

CPAT Report No 1056

**Historic settlements in the
former Brecknock Borough**

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Report for Cadw

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The Historic Settlements of the former Brecknock Borough

Background

In 1993, the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust compiled an assessment of the historic settlements of northern Brecknock on behalf of Cadw and the Brecknock Borough Council. It was one of the earliest such assessments for eastern Wales and ultimately ten such reports were completed between 1992 and 1995, embracing the entire region for which CPAT had a remit.

The imperative underpinning these surveys was laid out at the Brecknock Borough study in the following terms:

It has long been recognised that development within town and village alike [might] disturb or obliterate significant information about the past, but a suitable response to a specific building development or other permanent land use change has usually been instigated, if at all, on an *ad hoc* basis. A more structured approach to the understanding of historic settlements and the preservation and management of this fragile resource is required. This has been given a greater urgency by the publication in 1991 of the Welsh version of the *Planning and Policy Guidance Note: Archaeology and Planning* (PPG 16 Wales). This emphasises the responsibilities of Local Planning Authorities in the conservation of the archaeological heritage and confirms that archaeological remains are a material consideration when determining planning applications (Martin and Walters 1993, 3).

Three principal objectives of the study were defined:

- i) to produce a general picture of historic settlement in the area,
- ii) to identify, in as far as the evidence allows, those areas within the historic settlements that could be termed archaeologically sensitive, in order to assist in the day-to-day and long-term planning processes initiated by the local authority, and
- iii) to define areas of potential archaeological significance where developers might be required to undertake an archaeological evaluation as part of the planning process.

It hardly needs to be stressed that in the seventeen years since that report was circulated, there have been considerable changes, and we would hope improvements, in our perceptions of the emergence, development and collapse of settlements generally and in Brecknock more specifically.

Firstly, a series of Cadw-funded studies have appeared which directly or indirectly have had a bearing on settlement studies. The historic churches survey (1995-99), the early medieval ecclesiastical sites survey (2001-04) and even the deserted medieval rural settlement survey (1996-2001) all played a part in enhancing our understanding of settlement development in eastern Wales, as did some rather more specific and detailed ground surveys such as those of village earthworks in Brecknock and Radnorshire (1993 and 1996), and an analysis of one of the best deliberately planned villages in the country, New Radnor (1994).

Secondly, there are the results that have accrued from developer-funded works – whether excavation, evaluation, watching brief or building recording – as a result of local authorities implementing PPG16, Welsh Office Circulars 60/96 and 61/96 and the various editions of Planning Policy Wales.

Thirdly, there are recently published studies which have transformed our thinking on certain topics. Most notable in this context are the place-name investigations by Hywel Wyn Owen

and Richard Morgan (2007) and the first volume of the early medieval inscribed stones corpus prepared by Mark Redknap and John Lewis (2007).

And finally but in some ways the least tangible is the ever-improving perceptions and appreciation (or so we hope) of settlement in east Wales, as a result of accumulated expertise, and the accessing of research from other regions of Wales and England. This doesn't normally manifest itself in publications, although the writer's paper, co-authored with Wyn Evans (2009) on *clas* churches and their landscapes is an exception.

CPAT thus felt that it was an appropriate time to examine the picture of historic settlements, more than fifteen years after the initial study was completed. Various questions had been raised. Had developer funding in advance of the potential destruction or damage to the cultural heritage had much of an effect and if so where? Had our knowledge and appreciation of the historic settlements markedly improved in the last fifteen years? And in a departure from the practice in the early 1990s when the Internet was little more than an unfulfilled dream, could we successfully disseminate that information authoritatively so that it could be accessed digitally to satisfy the increasing number of people who search our website? There are several hundred historic settlements in eastern Wales and it was not possible to examine them all in a single exercise. The former local authority areas of Brecknock Borough and Radnorshire were selected to start the programme and it is hoped to be able to follow with the other areas over the next two to three years.

