

## Llangollen

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### ***Introduction***

Llangollen shelters in the valley of the Dee overshadowed by the Berwyn massif to the south and the heights of Ruabon Mountain together with the detached hill supporting Castell Dinas Bran to the north. The rising face of the Berwyn is however not continuous, for the steep slopes are interrupted by a shelf and the ground then rises to another isolated hillock, Pen-y-coed, beneath which Llangollen has developed.

The Dee valley here is narrow, and the town has developed on both sides of the river, though the main historic core is on the south bank where the ground shelves gently. Housing has extended, largely in the last 150 years, up both hillsides, but the main concentration is still south of the river. The town sits astride the A5 trunk road, with Wrexham 14km to the north-east and Oswestry a similar distance to the south-east.

This brief report examines the emergence and development of Llangollen up to the year 1750. For the more recent history of the settlement, it might 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](http://www.archwilio.org.uk)).

### ***History of development***

The ‘church of Collen’ was named as *Lancollien* in 1234, while the Norwich Taxation of 1254 listed *Sancti Colyenni, Llancallen* in 1254. *Langollen* was given in the later taxation of Pope Nicholas (1291) and another variant – *Llangollenn* – at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

A church was reputedly established here by St Collen as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> century, and his *cell-y-bedd* (or a successor) survived in the churchyard to the west of the church tower beyond 1749. The church became an important ecclesiastical centre in the pre-Conquest era, emerging as the mother church for a part of the middle Dee Valley which largely equates with the commote of Nanheudwy, though its relationship with Corwen, another mother church is unclear. A mid-9<sup>th</sup>-century poem refers to the grave of Sawyl here.

Pengwern less than a kilometre to the south-east also supposedly has early medieval origins.

The development of the settlement at Llangollen, either side of the 11<sup>th</sup>-century Norman Conquest is impossible to determine at present, although Welsh control of the region remained strong in the region up until the Edwardian Conquest of the 1280s, and this could have restricted its development. It was in 1284 that Edward I granted the manor of Llangollen to Roger Mortimer, together with the rights for a weekly market and two annual fairs for a community that had perhaps already grown up around the church. It has been suggested that

the settlement ('tref') may have emerged as a result of the proximity of Gruffudd ap Madoc's stronghold on Dinas Bran from around 1270. The king's grant reputedly allowed, too, for the construction of a bridge across the Dee, although according to tradition there was a bridge here from the time of Henry I. If its construction immediately followed, it did not stand up to the power of the river for supposedly, it was rebuilt by the bishop of St Asaph in 1345. For some of the Middle Ages the settlement lay within the forest of Cwmcathi.



*Central Llangollen, photo 95-C-0042, CPAT 2014*

Little is recorded of the subsequent history of Llangollen in the Middle Ages. A market house lay between the church and the bridge, but Leland referred to it only as a village in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century. A correspondent of Edward Lhuyd claimed 70 houses in the town at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century from which considerable development might be inferred during the Tudor and Stuart eras. Pennant in the later 18<sup>th</sup> century dismissed it as 'a small and poor town, seated in a romantic spot', while the Rev Bingley at the end of that century 'wandered into the dirty, ill-built and disagreeable town of Llangollen'.

By the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century expansion across the river had already occurred. On flattish ground beside the river and west of the bridge was an open space known as Llangollen Green, used for recreational purposes until its purchase by the Vale of Llangollen Railway Company soon after 1860. It is now covered by houses and by St John's Church, but its previous history is recalled in the name 'Green Lane'. Plas Newydd was added to the townscape of Llangollen from 1780, a stone cottage transformed.

The 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries also saw changes to the street layout in the town. Two manuscript maps, one of 1743, the other from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, provide us with some evidence of the earlier layout though the evidence is a little ambivalent (see below).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the village expanded as a result of its position on the London to Holyhead coach road, local industries such as quarrying and wool-working developed, and the riverine setting attracted increasing numbers of tourists. A branch of the Ellesmere Canal was constructed to the town in 1808 and the railway reached here in 1862.

### **The heritage to 1750**

St Collen's Church is a double-naved building of Perpendicular design though it has at its core a 13<sup>th</sup>-century structure, added to in subsequent centuries. The west tower is 18<sup>th</sup>-century and the whole building was drastically remodelled in 1864-67, though a few medieval architectural features survive. Most of the internal fittings are post-medieval in date. A 12<sup>th</sup>-century stone shrine fragment has been incorporated into the fabric, an indicator of its importance in the Middle Ages, and there are two fine late medieval roofs.

