

Machynlleth

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Introduction

Machynlleth lies at the junction of two trunk roads, the A487 and A489, on the western periphery of Montgomeryshire. It has developed close to the lowest bridging point of the River Dyfi and was established on slightly raised ground adjacent to where the valley floor broadens out. The town has expanded eastwards along a shallow valley that nurses several small streams. Northwards the isolated crags of Pen yr Allt have inhibited expansion, but in recent times housing developments have started to encroach on rising ground on the south and also towards Afon Dulas on the east. It is now the fourth largest town in Montgomeryshire.

This brief report examines Machynlleth's 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).



Machynlleth town, photo 03-c-0753, © CPAT, 2012

History of development

The earliest form of the name is *Machenthleith* which was committed to paper sometime between 1201 and 1213. Other later forms such as *Machenloyd* (1254) and *Machynllaith* (1385) all reflect only minor variations. The most recent commentators on Welsh place-names suggest that *mach* should be equated with 'plain' and that *Cynllaith* is a personal name, though nothing is known about such an individual. Any link with the Roman settlement of *Maglona*, for long a favourite antiquarian speculation, has been comprehensively refuted.

The town was founded by the Welsh prince, Owain de la Pole, supposedly late in the 13th century, for in 1291 he was granted the right to hold a weekly market and two annual fairs there, with Machynlleth usefully placed on the trade route between Aberystwyth and Gwynedd. If other mid-Wales towns are any guide, there was probably some settlement already in existence earlier in the century, a contention supported by the earlier place-names cited above. By the end of the 13th century there were 61 tax payers resident in the town.

There is no direct evidence through the survival of its charter that the town ever acquired borough status, but an Elizabethan copy of the mid-14th century charter for Llanidloes includes a list of privileges more likely to relate to Machynlleth than Llanidloes itself, and thus suggesting that its own borough charter has disappeared. The case is strengthened by a will of 1597 referring to tenements as burgages and other evidence secreted in the National Archives.

The layout of the new town was a regular T-shape with an east-west road (Maengwyn Street) meeting a north-south road at a market place. The former was the principal thoroughfare. The earlier settlement is likely to have been in the vicinity of the church (*cf* Welshpool) and might find some reflection in the alignment of Pen-yr-allt Street which is not in keeping with the rest of the regular planned layout and may, at least in part, already have been in existence.

One of Machynlleth's principal claims to fame is that Owain Glyndŵr called a parliament here in 1404. Though short-lived it has left an indelible mark on Machynlleth's history.

That the town declined in the late medieval period like so many other towns is suggested by the fact that in 1545 there were only 51 tax payers. Nevertheless, John Leland who passed this way in the 1530s classed it as the second town of Montgomeryshire, and with both a market and assizes it was considered amongst the most important twenty-five towns in Wales in the 16th and 17th century. It seems to have had a strong commercial base and as the Dyfi was navigable to within a mile and a half of the town, water-borne transport was of some importance.

The Dyfi was bridged in 1533 (4090) providing easy access to the north and the bridge was apparently the site of a minor Civil War skirmish in 1644 (4323).

When the cattle droving era was in its heyday between the 17th and 19th centuries, Machynlleth emerged as one of the most important collecting centres for stock making the journey to England. A coach link with Shrewsbury was established in 1798 and the railway reached Machynlleth in 1864.

Around 1770 Plas Machynlleth was constructed at the southern end of the town, replacing a house known as Greenfields which carried a datestone of 1653. Its construction necessitated the diversion of Heol Pentrerhedyn and presumably the destruction of houses along it to make way for the house and grounds.

Despite the information currently available from early mapping, the local topography and archaeological and architectural work, it would be premature to try to define the extent of the town in any given period. This, however, must remain a long-term aspiration.

The heritage to 1750

There has probably been a church (7669) here before the Normans invaded Wales. Nothing of that early structure survives, however. The present dedication is not to a Welsh saint but to St Peter, which might point to a post-Conquest re-dedication. The west tower has 15th century fabric with later additions; the rest of the building was replaced in 1827 with subsequent modifications in 1866. Inside the font is 15th century but other fittings are largely Victorian.

The original perimeter of the churchyard (7668) can still be recognised on the ground; while its curvilinearity may be exaggerated on the tithe map of 1844, the sub-circular appearance does suggest that there may have been a pre-Conquest foundation here. It has been enlarged on several occasions since.

Owain Glyndŵr's Parliament House, a Grade I listed building (1270), is traditionally the location where he held the 1404 parliament. The building itself is later than the event. Some residual parts of it have been thought to be 15th century in date, and this has now been confirmed on the basis of dendrochronological dating which provided a date of 1470, and limited evaluation in c.2004 produced a few sherds of pottery from the 15th or 16th centuries. However, Parliament House as a building was extensively reconstructed at the beginning of the 20th century.

The Court House (20203) is located towards the eastern end of Maengwyn Street and is probably a late medieval half-timbered hall-house which was re-faced in stone in 1628 as shown on the central gable. It has a Grade II* listing. Likewise the Royal House (7670) on Heol Penrallt which has been tree-ring dated to 1559-1561 (with later additions), and first appears in a document of 1580. Probably from the outset it was designed to have both domestic and commercial functions, and ran lengthwise along a half-burgage plot.

There are some other 17th and 18th century buildings, such as No.8 Heol Pentrehedyn (40484) which is probably earlier 18th century and the White Lion Hotel (31938) on the same street which could be late 17th century. No.33 on Heol Maengwyn (31891) is thought to be of the late 17th or early 18th century, as are others in this line of properties (nos 35 and 37). All carry a Grade II listing. While some of these may suggest a renewed phase of building within the town on either side of 1700, they are relatively few in number. The appearance of the town is essentially Victorian as Richard Haslam noted in the Pevsner guide to Powys in 1979.

The pattern of long narrow tenements leading off the two main streets is still clearly represented on the ground. Beyond this zone, artisans' and workers' dwellings had sprung up by the later 19th century. In 1763, for instance, the site of Brickfield Street below the church was represented by a linear sheet of water, perhaps a mill pond.

The early course of Heol Pentrehedyn prior to its diversion in about 1770, is depicted on an estate map of 1763. The road ran south from the Market House at the T-junction and had dwellings along both sides. Just to the north of Greenfields (now Plas Machynlleth), an archaeological assessment in the 1990s revealed that the road turned through a right-angle and then some 200m on it broadened out where the town pound was sited. The estate map shows some housing on the north side of the road near the pound. Excavations in advance of the Bro Ddyfi Leisure Centre scheme revealed the plans of three buildings on either side of the street which were demolished in 1845.

*Clwyd Powys Archaeological Trust
Historic Settlement Survey - Montgomeryshire*



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