Methodology and presentation

A pattern for each report had been established in 1993 through to 1995 comprising a report which covered a minimum of an A4 page of text and in some instances, depending on the size and interest of the settlement involved, three or four pages. The report considered, under four sub-headings, the geographic location of the settlement, the known history of its origins and development, the buildings and archaeology that were an integral element of the settlement, and finally a set of recommendations for further work.

Accompanying each settlement study was an Ordnance Survey map-based depiction of the settlement showing scheduled ancient monuments, known archaeological features and earthworks buildings or structures considered in the text, areas which it was felt at the time should be preserved in situ, areas that should be evaluated in advance of development, and a boundary line drawn around the historic settlement as it was then recognised, in other words the historic core.

The early reports also contained as annexes a copy of the descriptive brief for the preparation of the study and another of a draft paper on archaeology and the planning process in Powys

After various discussions the modelling of both the text layout and the accompanying map have been revised, to take account of changing circumstances and current requirements.

The baseline information – the settlement name, the national grid reference and the primary record number that links the settlement (as well as its individual elements) to the Historic Environment Record – have necessarily been retained, although the height above sea level and the prefix PRN have been dropped.

The geographic location has been retained, as has the section on history, now renamed 'history of development'. More change can be seen in the section formerly headed 'buildings and archaeology' which has been altered to 'the heritage to 1750'. This alteration results from two considerations. Firstly, it is becoming increasingly commonplace to refer to the cultural heritage and cultural heritage assets, convenient collective terms that embrace not only below and above-ground archaeology, and buildings, but also historic landscape (and townscape) elements that did not necessarily get the recognition that they warrant in the former

terminology. Cultural heritage is seen as a useful shorthand descriptive term for everything that we are concerned with here. Secondly, a decision was taken to end the study at 1750, bringing it into line with Cadw's terminal date for the concurrent scoping programme of medieval and early post-medieval monument scheduling enhancement. 1750 to 1760 is often seen as a starting date for the Industrial Revolution, even if its full 'flowering' did not occur in Wales for another fifty years. Equally importantly, however, it was during the later 18th century and a little beyond that some settlements saw marked development with a concomitant increase in the number of buildings, and the diminishing significance in the forms of evidence that are significant to the archaeologist. Ystradgynlais in this report offers an excellent example, and a comparison of this industrial town with say Llandefalle is instructive. This is not to downplay the significance of the buildings that date from the later 18th and 19th centuries, nor to infer that settlements that contain large numbers of such structures are not historic, rather it is a commentary on the shift in the nature of the evidence that is available to us.

This section of the report has also tried to adopt a more rigorous approach to the presentation of the data, whether it be on archaeological sites, buildings or the townscape or villagescape. It would be easy to write protracted descriptions of some buildings such as churches or earthwork complexes, or even in some instances the discoveries from development-led evaluations. The regurgitation of much detail, it was felt, would not necessarily be particularly useful to the general reader, and indeed might act as a deterrent. The inclusion of PRN numbers will allow the researcher or enthusiast to follow up individual leads should they wish, but what is offered here is a concise text covering as many issues as are currently known without over-elaboration on any one of them.

Finally, the section of recommendations has been removed. This, it should be admitted, is in part a pragmatic decision based on the realisation that some of the original recommendations covering standard issues such as the importance of consultation with the archaeological curator, the need for watching briefs and evaluations, and the like were compiled at a time when PPG16 was new, consultation practice was yet to be regularised, and the importance of the cultural heritage resource in our towns and villages had in some areas yet to be appreciated by at least some local authority planners. This situation has changed, and the importance of the cultural heritage is now largely accepted at local government level. It is pragmatic, however, for less satisfactory reasons. In an ideal world the recommendations for Crickadarn that the remnant earthworks in the churchyard and those in the field to the east should be 'surveyed and recorded at an appropriate level', or that at Llanafan Fechan the area of ridge and furrow to the north of the church should be 'recorded by aerial photography' would have been followed up and completed in the intervening seventeen years. That this has not happened is less a comment on the integrity of the recommendation, more on the limited resources that are available for surveying and aerial photography. It is unrealistic to assume that this is going to change, and perhaps equally unrealistic to assume that this is the best way to present a set of recommendations for future action. The writer would argue that it would be better to have a separate, prioritised 'hit list' combining all the survey or photographic targets, so that if resources were to be made available in Powys, decisions could be made on the basis of comparative need and significance.

