

Bronllys

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Introduction

Bronllys is one of the larger nucleated settlements in Brecknock, lying at the junction of the A479 and A438 roads, halfway between Brecon and Hay on Wye, and has recently been bypassed. The settlement occupies a slight spur on the gently sloping northern side of the valley the Afon Llynfi /Dulas river system.

This brief report examines its emergence and development up to 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 may 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).

History of development

The settlement is first recorded as *Brendlais* around the year 1200, and could mean 'the court of Brwyn', who may perhaps be the *bruin o bricheinauc* (Brycheiniog) living in the 12th century. Whether the court that is referred to has any link with the moated site adjacent to the church has yet to be established. It is a characteristically 'English' settlement, despite its Welsh name, and looks to be one of the few settlements in the area which has no obvious 'Celtic' component.

The village today, although still centred around the church, is a linear development running east-west, for about half a kilometre, along the main Hay to Brecon road. It does not now spread as far as Bronllys Castle, which lies some 500m to the south-east, but this is perhaps misleading and a case can be made for a much closer connection during the Middle Ages.

The heritage to 1750

Bronllys Castle itself (539) is first recorded in the earlier 12th century and was perhaps founded in 1144. Throughout the 12th and 13th centuries it belonged to the Cifford family and was the principal seat in the lordship of Cantref Selyf (a Welsh administrative unit that covered the remoter areas east and north of Brecon). Cantref Selyf and Bronllys held their local political importance into the 15th century by which time it had come into the hands of the Crown. It seems to have fallen out of use by the end of the 15th century or soon after. The castle, in the guardianship of the Welsh Assembly Government, is sited on the western edge of the first river terrace of the Afon Llynfi. Its steep-sided motte is topped by a round, three-storied masonry tower and abutted by a rectangular embanked and stone-walled bailey beside the river to the north. The latter now contains the buildings of Castle House which may overlie the site of the medieval hall.

The church of St Mary (20184) which was largely rebuilt in 1887, probably conforms to its much earlier, 12th or 13th-century plan, retaining its original font and a 16th-century rood screen. The original church was probably established by the Clifford family and may well have been a new foundation following the building of Bronllys Castle, rather than a rebuilding of an existing structure. The church and much of its land were subsequently given to the Cluniac Priory at Clifford, in Herefordshire, and were still held by them at the Dissolution in the mid-16th century.

Set in a rectangular churchyard (2991), the church has a nave and chancel separate from the free-standing bell-tower or campanile which does not share the church's orientation. A decorated medieval tombstone (538), presumably from the church, was in use in the churchyard stile until the 1930s, but was then lost. Sherds of medieval pottery (5559) have been recovered from St Mary's churchyard.

