

Cefnlllys

SO 08536149
16124

Introduction

A high, isolated hill rising dramatically within a great loop of the River Ithon is surmounted by the earthwork remains of Cefnlllys Castle. The church and settlement that accompanied it lie on a flat spur, akin to a river terrace, projecting westwards towards the river from the base of the hill. These are just over 2km east of Llandrindod Wells.

This brief report examines the emergence and development of Cefnlllys 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).



Cefnlllys church, photo 3247-0012 © CPAT, 2011

History of development

Cefnlllys is recorded in 1246 as *Keventhles*, with other variations on this form during the 13th century. The name combines the elements *cefn* meaning 'ridge' and *llys* interpreted as 'court'.

Though the date of the first earthwork castle at Cefnlllys is unknown, there is a tradition that Elystan Glodrydd maintained a fortification here in the 10th century. The lords of Maelienydd could have thrown up fortifications here in the 12th century, perhaps to replace the motte and bailey at Din Iethon some two miles to the north, but there is no documentation to support this possibility. Other commentators, however, have suggested that the first work on site was the stone fortification erected by Roger Mortimer between 1240 and 1246, which fell to Llewelyn twenty years later in 1262. A more substantial foundation for a new keep at the south-west end of the hill was developed by the Mortimers in about 1273 after the Treaty of Montgomery. The castle was burnt by Glyndŵr in 1406. A house was built on the site by a new constable of the castle between 1432 and 1459, and his bard describes the keep as having an octagonal tower. By the time that Leland passed by around 1540 the castle was in ruins.

There are references to a medieval borough at Cefnlllys (4246), probably designed to become the chief town of the cantref of Malienydd. The date of its foundation is not chronicled, but it was certainly in existence by 1297 when a market charter was granted, and by 1304 there were 25 tenants and a mill on the Ithon in the vill of Keventhlis. The prosperity seems to have been short-lived. In 1332 only 20 burgesses were recorded in what was specifically termed a 'borough' and fifty years later 10 of the burgages had been abandoned.

Pontage was one of the tolls recorded in 1304, suggesting a bridge across the Ithon, perhaps where the present 'Shaky Bridge' is sited, with tracks leading south and west from it.

Lewis claimed that it retained its burghal status into the 19th century. It was one of the five boroughs in Radnorshire that jointly returned a Member of Parliament under the Act of Union in 1536 and, after the abandonment of the castle, the court leet continued to be held at Neuadd, a few hundred metres to the north of the castle site. Williams reported that it was still held there in the early 19th century.

An estate map dated to c.1770 shows a few dwellings dispersed around Cefnlllys in addition to Shaky Bridge and the 'ruins of the Old Castle': two east of the church and a couple more north-west of Neuadd.

The heritage to 1750

It has been convincingly argued that the large bailey of Cefnlllys Castle originated as an Iron Age hillfort (50039; SAM Rd008). Cefnlllys Castle (50040), also sometimes known as Castell Glan Ithon, commands the surrounding area. It consists of two mottes at opposite ends of the hill with a bailey attached to the more southerly one. Quarrying on the hilltop, where rock outcrops break the surface, has generally had a detrimental effect on the earthworks. The central area of the bailey is flat and it has been claimed that the foundations of rectangular buildings can be discerned. Certainly there are scoops within the east rampart, some of which may result from quarrying, but others could mark the position of earlier buildings.

St Michael's Church (16054; Grade II listing) is single-chambered with a west tower, the windows are 16th-century perhaps set in earlier, 13th-century walls, and the tower is rebuilt. It was heavily restored in 1895 after being deliberately unroofed two years earlier. There is a 13th-century piscine, a font thought to be 14th-century and a restored 15th-century screen.

The churchyard (16101) which lies at the apex of the spur is irregular in form and is not raised, except as a result of the natural slope on the west. There is no obvious reason to see it as an early medieval creation.