There have also been some modifications to the plans that accompany the texts. The depiction of designated archaeological sites (scheduling) and buildings (listing) has been dropped, for we are conscious of the fact that it is the prerogative of Cadw to define these sites in cartographic form, and that the reader requiring information on the extent of a designation should approach the appropriate authorities. Furthermore, the number and extent of designated sites within any given settlement may change at any time, and assuming that the maps have a currency of several years, there is the potential for misleading a reader because the situation could have changed.

The definition of the historic core has also been modified, taking more account of existing boundaries in order to lessen any potential contention over whether a particular spot lies

inside or outside the historic core, whilst also stressing that the core boundary as defined is not an immutable perimeter, but is simply an estimate and a guide based on an assessment of the existing evidence by the writer as to where earlier settlement may once have existed.

Dropped to is the zonation of areas for evaluation in advance of development. In 1993, defining such areas was a useful guide to planners as to where archaeological intervention was most needed, but there is a potential conflict between the depiction of one or two such areas on a map on the one hand and the definition of the historic core on the other. If for whatever reason, an area within an historic core envelope is not highlighted for evaluation, this could be taken to mean that the area would not require further assessment in the event of a proposed development. Rather we should be working on the assumption that any development within an historic core should be a candidate for an evaluation, depending on the nature of the development itself.

More contentious perhaps is the decision to omit the identification of blocks of land defined as ‘areas for preservation in situ’, another facet of the 1993 survey. Where such areas are already designated within an historic settlement as for instance at Gwenddwr, there preservation is a given and no problem arises. However, in some cases in the past a decision that an area should be preserved has been taken on the basis of a rather superficial assessment of its worth, rather than on a detailed analysis of what is there. Yet if at a planning level a field containing earthworks is going to be preserved it has to be based on rigorously defined evidence that will stand up to scrutiny.

One final aspect to clarify is that the historic core envelope now defines only those areas within which there is the likelihood of settlement, by which we mean dwellings and their curtilages. The setting of any settlement will have been the surrounding landscape that was farmed and utilised from it, and potentially could spread over several square kilometres. Defining its fields, its pastures and its woodlands will be a considerable task, and its success cannot be guaranteed. Vital though it is to an understanding of that settlement, the inclusion of the setting within the historic core cannot be advocated. It requires a different level of zoning.

The original study listed 59 settlements, though this included several duplicates – as with Llanafan Fechan and Llanfechan, and Llandulas and Tirabad – which are alternative names for the same places. The current survey covers 43 settlements. Omitted are several settlements which reflect only post-1750 developments such as Llanwrtyd Wells and Beulah, and others such as Gwarafof where the nature of the settlement does not fit comfortably within the scope of this report.

An overview of historic settlements

The 1993 study provided a very thorough assessment of the settlements in what was Brecknock Borough. Attention was paid to the differing concepts of dispersal and nucleation, to the ideas of the late Glanville Jones on nucleated bond settlements, to the prevalence of settlements where ‘llan’ was incorporated in the name, to the primacy of sub-circular churchyards, to mottes with settlements, to those settlements displaying English (or more properly Anglo-Norman) influences and so on.

It is not proposed to repeat all of this here, but simply to look at the varying types of settlements to discern what patterns emerge.

Church settlements

In terms only of numbers, it is the church settlements that take precedence. The term ‘church settlement’ is a useful collective one, although it is one that probably doesn’t figure in the classic texts on historic settlement. In that some degree of grouping or nucleation might be assumed in the definition of a settlement, the term is indeed almost a paradox. For the

morphology of a church settlement centres on the fact that the church appears to be positioned by itself or perhaps with no more than a single farm, an inn or a rectory for company. The church, then, is the settlement. In some instances it might be suspected that former dwellings have been abandoned or swept away leaving few if any visible traces. Putative bond settlements of earlier medieval date could be candidates. But some churches almost certainly never attracted more than a solitary dwelling around them, for they served a community dispersed in landholdings around the parish. Only in the most recent centuries have a few more dwellings aggregated around the church, and in places such as Llanynis on the bank of the Irfon, not even this has happened. Archaeology may demonstrate in due course that some of those in the list below were accompanied by dwellings in earlier centuries, but for the present in nuclear terms these occupy the bottom rung of the ladder.

