogs? Since ancient Greek times, the hedgehog has been portrayed as a cunning animal that steals apples, fruits, eggs and milk. Does it, therefore, follow that those who in habited Ergyng were called 'hedgehogs' by the Anglo-Saxons because they were thieves and not to be trusted? Or, were there other reasons why Ergyng was called 'Land of Hedgehogs'?

Come to Yolande’s talk on Tuesday 17th May at Ross Library to find out. You'll also learn some interesting facts about the humble hedgehog and its unique connection with Ross-on-Wye.

Yolande is the Founder of the Hedgehog Festival in Ross-on-Wye and gives fascinating talks and tours on Archenfield. If you are unable to attend the talk on Tuesday 17th May but would like her to deliver a talk to your local group, contact Yolande via festivalhog@yahoo.co.uk.

The Hedgehog Festival in Ross-on-Wye runs from March – November every year, to find out what's on, go to: www.playross.com/hedgehog-festival.html.