

Derwen

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Introduction

Derwen lies in the hills some 9km south-west of Ruthin, and about 1km from the A494 trunk road linking Mold with Bala. High above the valley of the River Clwyd, here in its upper reaches, the land slopes downwards from the ridge of Cefn Mawr interrupted only by the occasional natural shelf. Derwen occupies one of these flatter shelves, with church and houses on relatively level ground.

This brief report examines the emergence and development of Derwen 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).



Derwen, photo 93-C-0168, © CPAT 2014

History of development

Recent place-name authorities have assumed that there was a prominent oak tree near to where the various minor lanes converged on the hamlet. It was recorded as *Derinney* in 1254, but as *Derwen* in 1291. A longer version, *Ll. Derewenyall* (1392) and *Derwenynial* (1535), incorporates an element which is seen as a version of *anial* meaning ‘desolate’ or ‘wild’, rather than the commote known as *Iâl* which lay well over to the east.

Nothing is known of the emergence and subsequent development of Derwen. The truncated curvilinear churchyard hints at an early medieval foundation, and it is perhaps likely that the present dedication to St Mary is not original but was imposed on an already existing church after the Norman Conquest, but such an early beginning requires corroboration. And even with a church here in the Middle Ages we cannot assume that there was a settlement around it.

In the late 17th century Edward Lhuyd termed it *Lhan Dherwen*, and stated that there were only about 4 or 5 houses by the church. The mid 19th-century Tithe survey presented a similar picture with 4 houses (or pairs of houses) on the lane circumambulating the churchyard.

The heritage to 1750

St Mary's church (100767) is single-chambered, and retains medieval fabric though what this is cannot be established. It is thought to be earlier however than the fine rood screen and loft, the late medieval roof and the east window. The double west bellcote is dated to 1688 and the font to 1665. The church was restored in 1857 and is now in the hands of the Friends of Friendless Churches.

Though the churchyard (19723) is sub-rectangular with a curve to its south-east side, it displays otherwise relatively straight boundaries, though a slight curve on the north-west has been flattened out since the Ordnance Survey's mapping towards the end of the 19th century. One senses nevertheless that this is originally a small curvilinear graveyard. Generally it is raised above the surrounding lanes, one metre or so on the west, rather more elsewhere.

The churchyard houses a fine, late 15th-century cross consisting of a shaft and pedestal and finely decorated if somewhat worn crosshead (100769). It is considered to be one of the finest of its type in Wales.

Also within the churchyard is Church House (19722). This is believed to date from around 1700, or perhaps even earlier. Two-storied, the upper floor was formerly used as a parish room or vestry and also served as a village school, while the lower storey functioned as both a lych-gate and a hearse house.

The ecclesiastical structures apart there are no recognisable buildings of any age within Derwen itself.

The pattern of lanes converging on the churchyard confirms the focal character of the church in the Middle Ages. That approaching from the north-east could however be a late addition to the landscape for it appears to cut across the grain of a field system that integrates medieval strip fields though these were more in evidence on maps of the 19th century. Other medieval strips lay to the south-west of the churchyard.

Uncharacterised minor earthworks appear in OS plot 1176 behind the house of Ael-y-bryn to the east of the churchyard.



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