

Merthyr Cynog

SN 985 375
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Introduction

Merthyr Cynog is an isolated settlement in the lower hills below Mynydd Epynt, 15km to the south-west of Builth Wells. It lies on the interfluvial ridge formed by the Ysgir Fechan and Ysgir Fawr rivers and now comprises only a large church surrounded by houses.

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).



Merthyr Cynog church, photo 3247-0022 © CPAT 2011

History of development

Merthyr Cynog is traditionally the site of an early medieval monastic church named after, or perhaps founded by, St Cynog in the 5th century. Cynog was one of the numerous 'sons' of the legendary Brychan Brecheiniog. The saint is said to have been killed here by invading

Saxons and is supposedly buried in the churchyard. Modern expert opinion favours the interpretation of the term *merthyr* as an indicator that a place possessed the physical remains of a martyr. The size and shape of the churchyard might arguably support the tradition that this was originally a *clas* church and was thus of more than local importance, yet it is difficult to identify the basis for the tradition of it being the home of a *clas* community, and was perhaps a *monasterium*. Certainly though, it became a place of pilgrimage during the Middle Ages because the church possessed Cynog's torque or collar, a 'potent relic' as described by Gerald of Wales at the end of the 12th century.

The earliest forms of the name come from the 13th century with *Kynauc in Merthyr Kynauc* being referred to sometime during that century, and *Merthir* in about 1291.

Today the village comprises only a few houses clustered around the church, but is typical of the small nucleated settlements found in the upland north-western parts of the region and may never have been significantly larger.

The heritage before 1750

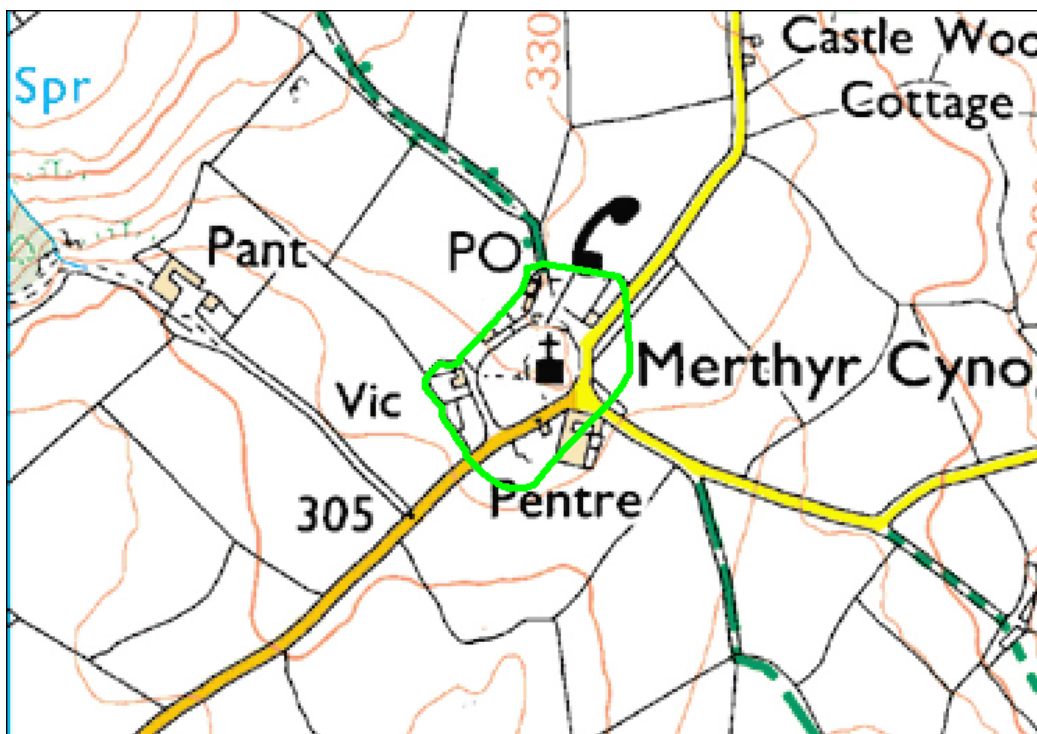
The church of St. Cynog (20132) is basically 14th-century, though parts reputedly date back to the 12th century. It was partially rebuilt in 1862 and 1866. The building is unusually large, comprising an undivided nave and chancel and a massive battlemented square tower set on a plinth. The church contains a 14th-century rood screen, and a font and a stoup both considered to be 12th or 13th-century. The church formerly contained two undated, incised slabs which might be early medieval. These, it was claimed by one commentator, came from Mynachdy in the same parish, but the evidence is not conclusive.

The church is centrally set within a raised oval churchyard (748) some 100m across, the majority of the circuit being defined by a low bank behind a revetment wall. The fabric of this wall is relatively modern (perhaps dating from the 1862 restorations) but it may reflect the line of an enclosing ditch. It was suggested in the 19th century that the enclosure might have originated as a defended settlement rather than as a church, a view that cannot be sustained on the evidence as we presently have it. A modern breach in the churchyard bank, associated with building work at its south-west corner, was examined during the original study of historic settlements in 1993.

The church is a clear focus for the small modern nucleated settlement encircling it. Originally, a thoroughfare completely ringed the churchyard, and even in the mid-19th century there were more dwellings around the perimeter than was normal in the church settlements of Breconshire. The possibility, then, that there was some form of nucleated settlement in earlier centuries cannot be dismissed, but there are no surviving buildings or earthworks of late medieval or even early post-medieval date to give credence to the theory.

A group of low earthworks (2943) survive in the fields to the east of the church and these may represent the sites of former buildings, although for the most part they appear more likely to be the remnants of a field system. Areas of ridge and furrow cultivation (2944; 2678) survive in the fields immediately north of the village, and these too may represent a medieval field system, but equally could be of rather later date.

In summary Merthyr Cynog has a strong ecclesiastical history from early medieval times onwards and it is possible that a settlement developed around it in the Middle Ages. This, however, has yet to be convincingly demonstrated.



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