

ABERYSCIR

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Introduction

Aberyscir, 4km to the west of Brecon, lies on the north bank of the River Usk/Afon Wysg where its tributary Afon Ysgir descending from Mynydd Epynt, creates a flat-topped spur-like location that projects towards the Usk.

This brief report examines the emergence and development of Aberyscir 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 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. The HER can be accessed on-line through the Archwilio website (www.archwilio.org.uk).

History of development

The place-name signifies 'mouth of the Yscir', Afon Ysgir emptying into the Usk, 200m south of the church. The earliest reference to it comes in the period 1143 to 1154 when it was termed *Aberescir*. Later forms of the name show minor variations, all close to the modern form.

Theophilus Jones, the Brecknock historian of the early 19th century claimed that Bernard de Neufmarche, Lord of Brecon, granted land here to Hugh Surdal in the late 11th century, the motte below Aberyscir Court being the focus of his manor. Another source refers to a Bernard Fitz Unspac, a contemporary of William the Conqueror, and his successors the Waldeboefs. Regardless of the knights involved, there is little to indicate why the Aberyscir spur was selected for a manorial centre, other than its naturally strong position. But it may also be more than a simple coincidence that the ruins of Brecon Gaer, one of the best-known Roman forts in south Wales, lay opposite Aberscier on the east bank of the tributary river.

By the 14th century it is likely that the motte had been superseded by an unfortified manor house, the medieval predecessor of Aberyscir Court. This is at best speculation. Earthworks to the north of the church (see below) do suggest that a settlement may have developed at Aberyscir in the Middle Ages, but if so it dwindled and disappeared in later centuries.

The heritage to 1750

The church of Ss Mary and Cynidr was certainly erected in stone in the medieval era and some fabric and a doorway on the north side survive from those times, but it was largely rebuilt in 1860. It contains one pre-Reformation grave slab and a medieval stoup, but has relatively few furnishings and fittings of interest. Its surrounding churchyard is sub-oval,

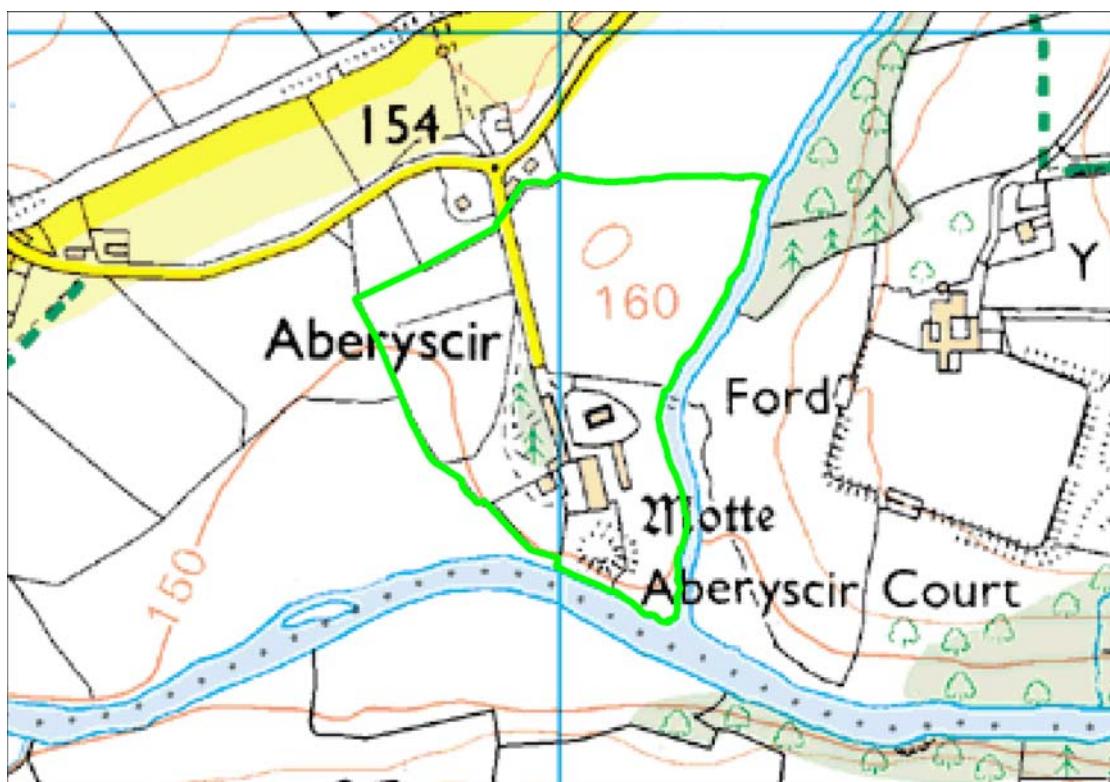
hinting at an early medieval (i.e pre-Conquest) origin, a theory strengthened by the British dedication, which is likely to have been supplemented by the Marian attribution only after the Norman Conquest. Certainly, Cynidr alone featured when the church was mentioned in 1490, with Mary not being named until c.1562, though the dual dedication is likely to be rather earlier than that.

Edging the churchyard on the north is a natural hollow that provides access to the ford across Afon Ysgir. A Roman road might have forded the Ysgir after leaving the west gate of Brecon Gaer, utilising the hollow and providing an access to the settlement long after the fort itself had fallen out of use. But this remains unproven. The layout of Roman roads in the vicinity of the Gaer is complex and not yet fully understood, and a definite stretch of a different road was found two to three hundred metres to the north when a gas pipeline was being built in 2007. At the time of writing, details of this are sparse as full publication is still awaited.

The Norman motte lacking an obvious bailey lies 100m to the south of the church and takes full advantage of the edge of the Usk's valley. A straight curtain wall has been suggested on the top of the mound on the basis of masonry remains, but there is a tradition, too, that a much later summer house was erected on the summit of the mound. It is evident that a modern survey is required here.

The third member of the group, Aberyscir Court, lies just to the south-west of the church, was built in 1837, occupying the position of an earlier house, and perhaps incorporating some of it in a rear wing.

The field to the north of the church contains earthworks including platforms, which have tentatively been identified as a deserted medieval settlement, though an alternative favours their interpretation as the marks of a formal garden. Suggestions that the earthworks could be a pre-Norman predecessor to Brecon are probably somewhat wide of the mark. Ridge and furrow has been identified in fields to the north-west of the church, though this has not yet been confirmed as being of medieval origin. There is a reference, too, to a Roman practice camp in this field and this has been authenticated in a recent definitive study on Roman camps in Wales.



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