

Gwyddelwern

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Introduction

Gwyddelwern is placed on the eastern face of a broad U-shaped valley which channels an obscure stream, the Afon Camddwr, southwards towards the Dee. The church lies almost on the valley floor and the village itself is virtually no higher. A small tributary stream now partly culverted runs down from off the hills to the north-east and passes just to the south of the church. Through the village runs the A494 which links the A5 trunk road in the south with Ruthin and the North Wales coastal strip further north. The nearest settlement of any size is Corwen, some 3km to the south. Now in Denbighshire, it was one of several parishes transferred from Merionnydd to the newly formed county of Clwyd in 1974.

This brief report examines the emergence and development of Gwyddelwern up to the year 1750. For the more recent history of the settlement, it will be necessary to look at other sources of information and in particular 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 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 will require modification 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. The HER can be accessed on-line through the Archwilio website (www.archwilio.org.uk).



Gwyddelwern, photo 95-C-0124, © CPAT 2014

History of development

The origin and growth of Gwyddelwern are not documented. Both the church dedication to one of the best known saints of north Wales and the atypical shape of its churchyard hint at an early medieval date for the ecclesiastical foundation. A tradition perpetuated on the village information panel that Gwyddelwern was originally known as Llanalhaiarn can be dismissed as a confused recollection of the incorporation of a medieval parish of that name into Gwyddelwern at a later date, probably around 1550 according to Archdeacon Thomas, the historian of the diocese.

The earliest written reference comes from 1198 when it was termed *Gwothelwern* and in the Norwich Taxation of 1254 the church is listed as *Ecc'a de Gwidelwern*, a form very close to the modern version. Putting aside a folk tradition that St Beuno restored an Irishman (Gwyddel) to life near here, modern place-name authorities suggest that the elements *gwyddwal* and *gwern* signify 'an alder marsh in the thickets' which seems not unreasonable in this broad valley location.

The development of a settlement here during the Middle Ages can be no more than an assumption, but in the closing years of the 17th century Edward Lhuyd recorded eight houses and two cottages by the church. Maps of the late 18th/mid-19th century imply a similar density of settlement. Bueno's Terrace and other houses further north as well as the ribbon development to the south of the church represent later 19th-century growth.

The heritage to 1750

St Bueno's Church was largely rebuilt in 1880 when a new chancel was erected, together with a tower and spire over the porch. An earlier rebuilding, its scale unknown, occurred in 1538, and together these have complicated the architectural story of Gwyddelwern's development. Windows of 14th-century date, though much restored, remain in the nave, as does a priest's door, and the east window may be similar to its 16th-century predecessor. Internal features include a 19th-century screen integrating late medieval work, a late medieval dug-out chest and a font, probably of 15th-century origin, some pre-Reformation stained glass fragments in the chancel, 18th-century pew panels and a couple of memorials from the same century.

Elias Owen in the late 19th century was convinced that Gwyddelwern had a 'circular' churchyard, pointing out that its curvilinear shape had been disturbed on its north-west and south-west sides but that an earlier line was still apparent. This earlier perimeter line is no longer discernible, but the relatively modern artificiality of the boundary on these sides is not in doubt, nor is the curvilinearity on the north-east and around the south end, notwithstanding the encroachment of the now-ruined building by the north entrance.

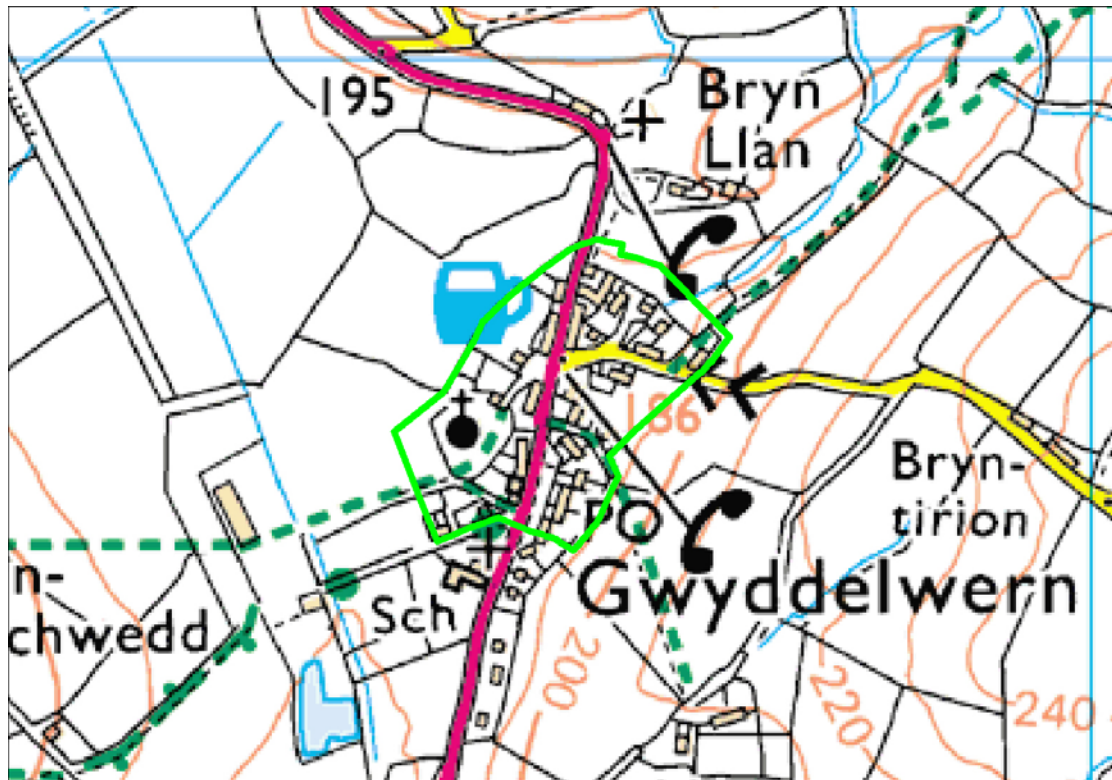
Fynnon Bueno lies to the north of the village and was marked on early editions of the large-scale Ordnance Survey map. The spring formerly rose in a sunken slate-lined chamber but this was apparently used as a rubbish tip and no trace of the well remained. There is now a brick and stone tank, fenced off from the rest of the field. Another well, Fynnon Fair, was recorded, though less precisely, as lying to the west of the village.

Apart from the church, there are several early buildings in the village. The Rose and Crown immediately to the north-east of the churchyard, and in the late 19th century known more simply as the Crown (and before that reportedly as Ty Mawr) has box-framing and half-timbering; the building is now known to date from 1570-2 as a result of dendrochronology. A little further north along the main road, the former Blue Bell Inn has some details that could be late medieval or perhaps sub-medieval according to the RCAHMW. And Ty'n Llan on the east side of the Camddwr stream is a cruck-framed hall-house perhaps from around 1500, but then converted to a storeyed house of regional type a century later.

Low earthworks exist on the valley floor immediately to the west of the churchyard. These have not been characterised and are not sufficiently distinctive to merit detailed recording. Narrow quillets covered low ground north of the church in the late 18th century, showing on

an estate map of the time. Almost all traces of these have now been erased, but farm names incorporating the element 'maes' are probably a reminder of medieval open field agriculture associated with the settlement. Field patterns to the west of the church imply something similar.

The axis of the village has been adjusted over the last two to three hundred years. The main road passing through the village is a turnpike road. Perhaps it superseded an earlier track along the valley though this is not certain. The network of lanes and footpaths aligned across the valley from north-east to south-west could indicate the main approach in earlier centuries.



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