

Henllan

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Introduction

Henllan lies a little less than 3km to the north-west of Denbigh on a secondary road, the B5382. The location is an interesting one in as much as the early village is set on both the top and the upper sides of a limestone spur, the detached church tower on an outcrop, the church itself lower down the slope. To the west is the deep valley cut by Afon Meirchion, to the south a small, dry re-entrant. The modern village (see below) has spread over the flattish plateau behind the limestone spur.

This brief report examines the emergence and development of Henllan 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 in particular 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 name of the village is significant. Presumably, though not certainly it has an ecclesiastical origin, but at what point the name 'old church' was applied to the ecclesiastical foundation and the settlement is not known. However, the name could conceivably refer to an otherwise unknown enclosure, probably not associated with a church, but one albeit of very early date. The church dedication to St Sadwrn may indicate an early medieval (i.e. pre-Conquest) origin, but the first documentary reference to it is in 1291 when it was described as a chapelry subservient to St Asaph though with the relatively high value of £16 10s which might offer a hint that the church in earlier centuries was of greater importance than it was reduced to in the high Middle Ages. The presence of a possible holy well – Ffynnon Sadwrn – close to Fox Hall, immediately to the south-east of the village, also focuses in on the obscure saint, and probably strengthens the argument for an early medieval foundation.

The earliest reference to the church and by association the settlement that was to develop here is the Pope Nicholas' Taxation of 1291 where *Helan* appears, a little too late to determine whether the creation of the new castle and settlement at Denbigh, the former presumably with its own associated chapel, could have had some influence on the name applied to what was certainly the earlier settlement. Later, in 1311, it was recorded as *Henthlan* and in 1518 it appeared in a document in its modern form. What is worth remarking is the relatively small number of references to Henllan in medieval documents.

To John Ogilby in the 1670s, Henllan was ‘a little village seated on an eminence’, while Edward Lhuyd at the end of the 17th century reported about thirteen houses around the church and another eighteen not far off, suggesting a not insignificant community.

Henllan has grown considerably in the last century and a half, spreading eastwards away from the historic core, but attention to this strictly falls outside this study.



Henllan Church cross shaft, photo 3053-0009, © CPAT 2014

The heritage to 1750

A church dedicated to St Sadwrn (100582) was erected here in the 15th century, although this will not have been the first on the spot. The detached tower of that building (100583) survives, constructed on a spur of rock in the north-east corner of the churchyard. Some of the present building is Georgian (early 19th century), but in places the wall fabric may be of 15th-century date. Very few medieval architectural features have been retained or reused, but there is a doorway in the decorated style now leading into the vestry. The only medieval furnishing to survive is a piscina, although the medieval font, formerly functioning as the basin for a small well in the grounds of Llysmeirchion, on the opposite side of the river, has now been returned to the churchyard where it is set beside the path leading to the church entrance. Other furnishings and fittings, all post-Reformation, include a Jacobean altar table, 18th-century chandeliers and befaction boards and monuments from the late 17th century onwards.

The churchyard (19773) sprawls across a steep slope falling away to west and south. Now a quadrilateral in shape, with a curving perimeter only in the north-west quadrant, there is a break of slope south of the church itself which is probably a natural feature. It was extended to the south-west in 1889.

The churchyard cross (100584) of which only the shaft survives was, if an undated sketch in the Bodleian is accurate, at one time sited outside the churchyard, perhaps being uprooted at the time of the 1807-8 restoration; a date of 1608 incised on it must be associated with an earlier, but unchronicled, event.

The layout of Henllan is intriguing, with its numerous roads and lanes forming an irregular network of thoroughfares and 'islands', unusually complex for this part of north-east Wales. It is the lanes themselves that provide both hints and uncertainties about the origins and development of Henllan. Some can be dismissed as recent additions to the village-scape. The narrow lane that runs down from the church tower to Llindir Street past the Institute cuts across an existing 'island', while the zig-zagging lane beside Plas-meifod give the appearance of a road established in a pre-existing landscape.

At the core of Henllan are four or probably five routeways coming in from various points of the compass, and focussing not on the church itself which would almost certainly have been here before any settlement developed, but on the ground immediately to the east of it. Some of these tracks certainly had a long history, originating back in the Middle Ages if not earlier. That approaching from the north-west was referred to as 'the way leading from the parish church of Henllan towards Abergley' in 1537, that coming up from Nantglyn to the south was referenced in 1518, and there are various 16th-century references, too, to the road from Denbigh which came in from the east. The pattern created however is slightly irregular, particularly with the lane coming down from the north-east and exiting to the south-west, and this suggests that there was probably not a well-defined thoroughfare through Henllan but an area of open ground through which tracks threaded an irregular course.

Such open ground might be a small common, but in this area of Denbighshire, there were also greens, an essentially English landscape form, seen nearby at Denbigh Green which was a large tract of open land until its enclosure between 1802 and 1814. On and around this common/green dwellings would have been established in random fashion and the lanes across the common would gradually have become formalised to create the irregular layout visible today. What this common might have been called in the past is not clear. Elizabethan and later documents refer to various commons close to Henllan such as Craiga Henllan, Y Llindir and Henllan Common, and a number together with Denbigh Green might be traceable through detailed analysis of the Enclosure Map.

The two oldest houses in Henllan appear to be the Llindir Inn (102746), traditionally always an inn, though it perhaps originated as a farmhouse, the earliest of its several phases probably of late 16th-century date; and Plas Meifod (102747), which is located on what is now the eastern edge of the modern village – it originated as a late medieval timber-framed hall house, the central truss of the former open hall still surviving, and the house was subsequently encased in stone in the late 16th or early 17th century, at which time it became a storeyed structure. Tan yr Eglwys (19752) is a sub-medieval, stone-walled house; Bryntirion on Denbigh Street is a late 16th-century lateral chimney, storeyed farmhouse; Bryn-y-ffyn(n)on is a mid-18th-century end-chimney house (a plaque above the door sports the date 1752); and two terraced cottages on School Street originated as a mid-18th-century storeyed house.

Also significant is the grouping of historic houses situated within the environs of the village; these include Plas Heaton (102807) to the north-east, Garn (101470) to the north, Foxhall (100586) to the south-east, and Bryn-y-parc also to the south-east.

Uncharacterised earthworks (19774) of potential archaeological interest survive in pasture, north of Ty-coch Street and south-east of the Rectory. Their significance has not been ascertained.

Strip fields lay on the north side of the village and could still be seen from the air in 1946, as could a patch of ridge and furrow (19753), though this has now been built over.

In addition to its parish church Henllan reputedly had four chapels within the parish, none of which were still standing in 1864.



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