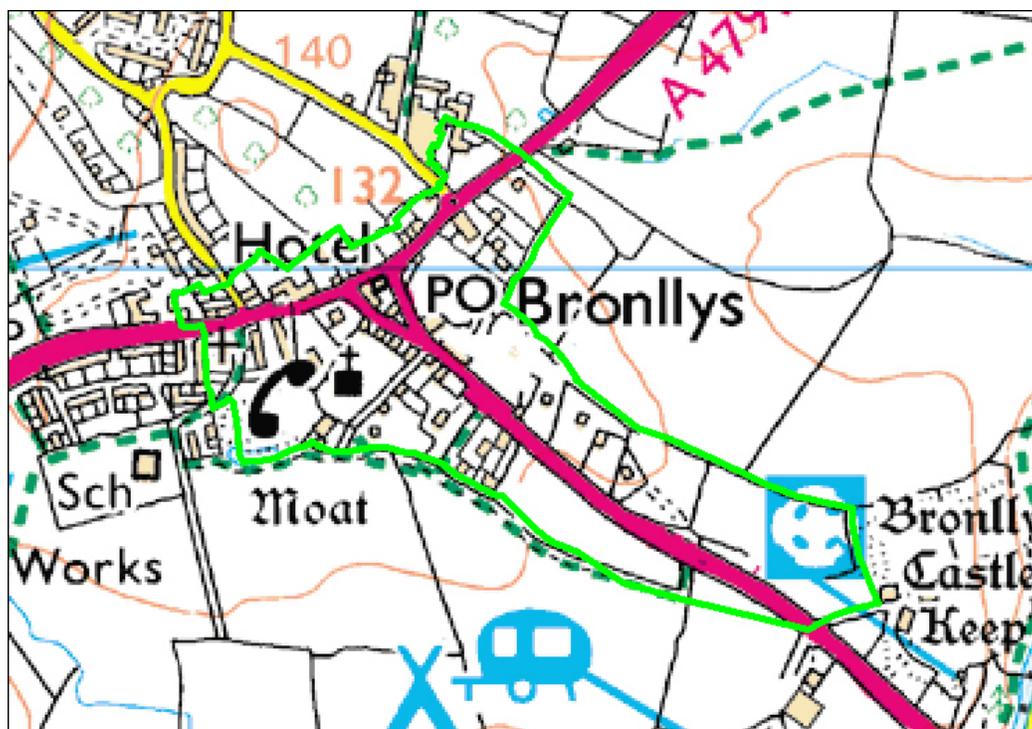
Immediately to the west of the church lies a large moated site (546), a typical example of the small group of medieval moated enclosures east of Brecon. It comprises a raised rectangular platform surrounded by a single bank and partially water-filled ditch. Its date and any relationship remain undetermined.

The church and moat together form the core of the village of Bronllys. The village streets hint at a characteristically medieval arrangement, and the small triangular pattern formed by the main through roads and Church Street may enclose a former green or market area, though this remains to be confirmed. Apart from Bronllys Court (2992) on the north-eastern edge of the village, which is a substantial 18th-century building, Upper House (30463), on the north side of the main road, which is an L-plan 18th-century farm house (although a 17th-century date has been ascribed to the barn and perhaps the first phase of the byre, but this is unverified), and the outbuilding to the Anchorage Café (near Upper House) which is 17th-century, there are no domestic buildings of any great age apparent in the settlement.

An estate map probably from the 1770s suggests that there were fewer buildings alongside the main Brecon to Hay road in the 18th than in the 19th century, not altogether surprising in view of how post-medieval settlements grew along major thoroughfares. Of potentially more significance are the lines of small fields beside the Talgarth road, with continuous back boundaries, heading towards the castle, and a footpath following the edge of the boundary on the south side of the main road. In the mid-19th century, only one or two of these individual fields had dwellings in them, and the pattern of housing that we see today is a very modern one. The layout of fields, however, for which is their no obvious topographical explanation, is strongly redolent of planned medieval castle-gate settlements whereby the settlement lay between the castle at one end of the street, the church and perhaps the market place at the other and burgrave plots or the like ran off the street at right-angles.

Documentary evidence confirms that Bronllys had an extensive medieval open-field system. Open-field strips fossilised by the introduction of earthwork banks survive to the south-west and north of the village. South of the church there are signs of relict ridge and furrow cultivation (5560), and to the west the 19th-century tithe map shows a system of medieval strip-fields (9254) in the area now occupied by a caravan park, an area termed the open fields of Bronllys (called "Small Field") on the Enclosure map of the 1860s. On the north side of the main street a group of three fields, surrounded by a closed circuit of lanes, contains similar areas of ridge and furrow (2994). Further strip-fields (2995) on the tithe map lie out to the east of Bronllys, although it is not clear whether or not these belonged to the village.

In summary, Bronllys is a settlement where its modern appearance does not mirror its potential medieval layout. A strong case can be made for the medieval settlement lying between the castle to the south-east and the church and moat to the north-west, to be replaced in the post-medieval era by ribbon development along the road from Hay to Brecon.



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