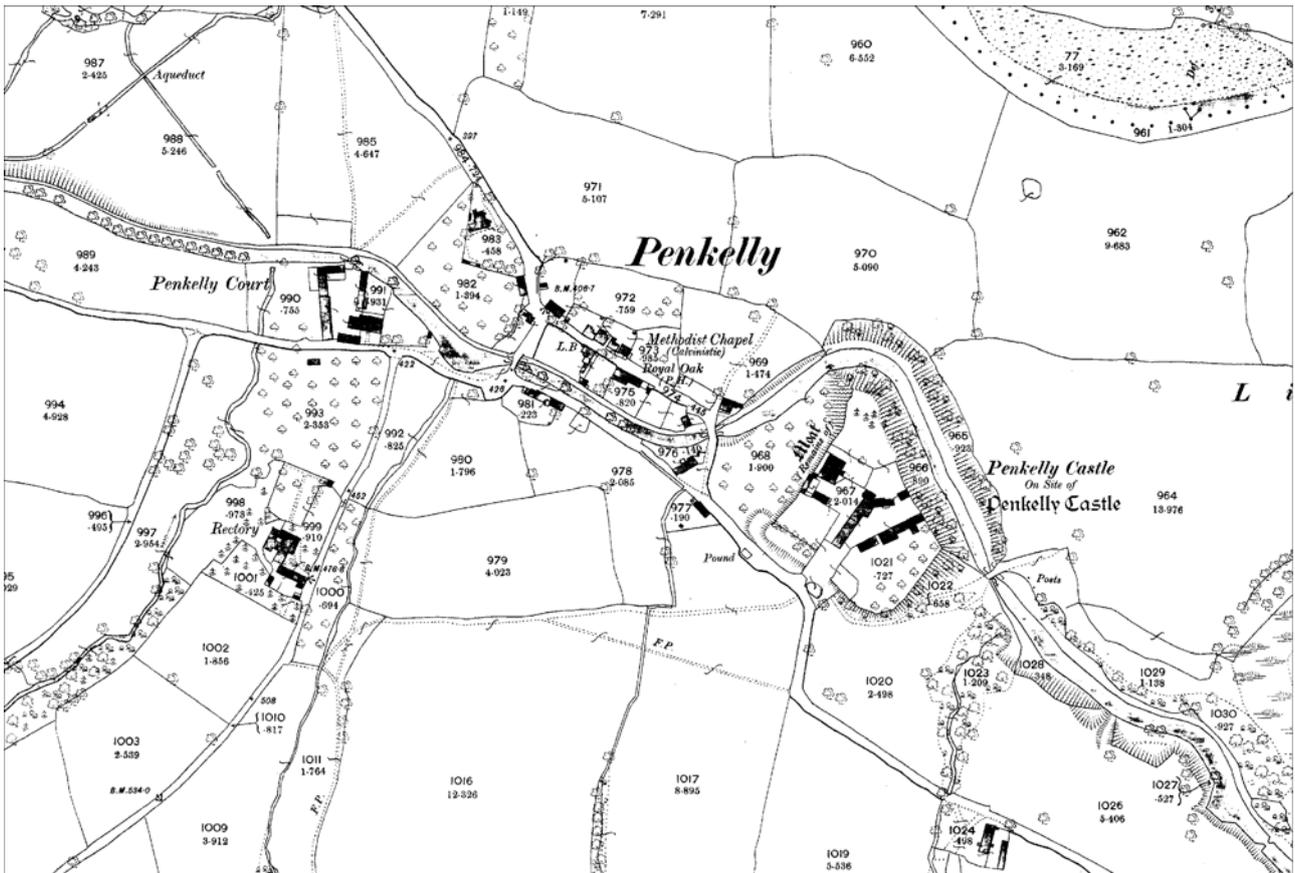


CPAT Report No 1200

Historic settlements in the Brecon Beacons National Park



THE CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

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Report for Cadw

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The historic settlements of the Brecon Beacons National Park in Powys

An introduction

Background

Twenty years ago the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust compiled an assessment of the historic settlements within the Brecon Beacons National Park, one of the planning districts within the modern county of Powys and conducted on behalf of the Park authority and Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments. This was one of the first such assessments for the local authority areas of eastern and north-eastern Wales and ultimately ten reports were completed between 1992 and 1995, embracing the entire region for which CPAT had and still has a remit.

