

Llanfair Caereinion

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Introduction

Llanfair Caereinion is situated beside the A458 trunk road through central Montgomeryshire, some 12km to the west of Welshpool. The small market town has developed up on the south side of the River Banwy where a stream runs down to the river from the south. The church occupies a low spur above the river, and the village has grown around this, spreading into the stream valley and in recent times up the steep hillsides that fringe both sides of the Banwy.

This brief report examines the emergence and development of Llanfair Caereinion 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 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 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).



Llanfair Caereinion, photo 89-c-0089, © CPAT, 2012

History of development

The church is believed to have been founded as a chapelry dependent on the mother church at Meifod. The shape of the churchyard and the riverine location are consistent with an early medieval foundation, while the dedication implies that Mary may have supplanted an early medieval saint, probably after the Norman Conquest and perhaps as late as the mid-13th century after the church was granted to the Cistercian nunnery at Llanllugan in 1239.

Llanfair appears first as Llanveyr in 1254, and as Llanveyr in Kereynon in 1281/2. It signifies the church of St Mary in the commote of Caereinion.

Very little can be established of the town's subsequent history through the Middle Ages. At an early stage it became the centre of an ecclesiastical parish, but unusually it was divided between two townships, the boundary running down Bridge Street. It never achieved borough status, although it emerged as a market centre, servicing the surrounding rural communities.

Probably as a result of the construction of the turnpike road on the north side of the valley in the 18th century, Llanfair bridge was built, with Bridge Street which provided access to it, lying parallel to the small stream entering the Banwy. Whether there was a crossing point of the river in earlier centuries is not known. In the post-medieval era, the stream was dammed to provide a pond (7693) behind the cottages on the west side of the street, for the woollen factory on the river's edge, and this was one of several local industries that developed during the 18th and 19th centuries. The construction of the bridge also opened the way for the expansion of settlement on to the north bank.

The heritage to 1750

The church of St Mary (31089) was completely rebuilt in 1868, utilising the footprint of its predecessor which had been well-described by Sir Stephen Glynne a decade earlier. Only the north aisle, uncovered in an excavation in 1993, seems not to have been rebuilt on the same line. The only diagnostic architectural feature surviving from the earlier, medieval church is the south doorway of 13th century date. Inside are a font of around 1300 and the recumbent effigy of a knight from a century later; some of the roof timbers are of 15th century date, salvaged and re-used by the Victorian builders.

The churchyard (7688) now appears as an irregularly shaped four-sided area. It has clearly been extended downhill on the northern side as the mid-19th century tithe map reveals. More of a speculation is that originally the boundary on the eastern side was Parson's Bank, indicating that a significant portion of the churchyard has been alienated at some point. Together the portions would have combined to create a large semi-circular churchyard, not dissimilar from, though smaller than, Meifod. Against this view, however, is the consequence that a valley would have been included within the churchyard, an altogether rare occurrence.

On the northern slope below the churchyard and reached by a flight of steps is Ffynnon Fair (758), a holy well still believed to possess curative properties at the beginning of the 20th century. This was entirely rebuilt in 1975 and restored in 1990.

The plan of the town indicates some organic growth. The market place is a focus for several roads with the town hall, demolished but then replaced, built in the middle of it in the late 18th century. It seems likely that regardless of the chronology, the settlement clustered around the stream on the south side of the churchyard, and gradually expanded eastwards and westwards from there. The development of housing down Bridge Street is also undated, but focussed on the west side of the street; even in the mid-19th century there were virtually no

houses on the east side. There are few signs of the long narrow tenements normally associated with 'urban' centres, though might partly be due to the undulating topography.

Given its size, surprisingly few buildings of architectural interest remain in Llanfair, but this may be attributed to a major fire in 1758. Apart from the church the only building listed (grade II) which might pre-date 1750 is the former Wynnstay Arms Hotel (36360) of mid-18th century date.

Ridge and furrow cultivation traces (7692) are visible in the neighbourhood including one survival just to the south of the town.



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