

Llanfilo

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Introduction

Llanfilo is a small, nucleated village occupying the steeply sloping southern side of Dulas valley, some 10km to the east of Brecon.

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).



Llanfilo village, photo 00-C-0163 © CPAT 2011

History of development

The origin of Llanfilo is not documented but the sub-circular churchyard and British dedication of the church indicate that the village has its roots in the early medieval period. The church is dedicated to St Beilo, perhaps the daughter of the legendary Brychan. Formerly, the dedication had been to St Milburga, the Abbess of Wenlock, but although this was used until quite recently it appears to have been an error based on a misleading reference

of 1503, as the original dedication to Beilo is clearly recorded in 13th and 14th-century documents. This erroneous dedication to Milburga, a 7th-century English saint, led to considerable antiquarian speculation about a Saxon origin for the village. There is, however, no evidence for such an origin, even though the village, like many of its immediate neighbours, reflects some Anglo-Norman influence during the medieval period (in the level and type of settlement). Its beginnings are firmly in the Welsh tradition.

Llanfilo is not mentioned by name until the beginning of the 13th century when it appeared as *Lanbilio*, but inhabitants of the village were named as witnesses in 12th-century documents (including Robert de Llanfilo, Constable of Brecon). The village appears regularly in documents from the 14th century onwards, implying that it may have been a relatively important and populous settlement. Certainly the archaeological evidence confirms that it was larger during the medieval period than it is today.

The heritage to 1750

St Beilo's Church (20183) has a separated nave and chancel, with a squat western tower and southern porch. The tower was completely rebuilt in 1881, while the body of the church retains its medieval fabric, perhaps 13th-century. It was extensively restored in 1913. Two Romanesque lintels, neither in their original position, are the earliest furnishings, from the 12th century. There are also two rare stone altar slabs, an elaborate rood screen from about 1500, an impressive 15th-century vaulted roof, and what is believed to be the oldest surviving bell in the county, supposedly cast at Worcester between 1380 and 1400.

The church is set eccentrically within a roughly oval stone walled churchyard some 50m by 75m (2644). The topography would allow the yard to have extended under the present road (making a more circular enclosure 75m across), and while there is now no evidence to support such a theory, detailed late 19th-century mapping appears to confirm that a portion of the churchyard has been sliced off by the development of the lane network. The churchyard occupies a shelf on a very steep north-facing slope and this may explain why the church is squashed into the northern end of the enclosure, even though it is not noticeably more level than the wider southern end.

St Filo's well (4492), sited outside the churchyard and a reputed holy well, now only survives as a concrete and brick capped cistern. The well was formerly used as the village water supply.

Opposite the church are the substantial earthwork remains of a moated site, enclosing an area some 24m by 15m (4494/SAM B195). Though on an unusually steep slope, it is fairly typical of the small group of moats in this area. It could well be the site of the forerunner of Penmaes Farm which was formerly the local 'manor house'.

To the west of Penmaes farm a small oval field survives, encircled by roads, between the farm and the church and in front of the moated site. This feature (2654), which is now semi-derelict and used for storage by the farm, might be the remains of a small village green, though the identification of a substantial medieval building on it in 1994 argues against this interpretation. .

The street pattern within the village is characteristically medieval, being a linear development extending north (downhill) from the church, and perhaps originally beyond Penishapentre Farm. The character of the surviving buildings is mixed although there are some examples of late medieval/early post-medieval forms, with St Anthony's (2997) and Penmaes Farm (2998) perhaps being the oldest. Though the latter cannot demonstrably be taken back before the 18th century, the presence of both a dovecote and a walled garden reveals that this originated as a gentry house.

On the west of this main street are several vacant plots (and one derelict farm building - 6729), all of which are probably on the medieval street frontage and might contain significant archaeological remains. Evaluations in 1994 produced little of significance on this side

suggesting that medieval housing along the west side of the road was not continuous. Either side of Penishapentre Farm the earthwork remains of building platforms and trackways (2999, 2650, 2651) are clearly visible.

