

Pennant Melangell

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Introduction

Pennant Melangell lies in the remote Tanat valley where it cuts into the eastern flank of the Berwyn Mountains, 14km north-west of the nearest accessible small town, Llanfyllin, though Bala on the other side of the mountains is fractionally closer. Consisting now of no more than a church and two houses, Pennant Melangell lies on the valley floor where a stream, Nant Ewyn, enters the River Tanat. Behind the churchyard, the ground rises steeply for nearly 300m to the heights of Pen Cerrig. Former house sites (see below) are restricted to the valley floor and higher up Cwm Nantewyn.

This brief report examines Pennant Melangell'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 only as an indicative guide to the historic settlement. The continuous line defining the historic core provides 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

Traditionally, Melangell, a princess of Irish origin, established a nunnery here in the later 8th century, having been given the land by Brochwel, Prince of Powys. Even if the tradition has a factual basis, it seems improbable that the nunnery survived into the medieval era. Nevertheless, Melangell's shrine became a place of pilgrimage in the Middle Ages, a *cell-y-bedd* surviving at the eastern end of the church.

Pennant is first documented about the year 1160, while *Penant Mellagel* appears in 1291. The first component means 'head of the stream or valley', the second refers to St Melangell.

The church became the centre of an ecclesiastical parish in the Middle Ages, but there is nothing to suggest that it ever became the focal point of a nucleated settlement. The Royal Commission have claimed that this is now a practically deserted village and 'that the foundations of numerous houses lie half-hidden beside the field paths near the church'. This, however, is probably something of an exaggeration.

The heritage to 1750

The church of St Melangell (14) has a complicated architectural history. The mid 12th century building was reconstructed in the 15th century, the nave and chancel were amalgamated into one chamber, and the apse containing the saint's shrine was sealed off from the church. The porch was built in the 18th century, the west tower in the 19th century, replacing an earlier structure. The church contains a 12th century font, an important but fragmentary 15th century

rood screen, two 14th century effigies and the shrine which has been claimed as the most delicate piece of Romanesque sculpture in Powys, and the earliest surviving monument of its type in northern Europe. There are fragmentary medieval wall paintings, a 7th-century chest, Hanoverian Royal Arms, and an 18th century candelabrum.



Pennant Melangell Church, photo 1955-0001, © CPAT, 2012

Pennant Melangell is the best-studied church in Montgomeryshire as a result of excavations and recording in 1989. These were fully published in Montgomeryshire Collections in 1994.

The distinctive circularity of the churchyard (7624) is interrupted on the eastern side, suggesting a modification to the perimeter, although the earlier line cannot now be determined. It still contains the shaft of a possible 14th century churchyard cross, and the lychgate is said to have been built in 1632, but the presence of a preaching mound (6342) first mooted in *Archaeologia Cambrensis* at the end of the 19th century seems very unlikely, though because of its subsequent destruction this cannot be verified.

To the north-west of the churchyard is Old Nant-ewyn cottage which may be of 17th century origin and supposedly pre-dates Nant-ewyn (43171) itself which is thought to be of mid-18th century date.

Two cockpits (15 & 16), one inside the churchyard, the other in the area of the present car park to the east, are shown on late 19th century maps. Only the car park example now survives as a faint earthwork.

The main routeway along Cwm Pennant in past times was on the north side of Afon Tanat and is now a farm track and footpath. At least two house sites, both occupied in 1842, can be positively identified (7626 & 7627) and there are suggestions of others. It is these in all probability that have in the past generated a belief in a shrunken medieval settlement at

Pennant (3774). As already noted, there is, however, no tangible evidence of any real nucleation here.

Other structures, not necessarily dwellings, lie in Cwm Nantewyn and at the confluence of the stream with Afon Tanat.



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