The imperative that underpinned these surveys was committed to paper for the first time when Brecknock Borough was studied in 1992, it being expressed in the following terms:

It has long been recognised that development within town and village alike [might] disturb or obliterate significant information about the past, but a suitable response to a specific building development or other permanent land use change has usually been instigated, if at all, on an ad hoc basis. A more structured approach to the understanding of historic settlements and the preservation and management of this fragile resource is required. This has been given a greater urgency by the publication in 1991 of the Welsh version of the Planning and Policy Guidance Note: Archaeology and Planning (PPG 16 Wales). This emphasises the responsibilities of Local Planning Authorities in the conservation of the archaeological heritage and confirms that archaeological remains are a material consideration when determining planning applications (Martin and Walters 1993, 3).

Three principal objectives of the Brecknock Borough study were defined at that time, and were equally applicable to all the later studies, the National Park included:

- i) to produce a general picture of historic settlement in the area,
- ii) to identify, in as far as the evidence allows, those areas within the historic settlements that could be termed archaeologically sensitive, in order to assist in the day-to-day and long-term planning processes initiated by the local authority, and
- iii) to define areas of potential archaeological significance where developers might be required to undertake an archaeological evaluation as part of the planning process.

The individual village histories that were compiled were never intended for publication, but their contents were absorbed into the Sites and Monuments Record (now the Historic Environment Record) where they could be accessed by all (and sometimes recycled, usually without any acknowledgement to their source, in others' reports).

There is no need to stress that in the two decades since those reports on The Brecon Beacons National Park's towns and villages were circulated to a relatively small number of interested organisations, there have been changes, and we would hope improvements, to our collective perception of the emergence, development and in some instances collapse of historic settlements in the border counties and more specifically in this southern part of Powys.

Firstly, a series of Cadw-funded site-condition studies have appeared which directly or indirectly have had a bearing on settlement studies. The historic churches survey (1995-99), the early medieval ecclesiastical sites survey (2001-04) and even the deserted medieval rural settlement survey (1996-2001) have all played a part in enhancing our understanding of settlement patterns and development in eastern Wales, as have some rather more specific and detailed ground

surveys such as those of village earthworks in Brecknock (1993) and Radnorshire (1996), though none unfortunately in the National Park.

Secondly, there are the results that have accrued from client-funded works on development sites – whether excavation, evaluation, watching brief or building recording – as a result of local authorities implementing PPG16 and, from 2002, the guidelines contained in Planning Policy Wales.

Thirdly, there are recently published studies which have transformed our thinking on certain topics. Most notable in this context are the place-name studies by Hywel Wyn Owen and Richard Morgan (2007), the first two volumes of *The Early Medieval Inscribed Stones* corpus prepared by Nancy Edwards, Mark Redknap and John Lewis (2007) and Richard Suggett's *Houses and History in the March of Wales. Radnorshire 1400-1800* published by the Welsh Royal Commission in 2005. The last of these is not directly pertinent to the Brecon Beacons but illustrates together with the others the quality of the work that has recently been completed or is in progress in the Principality.

Finally though in some ways the least tangible of the inputs is the ever-improving perception and appreciation of settlement development and the patterns that are fostered in east Wales, as a result of accumulated expertise, and the accessing of research from both other regions of Wales and from England. This doesn't normally manifest itself in publications, although the writer's paper, co-authored with Wyn Evans (2009) on clas churches and their landscapes is an exception.

In 2010 CPAT felt that the time had come to re-examine the pictures of its historic settlements, fifteen to twenty years on from when the initial studies were completed. In a general sense, various questions had been raised. Had developer-funding in advance of the potential destruction or damage to the cultural heritage had much of an effect and if so where? Had our knowledge and appreciation of the historic settlements in the region markedly improved in the last fifteen to twenty years? And in a departure from the practice in the early 1990s when the Internet was little more than an unfulfilled dream, could we successfully disseminate that information authoritatively so that it could be accessed digitally to satisfy the increasing number of people who search our website? There are several hundred historic settlements in eastern Wales and it was not possible to examine them all in a single exercise. The former local authority areas of Brecknock Borough and Radnorshire were selected to initiate the programme in 2010-11 and this was followed with studies of Montgomeryshire and Flintshire in 2011-12, Wrexham County Borough in 2012-13 and now the Brecon Beacons National Park (2013). We anticipate completing the remaining areas – Denbighshire and eastern Conwy – during 2013-14.

