

Llanafan Fawr

SN 968557
2567

Introduction

Llanafan Fawr is a small settlement clustered to the west of its church. It is sited on a slight spur on the western side of the Chwefri valley, overlooking its crossing by the B4358 Newbridge to Beulah road.

This brief report examines its emergence and development up to 1750. For the more recent history of the settlement, it will be necessary to look at other sources of information and particularly at the origins and nature of the buildings within it.

The accompanying map is offered as an indicative guide to the historic settlement. The continuous line defining the historic core offers a visual interpretation of the area within which the settlement developed, based on our interpretation of the evidence currently to hand. It is not an immutable boundary line, and may need to be modified as new discoveries are made. The map does not show those areas or buildings that are statutorily designated, nor does it pick out those sites or features that are specifically mentioned in the text.

We have not referenced the sources that have been examined to produce this report, but that information will be available in the Historic Environment Record (HER) maintained by the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust. Numbers in brackets are primary record numbers used in the HER to provide information that is specific to individual sites and features. These can be accessed on-line through the Archwilio website (www.archwilio.org.uk).

History of development

Llanafan Fawr means literally 'the greater St Afan's Church', and is presumably thus called to distinguish it from Llanafan Fechan near Builth Wells. The earliest reference is as *Llanauan Vaur* between 1198 and 1214, and around 1200 there was mention of *Sancti Avani quae Britannice Lanavan*.

It is documented as an early monastic site. The church was traditionally founded by St Afan, who is believed to have been a bishop at Llanbadarn Fawr (in what is now Ceredigion) in the 7th century, though it has also been claimed that Afan was murdered near here which could have established a link. Several associated features that might have originated in early times have been recorded around the settlement, including *Ffynnon Afan* (see below) and *Derwen Afan* (or Afan's oak-tree). More tenuously, two local place-names, Gwern-y-mynach and Lle'r Prior, might also attest this monastic past.

Llanafan Fawr does not appear to be recorded as a *clas* church in later documentary sources, but is nevertheless a strong candidate. It has a large circular churchyard sometimes associated with such sites, and was certainly the mother church for a number of smaller churches and chapels in the surrounding area.

Saint Afan's tomb lies in churchyard, and the ecclesiastical centre, for a time, may have become an important local centre for pilgrimage.

Now is little more than the church, a farm, an inn and a couple of houses.

The heritage to 1750

The massive single-cell church of St. Afan (20136) was substantially rebuilt in 1887 (by which time it was virtually ruinous), although the tower dates from 1765. The church formerly possessed a square chancel at the east end which was removed as part of the rebuilding, though its platform can still clearly be seen. The present church contains a medieval stoup which presumably belongs to the present building's predecessor, but otherwise few furnishings and fittings of medieval origin.

The church does contain a number of fragmentary decorated stones from the early medieval period. Within the church is a single pillar stone (3005) incised with a Latin ring cross dating from the 9th or 10th century, and built into the inside wall faces of the porch wall are three fragments of other decorated stones (5882, 5883 and 5884) which are probably of similar date.

The present churchyard (4079) is large and though now reduced has clearly been a sub-circular enclosure in excess of 130m across. The church stands eccentrically on a raised oval platform about 70m long which is probably the remains of an inner enclosure or possibly an earlier graveyard (2695). On the west and south the present churchyard has been squared off in modern times. To the west the enclosure has clearly been lost though road improvement, though its former line is probably reflected by the alignment of the Red Lion Inn. On the south a minor road has sliced through the churchyard, but the line of the original enclosing bank and ditch is still clearly visible as an earthwork (2905) in the field to the south of the lane. A well-defined holloway (2906) runs around the outside of the earthwork in this field and presumably represents the former course of the minor road. Based on existing and relic boundaries, an even larger, outer enclosure has been postulated beyond the south and east sides of the churchyard, but its authenticity has yet to be substantiated.

Within the churchyard lies St Afan's tomb (3007), now a substantial alter tomb topped by a single decorated slab 0.1m thick. The slab is inscribed in Lombardic script and is said to be of the 14th century. At the beginning of the 19th century the tomb was recorded as standing 7ft high and being surrounded by a dry stone wall, suggesting that its present appearance is of relatively recent design, and indeed it has been argued that even the inscribed slab could be a 19th-century creation.

A small ringwork called Ller'r Prior, which is a scheduled ancient monument (3008/SAM B89), lies to the south-west of the village. It comprises a circular area with an inner ditch and outer bank about 45m across and with an entrance on the south. Held to be the remains of a small castle by some, it is an unusual form of earthwork. It is possible that it could even be prehistoric or an early medieval enclosure associated with the church. Whatever its origins, it has a long history, however, and was used by the local community for games and events including cock-fighting into the early 20th century.