Abergwesyn	Llandulas	Llanwrtyd
Crickadarn	Llanfihangel Brynpabuan	Llanynis
Llanafan Fechan	Llanfihangel Nant Bran	Lower Chapel
Llanddewi'r Cwm	Llanganten	Maesmynis
Llandefaelog Fach	Llangynog	Talachddu
Llandefaelog Tre'r-graig	Llanlleonfel	
Llandeilo'r Fan	Llanwrthwl	

A variant of the church settlement is what (at least for the present) we might call the common-side settlement. In a few instances churches and chapels (and there may be a bias towards chapels-of-ease rather than longer established parochial churches) lie beside what were once small patches of open land, perhaps where tracks met or some other good reason prevented the encroachment of enclosed fields. Only in recent centuries have dwellings tended to accumulate around or even on this common land, emphasising a relatively modern move to nucleation, while the common itself has gradually disappeared. How significant a trait this is remains to be established. So far four likely candidates have appeared.

Alexanderstone	Llan-y-wern
Battle	Upper Chapel

There are a few settlements where there is archaeological evidence for dwellings around the church but not concentrated in a true nucleation, but spread out, giving a non-nucleated pattern, but one that cannot be satisfactorily identified as a dispersed form of settlement. In reality it may be that our evidence is currently so imperfect that we simply cannot recognise the nucleated settlement that was once here, or alternatively that the evidence that we do have is open to other interpretations and these were church settlements of the sort noted above.

Alltmawr	Garthbreny	Llanafan Fawr
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Nucleated settlements are now well attested in this part of southern Powys, primarily because of the survival of earthworks that point to dwellings and their crofts. Indeed, in eastern Wales it is Brecknock that stands out because of its nucleations, for it is the Anglo-Norman takeover of the Usk and Wye valleys that set the region apart from areas further to the north.

Gwenddwr	Llandefalle	Llanfilo
Llanddew	Llanfihangel Talyllyn	

There are only two settlements which reveal elements of deliberate planning. Builth Wells has long been known as a market town and a case can be made for its original growth to have been organic, spreading westwards from the castle towards the location where the church was established. But in the 13th century when it acquired market rights, a new part of Builth

developed and this has the look of a planted addition. Bronllys has not previously been seen as a planned settlement. It was hinted at in the 1993 study, but further examination of the topography indicates that between the castle and the church, a settlement was laid out, terminating in a small market place.

Bronllys

Builth Wells

Finally there are some settlements that currently defy categorisation: the evidence that is available to us is insufficient to place them in any of the groups already discussed. It is unlikely that further documentary research or topographic analysis will resolve the problem; only archaeology may throw any light on the matter. Interestingly two if not three of these places were important *clas* churches in the early medieval era, while the scale of the well-attested open fields around Llyswen might suggest a thriving community on the banks of the Wye, but unfortunately one that cannot be distinguished directly.

Llangammarch Wells

Merthyr Cynog

Llyswen

Ystradgynlais

Finally, we might touch briefly on how useful developer-funded works have proved to be since the first study in 1993. The old local authority area of Brecknock Borough is an intensely rural one, containing only one historic town, Builth Wells, notwithstanding the claims of Llanwrtyd Wells to be the smallest town in Britain. Not surprisingly then, nearly thirty settlements have seen no developer-funded work of any sort in the last fifteen years. But there have been some notable successes. Medieval dwellings have been revealed at Llanddew and Llanfilo, other activity at Alltmawr, and positive work on the church and churchyard at Llandefaelog Tre'r-graig. And inevitably there have been some negative returns as at Gwenddwr and Builth Wells.