Methodology and presentation

The 1994/5 reports. A pattern for each report was established in 1992 comprising a report which covered a minimum of one A4 page of text and in some instances, depending on the size and interest of the settlement involved, three or four pages. The report considered, under four sub-headings, the geographic location of the settlement, the known history of its origins and development, the buildings and archaeology that were integral elements of the settlement, and finally a set of recommendations for further work.

Accompanying each settlement study was an Ordnance Survey map-based depiction of the settlement showing scheduled ancient monuments, listed buildings, known archaeological features and earthworks, areas which it was felt at the time should be preserved in situ, other areas that should be evaluated in advance of development, and a boundary line drawn around the historic settlement as it was then recognised, in other words the perceived historic core of the town or village.

Those early reports also contained as annexes a copy of the descriptive brief for the preparation of the study and another of a draft paper on archaeology and the planning process in Powys.

The 2010-14 reports. After various discussions the configuration of both the text layout and the accompanying map have been revised, to take account of changing circumstances and current requirements.

The baseline information – the settlement name, the national grid reference and the primary record number that links the settlement (as well as its individual elements) to the Historic Environment Record – have necessarily remained the same, although the height above sea level and the prefix PRN have been dropped.

The geographic location has been retained, as has the section on history, now renamed ‘history of development’. More change can be seen in the section formerly headed ‘buildings and archaeology’ which has been altered to ‘the heritage to 1750’. This alteration results from two considerations. Firstly, it is becoming increasingly commonplace to refer to the cultural heritage and cultural heritage assets, convenient collective terms that embrace not only below and above-ground archaeology, and buildings, but also historic landscape (and townscape) elements that did not necessarily get the recognition that they warrant in the former terminology. Cultural heritage is seen as a useful shorthand descriptive term for everything that we are concerned with here. Secondly, a decision was taken to end the study at 1750, bringing it into line with Cadw’s terminal date for the concurrent scoping programme of medieval and early post-medieval monument scheduling enhancement. 1750 to 1760 is often seen as a starting date for the Industrial Revolution, even if its full ‘flowering’ did not occur in Wales for another fifty years. Equally importantly, however, it was during the later 18th century and a little beyond, that some settlements saw marked development with a concomitant increase in the number of buildings, and the diminishing significance in the forms of evidence that are significant to the archaeologist. This is not to downplay the significance of the buildings that date from the later 18th and 19th centuries, nor to infer that settlements that contain large numbers of such structures are not historic, rather it is a commentary on the shift in the nature of the evidence that is available to us.

This report has also tried to adopt a more rigorous approach to the presentation of the data, whether it be on archaeological sites, buildings or the townscape. It would be easy to write protracted descriptions of some buildings such as churches or earthwork complexes, or even in some instances the discoveries from development-led evaluations. The regurgitation of much detail, it was felt, would not necessarily be particularly useful to the general reader, and indeed might act as a deterrent. The inclusion of the Archwilio website address in each report will allow the researcher or enthusiast to follow up individual leads in the regional Historic Environment Record should they wish, but what is offered here is a concise text covering as many issues as are currently known without over-elaboration on any one of them.

Finally, the section of recommendations has been removed. This, it should be admitted, was in part a pragmatic decision based on the realisation that some of the original recommendations covering standard issues such as the importance of consultation with the archaeological curator, the need for watching briefs and evaluations, and the like were compiled at a time when PPG16 was new, consultation practice was yet to be regularised, and the importance of the cultural heritage resource in our towns and villages had in some areas yet to be appreciated by at least some local authority planners. This situation has changed, and the importance of the cultural heritage is now largely accepted at local government level. It is pragmatic, however, for less satisfactory reasons. In an ideal world the recommendation for say the scheduled enclosure at Hanmer that a survey be conducted to identify the relict earthworks of the former village would have been followed up and completed at some point over the last twenty years. That this aim and many others has not been achieved is less a comment on the validity of the recommendation,

more on the limited resources that are available for surveying and research: it is unrealistic to assume that this is going to change in the foreseeable future.

There have also been some modifications to the plans that accompany the texts. The depiction of designated archaeological sites (scheduling) and buildings (listing) has been left out, for we are conscious of the fact that it is entirely the prerogative of Cadw and/or the local authority to define these sites in cartographic form, and that the reader requiring information on the extent of a designation should approach the appropriate authority for that information. Furthermore, the number and extent of designated sites within any given settlement will change through time, and assuming that these maps have a currency measured in years, there is the potential for misleading a reader because the situation could have changed.

