

Ystradgynlais

SN 787100
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Introduction

Ystradgynlais is a substantial village in the extreme south-western tip of modern Powys. It lies on the east bank of the Tawe river, its church surrounded by modern housing.

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

As seen today, Ystradgynlais is ostensibly a modern creation arising from the rapid increase in mining and iron working in the area in the 18th and 19th centuries and in this respect it is typical of many such settlements on the fringes of the south Wales valleys. It is less typical of the settlements in this study as it is the only one to have any significant degree of industrialisation.

There is a tradition, courtesy of Theophilus Jones at the beginning of the 18th century, that the village derives its name from Gunleus ap Glewissig, an otherwise fictitious prince of Gwent. However, the meaning is the 'vale of the river Cynlais', though it has been suggested that Cynlais could also be a personal name. The stream itself is evidenced as *Cingleis* as early as 1129, while the settlement appears as *Stradgenles* in 1372, and *Estradgynles* in 1493.

The church contains two early medieval inscribed stones which are supposed to have originated locally. The present church is modern, but it had a medieval and perhaps even a Norman predecessor, and it is possible that medieval settlement underlies the modern village.

The heritage to 1750

Parts of two inscribed pillar stones (2689; 3223) survive in the boiler room walling on the south side of the church. One is attributed to the 5th century, the other to the second half of the 6th century. Both were recovered from the east wall of the old church when it was demolished, and presumably came from an early medieval ecclesiastical site or graveyard on this site.

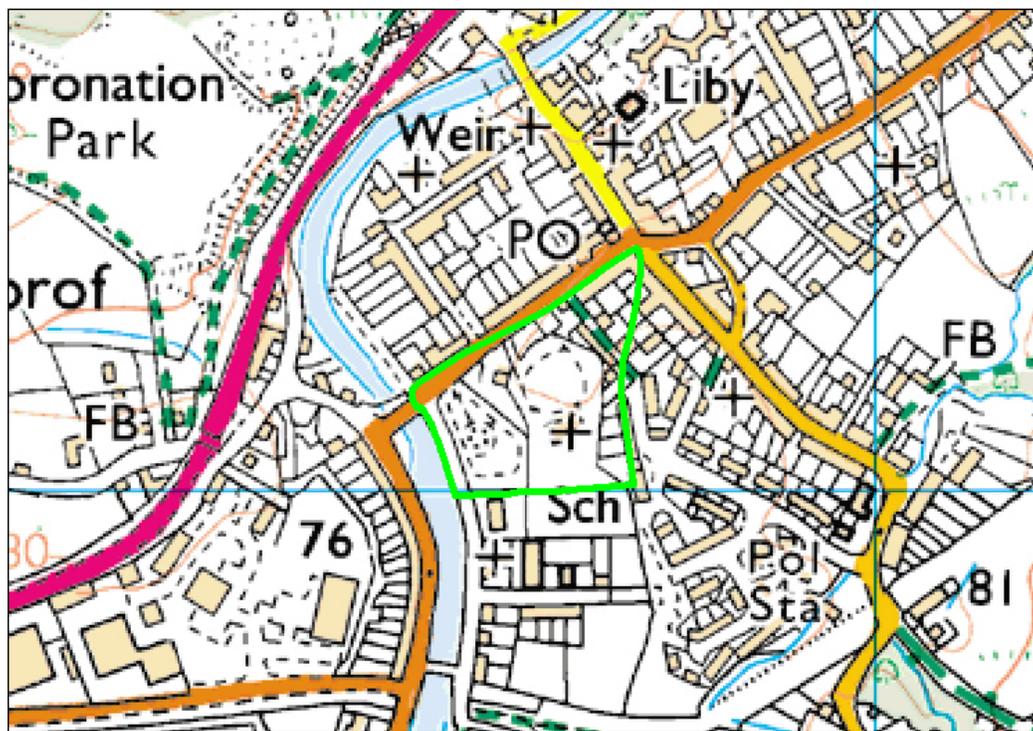
St Cynog's Church (20113) was built on its present site in 1861, to replace a smaller church (2691) of the same name. The foundations of this earlier church, which is locally held to have been a Norman structure, occupy a raised platform some 50m to the north of the present one. Its dimensions were recorded by Theophilus Jones. Little from the earlier church was re-

housed in the Victorian church: there is one 17th-century memorial inside the latter and some undated hatchments.

Both church sites lie within what has become a 'keyhole-shaped' churchyard which is filled with 18th and 19th-century memorials and is bounded by modern walls and fences. This unusual shape is composed of a modern rectangular extension joined on the north to an older sub-circular enclosure (2692). The sub-circular enclosure is centred on the raised platform containing the foundations of the old church and it is likely that these are the remains of an early medieval churchyard.

Without exception the buildings of Ystradgynlais appear to date from the 19th and 20th centuries, the earlier parts being typical of the terraced brick housing found in most industrial settlement, while the later parts are equally typical modern brick estates.

However, in view of the potentially early church it is possible that there was medieval settlement at Ystradgynlais. The most likely place for this would probably be in the level area to the north of the church bounded by the river Tawe, though there is no corroborative evidence for this belief. The street pattern of Ystradgynlais is typical of many small medieval towns, having a focal cross roads and a regular grid of side-streets, although it could equally well be the product of 19th-century planning and thus falls outside the remit of this study.



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