Llanafan Fawr was said to have possessed two holy wells: Ffynnon Afan (5886) which Edward Lhuyd mentioned in 1699 and Fynnon Dduw (5887). The site of one of these appears to survive as a small marshy hollow (6388) to the south of Brynafan and adjacent to the trackway noted above.

The Red Lion Inn (21182) opposite the church is a cruck-framed former hall-house of late 15th/early 16th-century date which was clad in stone in the 17th century. Although much altered, it is by far the oldest surviving domestic building in the settlement, and indeed at the time of the mid-19th-century tithe survey, it was the only dwelling accompanying the church.

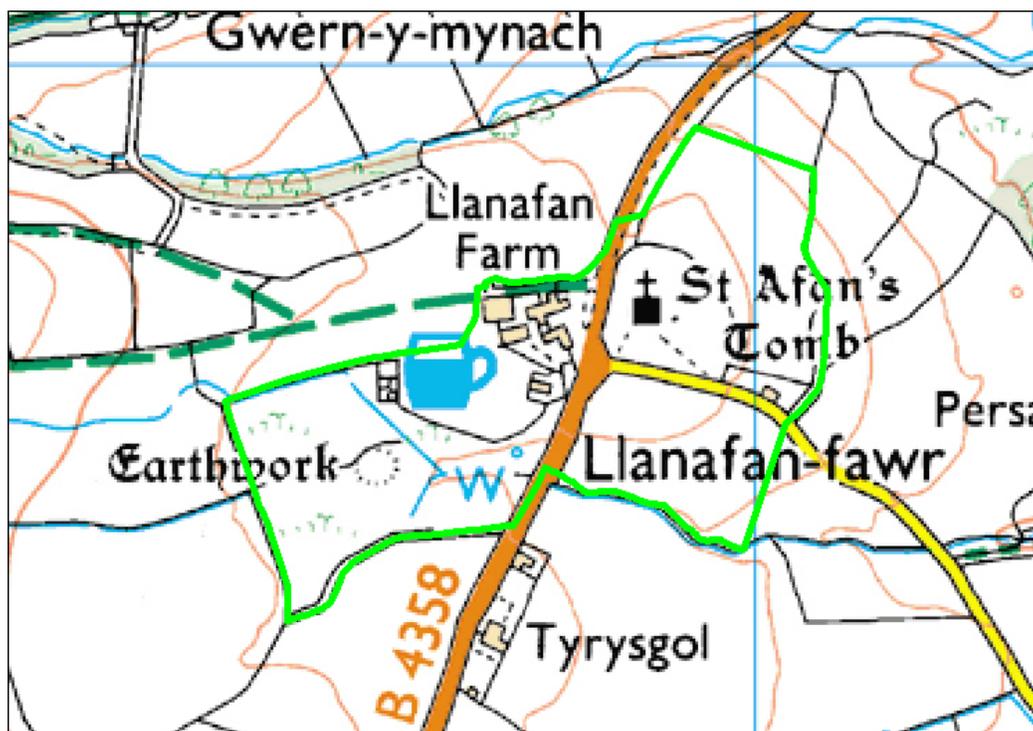
A small, square, embanked earthwork (2907) survives in the field to the south of the church close to the former circuit of the churchyard. Its date and purpose are unknown, though it might perhaps have functioned as an animal pound.

The ringwork is surrounded by the remains of a complex field system (2908). This comprises a number of intersecting banks, ditches and trackways, all of which appear to radiate from the ringwork and would appear to be associated with it. This field system has not been dated.

The field system and ringwork are approached by the remains a terraced trackway (2909) which originates to the east of churchyard and then circles round it to the south, crossing the road near Brynafan, and then merging into the field system to the north of the ringwork.

The field immediately to the west of the Llanafan Farm appears to contain traces of ridge and furrow cultivation (2910). Inherently undatable, these earthworks are presumably part of a medieval or later field system associated with the settlement. Relict field boundaries also remain in the field to the south of the church. A range of metal-detected finds of medieval and early post-medieval date in fields to the east of the churchyard reveal further activity of an uncertain nature.

In summary, the appearance of Llanafan Fawr as a simple church settlement is belied by its past history. Although there is presently little evidence of a significant nucleated settlement around the church, the potential for other features, some perhaps reflecting the higher status that attaches to a *clas* community, signals one of the most interesting places in the region.



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