The definition of the historic core has also been modified, taking more account of existing boundaries in order to lessen any potential contention over whether a particular spot lies inside or outside the historic core as we perceive it. We would stress that the core boundary as defined is not an immutable perimeter, but is simply an estimate and a guide based on an assessment of the existing evidence by the writer as to where earlier settlement may once have existed.

Dropped too is the zonation of areas for evaluation in advance of development. In 1992, defining such areas was a useful guide to planners as to where archaeological intervention was most needed, but there is a potential conflict between the depiction of one or two such areas on a map on the one hand and the definition of the historic core on the other. If for whatever reason, an area within an historic core envelope is not highlighted for evaluation, this could be taken as an indication that the area would not require further assessment in the event of a proposed development. Rather we must work on the assumption that any development within an historic core could be a candidate for an evaluation, depending of course on the nature of the development itself, but that it should be the development control officer at CPAT who makes that decision, based on his own professional judgment.

More contentious perhaps is the decision to omit the identification of blocks of land defined as 'areas for preservation in situ', another facet of the 1992 survey. Where such areas are already statutorily designated within an historic settlement, their preservation is a given and no problem arises. However, in some cases in the past a decision that an area ought to be preserved has been taken on the basis of a rather superficial assessment of its worth, rather than on a detailed analysis of what is there. If, then, at a planning level a field containing earthworks is going to be preserved it needs to be based on rigorously defined evidence that will stand up to objective scrutiny, and this requires a detailed record that is rarely accessible through a report of this nature.

One final aspect to clarify is that the historic core envelope now defines only those areas within which there is the likelihood of settlement, by which we mean dwellings and their curtilages. The setting of any settlement will have been the surrounding landscape that was farmed and utilised from it, and potentially could spread over several square kilometres. Defining its fields, its pastures and its woodlands will be a considerable task, and its success cannot be guaranteed. Vital though it is to an understanding of that settlement, the inclusion of the setting within the historic core cannot be advocated. It requires a different level of zoning.

The original study of the Brecon Beacons National Park listed 53 settlements, omitting Brecon itself because of its size and complexity (a separate study of the town was undertaken later in 1993). The current survey covers 34 settlements. It excludes the 14 National Park settlements which are outside Powys and included in that number are places such as Vaynor and Penderyn which were formerly in Breconshire; and also omitted are settlements such as Blwch and Talybont which represent largely post-1750 developments. Two settlements – Llanfaes and Llechfaen – have been included for the first time.

A Brief Overview of Historic Settlements in the National Park

The 1993 study provided a thorough assessment of the settlements in the National Park. Attention was paid to such differing concepts as distinguishing between dispersed and nucleated settlements, to the ideas of the late Glanville Jones on nucleated bond settlements, to the prevalence of settlements where 'llan' was incorporated in the name, to the primacy of sub-circular churchyards, to mottes with associated settlements, to those settlements displaying English (or more properly Anglo-Norman) influences and so on. It is not proposed to repeat all of this here, but to look only at the varying types of settlements to discern what patterns emerge.

Planned settlements

At the apex of the hierarchy of historic settlements in most areas are the towns and in the National Park these have their origins in a deliberately laid out plantation or planned settlement, as they do in almost every part of Wales. The area has six when Brecon itself is included. Planning is most obvious in Crickhowell with its grid pattern of streets lying at right-angles to each other, not quite as regular as New Radnor in central Powys perhaps, but nevertheless so distinctive as to leave no doubt that the layout was planned in advance. The same is true of Hay-on-Wye where the topography prevented the most economical layout and instead there is a mix of grid-pattern streets in the south of the town and a converging street (Heol y Dwr) to the north (comparison with Brecon is not inappropriate here); and Talgarth where two or three streets run down from the church, and perhaps more importantly from the market place in front of it, but then town planning may have come late to the town.

Two other settlements reveal planning. Tretower with its early castle has short parallel streets which appear to show some degree of deliberate design, and surprisingly perhaps, Pencelli, not a town in the accepted sense, but like Crickhowell and Tretower the *caput* or chief place of a sub-lordship. The two parallel lanes below Pencelli castle, now complicated by the passage of the canal, have the appearance of a planned layout though clearly one that failed to thrive.