The east side of the street has fewer building traces, but between Penmaes Farm and St Anthony's has been heavily landscaped by gardens. North of St Anthony's a clear earthwork platform (37024) marks the site of a former house, of similar shape and size to its neighbour. Behind this single platform, in the field opposite Penishapentre, are the substantial earthwork remains of what appears to be a deserted part of the former medieval settlement (2652). These comprise a holloway, running north-west across the field to join the existing road opposite Pentishapentre, with a number of building platforms lying to either side of it.

North of the moated site the remains of a building, perhaps 15m long and 8.5m wide, were recorded in excavation in 1994, and dated by sparse pottery to the medieval period (15935). Whether this was part of the manorial complex focused on the moat, or a normal medieval dwelling within the settlement is unclear. A watching brief behind Rosary Cottage to the north of the church did not record any medieval features.

These deserted village remains may have extended further south of the village, into the fields behind Penmaes, but these have been heavily improved and no obvious evidence survives, other than immediately to the south of the moat where there is a platform adjacent to the road (9957).

More certain is the spread of open fields associated with the settlement both to the north and particularly the east.

On the crest of the east-west ridge, at the eastern end of this field, there is a small circular earth and stone mound (2653). While this might be the remains of a Bronze Age barrow, it is more likely that it is the site of a medieval windmill.

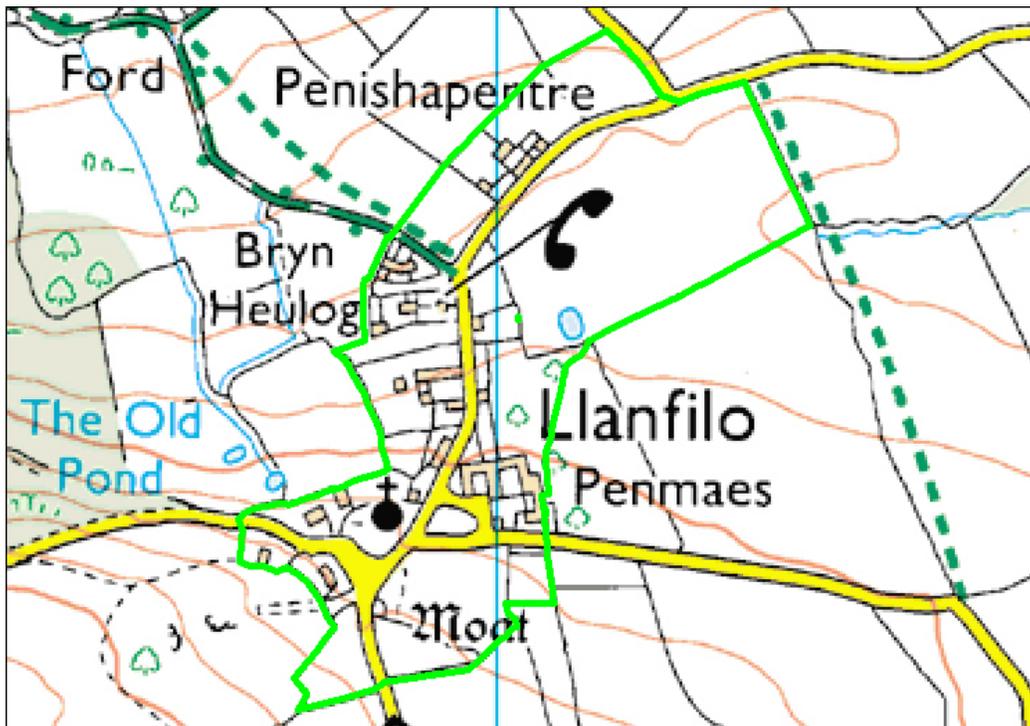
Outside Penmaes Farm is circular sectional stone a cider press (2617). While this press does not appear to be in situ (it is neither level nor properly assembled) it presumably attests a local cider making tradition.

North-west of the village lies a small abandoned quarry (2996) which may have provided stone for many of its present (and past) buildings.

What emerges at Llanfilo is a small medieval nucleated settlement with church and manor at its southern, higher end and accessed by a lane running up the hill with a straggle of dwellings lying beside it. Some other dwellings may have lain to the west and south-west of the churchyard, and south of the moated site.



Cider press at Penmaes farm, photo CS92-007-0033 © CPAT 2011



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