The churchyard (PRN 16744) is now trapezoidal in shape though the west side exhibits a slight curve. That its plan has been modified through time there can be no doubt, but there is little guidance as to its original form and there appear to have been no changes subsequent to the mid-19th century Tithe survey. It can be surmised that the Hand Hotel has taken in part of the earlier churchyard and that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century those who designed the National School (now replaced by the Health Centre and Hall) also cut away some of it on the south side. The eccentric position of the church set up against the eastern perimeter also points to fundamental changes in design but this could be due to the increased size of the church in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, though even prior to the 1860s remodelling it was set to one side of the churchyard.

The broken shaft of a medieval cross with its original stone pedestal has been erected on the Maesmawr Road, but where it was first placed is not known. In the past it has been known as *Croes y beddau*.

Llangollen Bridge, with its four arches and deep cutwaters, is considered to be largely of 17th-century date and linked with the 'Rondle Reade 1656' stone in Hall Street which may commemorate its reconstruction. Fragments of sepulchral slabs were embedded in the masonry. Leland referred to a great stone bridge and it is possible that the present structure incorporates 16<sup>th</sup>-century work. The original bridge was supposedly constructed in wood in the reign of Henry I (the 12<sup>th</sup> century) to facilitate access to Valle Crucis Abbey, and reconstructed by John Trevor, Bishop of St Asaph, in 1346, although other commentators have suggested that the reference may be to John Trefor II, a local man, who was bishop between 1395-1411. The present bridge was extended in 1863 to allow for the railway, and widened in 1873 and again in 1968.

The street pattern in Llangollen and the town plan as a whole have undergone changes in the early modern era. Additions include Regent Street and Berwyn Street, their straight line surely a result of Telford driving the Holyhead Road past the town in the years between 1821 and 1825, and Castle Street and the grid of streets to the west of it which were later 19<sup>th</sup>-century modifications, Castle Street providing a direct, straight link from the Holyhead Road to Llangollen Bridge. The name can only refer to Castell Dinas Bran overlooking Llangollen from the north-east.

Bridge Street/Church Street was the main thoroughfare up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the road curving off the bridge and past the church to link in with what is now Queen Street, where beside the Bache stream there was a small area of open ground with dwellings around its edge. The late 18<sup>th</sup>-century map shows a distinctive triangle of land edged by buildings, in the vicinity of what are now nos 10 and 12 Bridge Street. In the absence of a plausible alternative this is suggested as the medieval market place. Chapel Street lying to the west of the church looks to be an early thoroughfare linking town to Bache Mill though it is possible that its line may have been straightened out at the southern end, perhaps as a result of the construction of Regent Street. The 1743 map does not show Chapel Street but instead depicts another lane running southwards from the vicinity of the putative market place; its presence is only hinted at on the late 18<sup>th</sup>-century map, so its former existence – for no trace of it remains to day – cannot be authenticated and it could be a mapmaker's error in 1743. Minor lanes dropping down from the hills to the south such as Hill Street and Willow Street were certainly present

in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and account for the curious convergence of roads to the west of the Grapes Hotel.

Early buildings are not common in Llangollen. Overall, Church Street retains the oldest houses: no 31 is of cruck-construction with probably 17<sup>th</sup>-century origins, and others from the same century include Bryn-dwr and nos 18, 25. In Chapel Street no. 12 is probably a much altered 16<sup>th</sup>-century timber-framed structure and 1 and 2 Chapel Street Square have been attributed to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. 1 and 2 Regent Street are thought to be later 17<sup>th</sup> or early 18<sup>th</sup>-century. The early 18<sup>th</sup>-century Siambra Wen close to the north end of Llangollen Bridge was later re-modelled, and Wynnstay Arms on Bridge Street is believed to be an early 18th-century structure. The Willows on Willow Street is thought to have been constructed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. To round this off, Edward Hubbard noted in *the Buildings of Wales* that 'much of the centre [of Llangollen] belongs to an interesting piece of mid-19th century town planning'.

Plas Newydd, home of the ladies of Llangollen, lies on the south-eastern side of the town and was transformed from a simple cottage after 1780. The gardens have a non-statutory Grade II\* rating in the Cadw/ICOMOS register. They also contain one or two medieval curiosities brought from elsewhere, as for example the shaft of the High Cross from Chester and a medieval font.

It has been suggested that Lower Dee Mill originated in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but the evidence for this has not been confirmed.

In the garage at Siambra Wen near the north end of Llangollen Bridge are medieval sepulchral slabs which are claimed to have come from Valle Crucis Abbey and were then re-used in the re-building of the Llangollen bridge in the 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century, before being rediscovered by Henry Robertson the owner of the house when he altered the bridge for the railway.



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