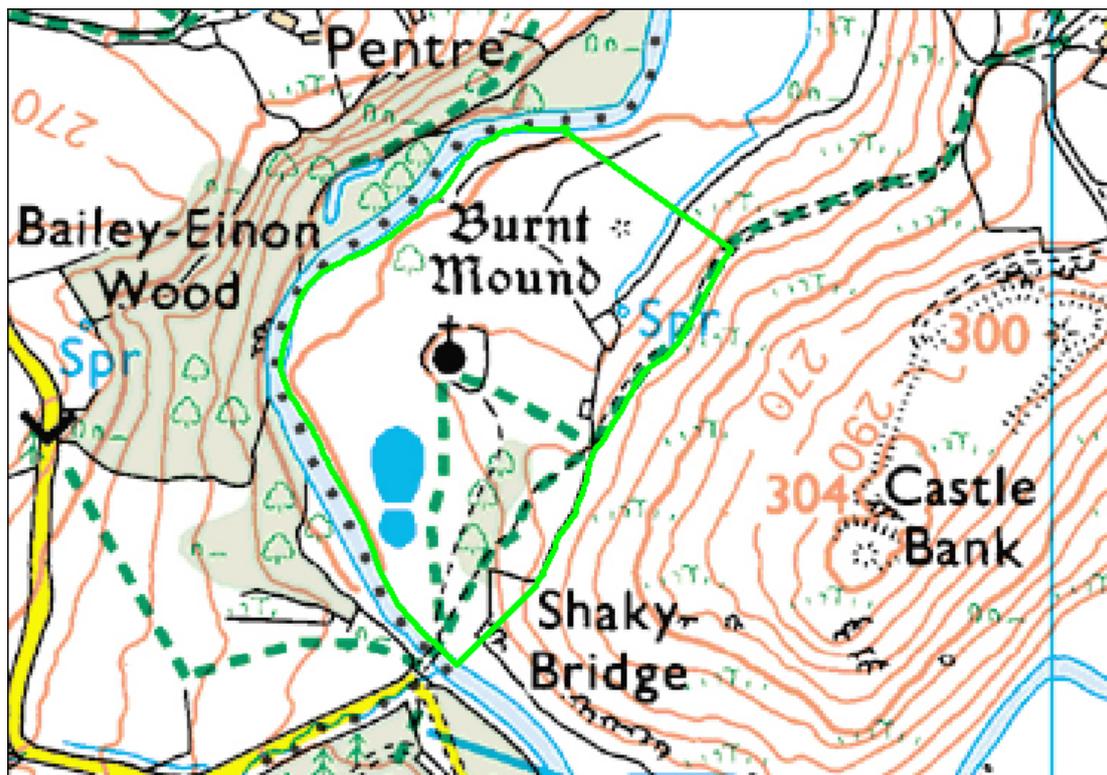
The ruins of a dwelling (16102), identified as Ty'n-y-llan on late 19th-century Ordnance Survey maps, lies little more than 100m east-south-east of the church, with traces of another cottage (16103) some 50m to the north.

The siting of the borough of Cefnlllys has generated considerable discussion. The documented mill, the local topography and also perhaps the collection of the toll of pontage to maintain a bridge across the Ithon favour the development of settlement in the vicinity of the church. Immediately to the north-east of the churchyard on flat ground are a number of platform earthworks with some rather better defined examples further east (16104; 23648). It seems probable that these represent the locations of dwellings within the settlement of medieval Cefnlllys, and the area is now protected as a scheduled ancient monument. More surprising perhaps is that while metal detecting recovered Tudor and later finds from around the church there were virtually no medieval finds. An alternative view of the borough is that it was sufficiently small to have been accommodated within the capacious bailey of the castle on the top of the ridge, though this view seems to be based on supposition rather than hard evidence; and a further suggestion implies that there was no nucleated settlement here, but rather a dispersed spread of houses in the valley which collectively might still have been considered a borough.

South of the church on ground sloping down to the river, and less clearly, to the south-west, aerial photographs show ridge and furrow (16108) surviving in pasture. Ground observation of these remains is less revealing.

Field names with the element 'park', in the vicinity of Neuadd, appear to corroborate the documentary reference in 1360 to a deer park at Cefnlllys (4211).

Neuadd (16074; Grade II listing) is probably of 17th-century origin, but was altered substantially in the 19th century. South of the farm, ridge and furrow (16105) survives in a pasture field.



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