Other attributes of the historic town are restricted to Hay, Crickhowell and Talgarth. Hay had town walls (as of course does Brecon), all three places had market squares, though the word 'square' is misleading, and Talgarth and Crickhowell had by the standards of central Wales large 'urban' churches. The church of St Mary, outside the walls at Hay and not particularly impressive is an exception.

Nucleated villages

Nucleated settlements are now well attested in southern Powys, primarily because of the survival of earthworks that point to both the dwellings and their crofts. Indeed, in eastern Wales it is Brecknock that stands out because of its nucleations, for it is the Anglo-Norman takeover of the Usk and Wye valleys that set the region apart from areas further to the north. That said, the phenomenon is considerably more pronounced in Brecknock Borough at places such as Llanddew, Llanfihangel Talyllyn and Llanfilo than in the National Park, and not one of the historic settlements in the Park has a convincing display for relict settlement earthworks.

Instead it is to the morphology of the settlements that we need to look. Llangattock with its narrow lanes and its location on the other side of the Usk to Crickhowell, Llangors with a possible row of tenement plots that give the appearance of an early concentration of dwellings, and Defynnog again with an interesting street pattern in the valley below the church are all obvious candidates, even if there is no solid evidence to corroborate the suggestions. Most interesting of all perhaps is Trecastle where two medieval villages lie side

by side, one in the ownership of the lord of Brecon, the other in the hands of the Bishop of St Davids, though today they constitute but a single settlement. Did they compete in trade and markets, or was it collaborative? – the former seems more likely, yet only eastern Trecastle seems to have a market place. Even the reasoning that lies beneath the establishment of two settlements adjacent to each other is obscure.

Then there are a group of modern farms or hamlets which show few physical traces of ever having been a village yet where documentary evidence or settlement morphology contradicts this assumption. Most are on the west side of the Llynfi Valley and therefore in Brecknock Borough, Tredustan, Tredomen and Court Llaca being examples. But one, Trefecca, is in the National Park and there may be others.

Finally, there are some modern villages where it remains impossible even to favour either the presence or the absence of a medieval nucleation. I would place in this category Llanfrynach, Llangynidr, Llanfaes, Llanspyddid and perhaps Llechfaen and Scethrog.

Church settlements

In terms only of numbers, church settlements head the list. The term ‘church settlement’ is a useful collective one, although it is one that does not figure in the classic texts on historic settlement. Indeed in that some degree of grouping or nucleation might be assumed from the use of the term ‘settlement’, the label is a paradox. For the morphology of a church settlement centres on the fact that the church appears to be positioned by itself or perhaps with no more than a single farm, an inn or a rectory for company. The church, then, is the settlement. In some instances it might be suspected that former dwellings have been abandoned or swept away leaving few if any visible traces, and this is where Glanville Jones’ putative bond settlements of earlier medieval date could be candidates. But some churches and chapels almost certainly never attracted more than a solitary dwelling around them, for they served a community dispersed in landholdings around the parish, and in the Park, Llanilltyd is a classic case.

The list is potentially quite a long one: Aberyscir, Cantref, Cathedine, Llanfihangel Cwmdru, Llanbedr, Llanddety, Llanelieu, Llanfeugan, Llangasty Tallylyn, Llangenny, Llanhamlach, Llanigon, Llansantffraed, Llywel, Partrishow, Trallong and Ystradfellte. Archaeological research may demonstrate in due course that some of those listed above were accompanied by dwellings in earlier centuries, but for the present in nuclear terms these occupy the bottom rung of the ladder, even if they are the most common within the Park.

Finally we can touch briefly on how valuable developer-funded works have proved to be since the first study in 1993. The National Park is a largely rural area, even though it does contain several towns. It is not surprising then, of the 34 settlements in the study precisely half have seen no archaeological investigations of any sort in the last twenty years, and quite a few others have seen only one or two pieces of work (or interventions as they are sometimes known). At the opposite end of the spectrum is Crickhowell which has seen eleven interventions though several of these have been no more than unproductive watching briefs during developments, Talgarth where they have been only four pieces of work but two of them have been particularly informative, Tretower also with a high success rate from four works and at head of the list Hay on Wye which has seen more than fifteen interventions, many with considerable archaeological returns. It would in the not too distant future be worth considering an in-depth analysis of the archaeological investigations at Hay in the recent past to determine how much more has been learnt about the town, not something that could be attempted in this assessment.