

Bettws Gwerfil Goch

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Introduction

Bettws Gwerfil Goch is set in a U-shaped valley occupied by a small stream that runs south-westwards to join Afon Alwen no more than three hundred metres away. Hills press down on the settlement to the east and west, the church with its surrounding houses sitting on a gentle south-east facing spur where the tributary opens out into the main valley.

Bettws is now one of the most westerly villages in Denbighshire, Afon Alwen to the west at times forming the boundary with neighbouring Conwy. Until 1974, it was a parish in Merionnydd, before being transferred to Clwyd, now itself discarded. Corwen is a little less than 6km to the south-east and the A5 trunk road about 3km to the south, but the settlement itself is served only by minor lanes.

This brief report examines the emergence and development of Bettws Gwerfil Goch up to the year 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 only 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 will require modification 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. The HER can be accessed on-line through the Archwilio website (www.archwilio.org.uk).

History of development

The church here is recorded as *Ecc'a de betos* in 1254, and as *Bettus* in 1535. In 1291 it appears as *Bettus Guerfyl* but the full name emerges only in the Elizabethan period. The *betws* element is usually taken to indicate a chapel or oratory rather than a parochial church, while Gwerfil Goch is identified in early genealogies as a daughter of one of the princes of Gwynedd, Cynan ab Owain Gwynedd, who lived at the beginning of the 13th century. Assuming her to be the patron of the chapel, this might indicate a late foundation date for it, and this would be in keeping with the adoption of the element *betws*. It has implications too for the development of the settlement that subsequently developed around it.

Yet we should acknowledge at least a possibility that there was already a chapel here and that Gwerfyl Goch simply re-founded or re-endowed it. Certainly Archdeacon Thomas, the historian of the diocese, considered that it might have originated as an oratory or pilgrims' church on an ancient routeway from Bala to Ruthin and Holywell. He suggested, too, that its earlier dedication might have been to St Elian, on the basis of locally surviving place-names, and that it was rebuilt by the husband of Gwefyl Goch, a grand-daughter of Owain Gwynedd, in the 12th century. However, this supposed dedication to St Elian is in doubt as the place-names quoted by Thomas appear to be of little antiquity.

The position of the settlement close to its own parish boundary with two other parishes, Corwen and Llanfihangel, also points to a late emergence for Bettws.

Edward Lhuyd at the end of the 17th century noted that there were nine cottages by the church which suggests a small but not insignificant settlement. Fairs were held in the churchyard until the 18th century which reinforces the view that Bettws was a local focus, and this is reinforced by Lhuyd's remarking on 'the small market of sale kept in it on fryday and 3 fairs in ye year'. The mid-19th-century Tithe survey reveals a pattern and density of settlement on the north-west side of the stream that has altered very little in the intervening century and a half.

The heritage to 1750

The small church (19754), a single cell structure with a porch and vestry attached, is dedicated to St Mary. The fabric of the church traditionally dates to the 15th century but whether any of it could be of earlier, 12th-century date, is impossible to determine. The porch was constructed in 1606. The church as a whole was restored and partially rebuilt in 1882. There are late medieval (1492) painted panels forming the reredos, a medieval roof with carvings and faint traces of wall paintings in the chancel, together with 18th-century furnishings.

The churchyard (19755) is almost rectangular. Encroached upon in the southern corner and perhaps on the north-west side, it is raised particularly on the south-east side where its level is nearly 3m above the lane beyond. There is no evidence of a former curvilinear circuit.

Lewis refers to a nearby well, also called after St Mary; its site has not been positively located, though Lhuyd referred to *Ffynnon y Saint* as a stone's throw from the church, and the Royal Commission linked this to *Gwerglodd y Saint* (Saint's meadow) about 90m from the church, though its name had apparently been forgotten locally and there was no notice of it on early Ordnance Survey maps. Towards the middle of the field was a spring, and perhaps this should be associated with the damp area still visible on vertical aerial photographs, about 95m north-east of the corner of the church.

The church apart, there are a few obviously older buildings in Bettws. Wyn Lan near the centre of the village includes a house thought to be of 16th or 17th-century origin, a derivative longhouse, and as such an exceptional survival. The public house known as The Hand is no earlier than the late 18th century, though its location points to it being the successor of an earlier building. Gwynfa was formerly a farmhouse, but later a public house, the White Horse Inn, and is probably of the 17th century.

The street pattern is a simple one with roads intersecting at right angles beside the church, and some evidence that the churchyard was previously completely encompassed by lanes. The broad thoroughfare on the north-east side of the churchyard appears to have been encroached on by Gwynfa.

The bridge over the stream on the south-eastern side of the village is assumed to be 18th century, but cannot be dated more precisely than this.

Shallow ridge and furrow (19757) was discernible in OS plot 3167 to the north-east of the village in the 1990s.



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