

Gwytherin

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Introduction

Gwytherin is situated five miles due east of Llanrwst, at the head of an isolated narrow river valley cut through an upland area. The B5384 runs through the village.

The village is a compact settlement lying in the base of the valley of the Cledwen, a river running roughly from south to north. The upper slopes of the valley sides are steep, but the village itself is situated on gently sloping pasture land just above the reach of any river floods, and in an unusually wide part of the valley. Immediately to the north of the village, the valley narrows and its sides are steep, thus adding to the sense of isolation of the village.

This brief report examines the emergence and development of Gwytherin 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 earliest documentary reference, obviously to the church, is in the Norwich Taxation of 1254 which names *Guythrein*, but the name in its modern form appears in 1284 and in at least one other 13th-century source, though some later variants such as *Guytheryn*. Modern authorities see in this the personal name, Gwytherin, who was reputedly a 6th-century saint, and this is thus ‘the place of Gwytherin’.

Thomas at the end of the 19th century claimed that Gwytherin was a place of very early ecclesiastical note, and famous for its *clas* of holy men and women. *Here St Cybi and St Sannan are said to have rested from their labours; and hither St Winifred, after leaving Holywell, was directed by St Sadwrn to seek a final retreat with St Eleri.....Possession of her (Winifred's) tomb secured for this place the establishment of a nunnery ... in a small field near the church called Penbryn Chapel.* Satisfactorily disentangling history from tradition and legend is rarely possible but there can be no doubt that Gwytherin was an important ecclesiastical centre in the early medieval period and that the removal of Winefride's bones to Shrewsbury in 1137 can only have diminished its importance.

Given its ecclesiastical significance, it would not be surprising to learn that a small settlement developed in the valley of the Cledwen in medieval times, but there is no concrete evidence to support the idea. And it might be argued that as the Middle Ages progressed Gwytherin sank into obscurity. Edward Lhuyd received no comments on the place from his correspondents at the end of the 17th century, Thomas Pennant and no doubt other travellers in the 18th century focussed on the story of St Winefride, and it is not until the detailed mapping of the 19th century that a picture of the settlement emerges.

The size and plan of the village have changed little since the time of the Tithe survey in about 1842, though modern houses now occupy some of the plots within the village. Only one road to the north-east of the rectory appears to have been added since then. Strip fields or quilletts existed in the fields to the south-west of the village, perhaps pointing to medieval cultivation, but there is no evidence of these today.



Gwytherin, , photo 93-C-0282 © CPAT 2014

The heritage to 1750

St Winifred's church (105464), now redundant, stands at the highest point of the churchyard. The present church was completely rebuilt between 1867-69 and like its predecessor is single-chambered. In the north wall is an early 14th-century sepulchral slab, with another set into the sanctuary steps. The present location of the medieval font bowl is uncertain.

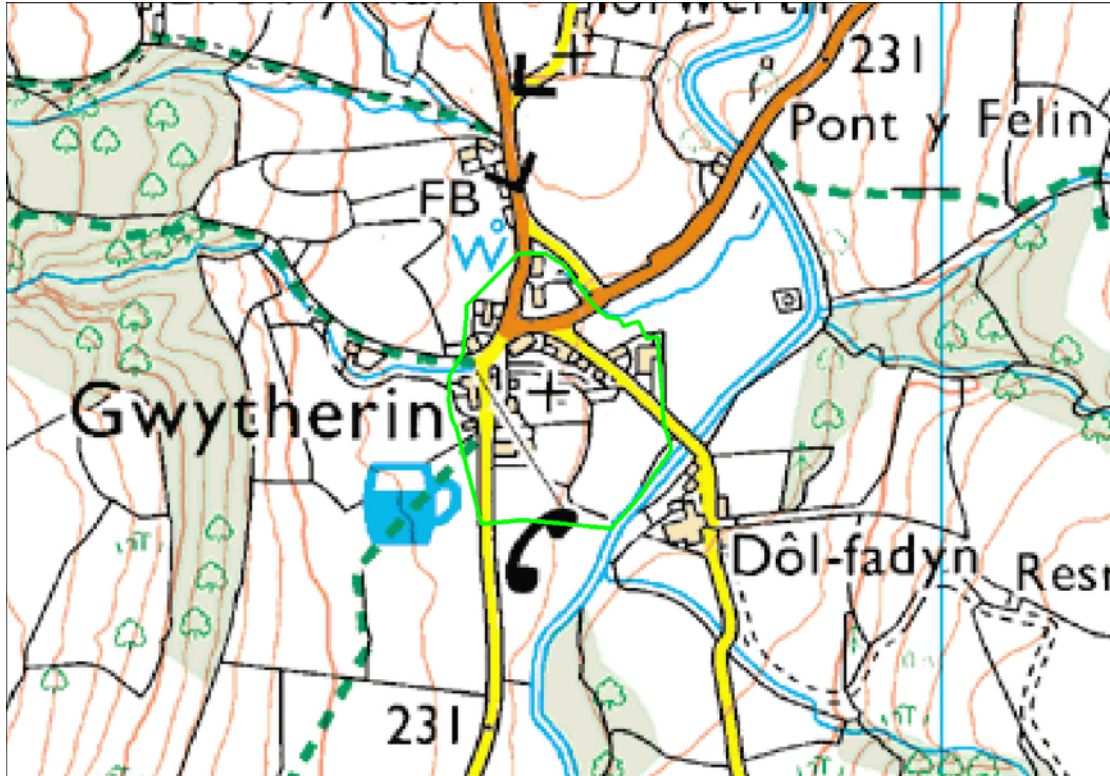
Edward Lhuyd favoured Gwytherin in his *Parochialia* of 1699 by including a sketch of St Winifred's shrine, then in the church. In a very fragmentary state by the 19th century, it disappeared from view, but a fragment was found in the presbytery at Holywell in June 1991.

The churchyard is rectilinear in shape, but how original this form can only be guessed. The Tithe map – not always the most reliable of indicators – suggests a different shape to it on the south-western side. Within the churchyard and on the north side of the church are four upright pillar stones in a line, two of them first recorded in a visitation of 1710. The westernmost retains a 6th-century Latin inscription commemorating Vinnemaglus son of Senemaglus, while the other three are not carved.

A low rounded knoll south of the churchyard is the site of the small chapel of St Winifred, demolished in the early 18th century and also known as Penbryn Capel (100444). Geophysical survey in 1995 failed to identify any sub-surface traces. It was formerly (though not necessarily originally) set within its own enclosure, but by 1729 this had been integrated into the churchyard.

Formerly there was a corn mill on the opposite side of the Cledwen to the north-east of the village. The bridge across the river is still termed Pont y Felin and the mill, its leat and a dam were all shown in a loop of the river on the first edition of the large-scale Ordnance Survey map surveyed in 1875. Most though not all of the mill has now gone.

There are no known buildings of any age within the village of Gwytherin.



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