

Llanidloes

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Introduction

The southern Montgomeryshire town of Llanidloes lies in the upper Severn valley where the A470(T) and B4518 now intersect. The town has expanded over the centuries to fill an unusually broad part of the valley where Afon Clywedog and Afon Dulas debouch into the Severn, and several other small streams run down to the river from the south-east. A terrace on the eastern flank of the river was utilised for settlement and this rises gently eastwards, interrupted by the courses of two of the streams, Lletty Coch-nant and Nant Cwm du, creating a spur location for the settlement. Both the Severn and its tributary the Clywedog were fordable in the vicinity, and two trackways, probably earlier in their origin than the town itself, converge on this spot.

This brief report examines Llanidloes' 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 origin of Llanidloes is obscure but it can be assumed that the church positioned on the bank of the Severn is an early medieval foundation. It is said to have been a daughter church of the mother church or *clas* at Llandinam in the pre-Conquest era. As to whether a settlement grew up around the church in the centuries either side of the Norman Conquest will perhaps never be known, although it has recently been pointed out that the township (*trefi*) boundaries which should be of early date are quite angular in the neighbourhood of the church, as though they were respecting existing property boundaries. The name simply signifies 'the church of St Idloes' and was first set down in print as *Lanidloes* in 1254. Little is known of the saint and this is the only church dedicated to him.

Although the first borough charter does not seem to have been granted until 1344 when it became self-governing, a town was deliberately established at Llanidloes in the second half of the 13th century. Possibly it may have occupied the site of or was perhaps adjacent to a pre-existing manorial centre that may or may not have had a castle at its centre, although there seems to be not real evidence for this contention. The first mention of the planted town is said to be in 1263, but the leading expert on medieval Llanidloes considers that the town was probably established in 1280, the same year that the Crown granted a weekly market and a twice-yearly fair to the lord of Arwystli, Owain ap Gruffudd. Over the next twenty years its growth was rapid with 13 taxpayers in 1293 and 66 burgesses in 1309. At the same time trade thrived. In 1293 market revenues brought in three times the amount generated from burgage

and other rents, an unusual state of affairs at a time when market revenues in towns were generally lower.

It has been claimed that the town was sufficiently important for defences to be built around it by the end of the 13th century, although the modern evidence of these is circumstantial.

During the later Middle Ages the population perhaps remained fairly static, confined within the medieval limits of the town. Yet, at some stage the suburb of Frankwell emerged on the north side of the river, the name a corruption of the Anglo-Norman term *Frank ville* meaning 'free town'. This expansion is undated, but is likely to have occurred in the Middle Ages.

Llanidloes, along with many other urban settlements suffered during the Glyndŵr rebellion at the beginning of the 15th century and recovered but gradually. Only with the growth of the textile industry at the end of the later 18th century did Llanidloes expand, putting it among the top forty towns in Wales. At this time gardens and open land behind the main streets began to be infilled and groups of small houses, often arranged in courts, added to its distinctive character.

A full history of the town has recently been published by David Stephenson under the title of *Llanidloes: A History* (2010).

The heritage to 1750

St Idloes' Church (1856) has a 14th century tower of a type often found in the Welsh Marches, and an arcade, a hammerbeam roof and a south door, all of 16th century date. The arcade and door were brought from Cwmhir Abbey after the Dissolution. There are a few pre-19th century furnishings including a font, a chest and some funerary attachments from a 16th century tomb, but relatively little survived the restorations of the 19th century.

The churchyard (7556) is rectilinear in its design. Though an enclosure of curvilinear design might have been anticipated here, there is now no evidence of one, except that the earliest large-scale map of Llanidloes depicts a curving boundary around the southern side of the churchyard.

A motte-and-bailey earthwork castle (1538), perhaps the prelude to the development of the new town, is envisaged for the south end of China Street. Its layout has been determined in some detail, and the evidence, though circumstantial, is reasonably convincing. Significant changes in ground height including the possible remains of the ditch on the south side of the community centre, the loop described by Smithfield Street, the local topography and the names Mount Inn and Mount Lane are all suggestive. No traces were recognised during a watching brief in the area of the putative bailey some years ago, and the bailey would appear to have been established at a higher level than the motte. Nor are there any documented references to it.

The layout of the town is typical of a planted town, with roads set at right-angles to each other defining rectangular blocks and the main focus being the market cross which was subsequently replaced by the Old Market Hall. At least one medieval street, no longer in existence, has been proposed between Great Oak Street and Mount Street. The church, though linked to the main plan by several small streets, was tucked away in an unimportant part of the plantation, suggesting that it may already have been in existence. Immediately to the south of the town was a common which was still in existence in 1776.

The line of the borough defences (1537) utilising natural scarps in places was defined in detail by O'Neil in the inter-war period. It was assumed that the artificial defences comprised a wooden palisade and, in places, a wide ditch. There were two gateways known by name, High Gate on the west and Severn Porte on the north, and probably a third on the south-east, the

site of which is lost, but which may have gone by the name of Cripplegate. But as noted above no substantive evidence of the defences has come to light since O'Neil's work.

Idloes' Well (1539) located on Lower Green, just to the north-east of the town, disappeared during the 20th century, as a result of the provision of piped water in the town, though its approximate position was established by evaluation in 2006. This may have been a holy well, whose origin in this guise could have stretched back to the early medieval era. A second well termed the Kiln Well and esteemed for its curative properties was positioned on the west side of the river close to the Short Bridge. It was identified in 1959 during work near the White House, and has also been claimed as the holy well associated with Idloes.

The Old Market Hall (3570; SAM Mg003), the only half-timbered example of its type in Wales, is thought to have been built around 1600.



The Old Market Hall, photo 0615-0018, © CPAT, 2012

A number of buildings within the town are considered to be of 17th century date or at least have their origins in that period. These include 20 & 22 Long Bridge Street (31811 & 40471), 42 & 43 Long Bridge Street (31813 & 31814), 42 High Street (40241) which is reputed to be from the mid part of the century and 44 High Street (40468) which could be from the end of it. The Royal Head (Short Bridge Street) also originated in the 17th century, and a similar date has been attributed to the Mount Inn. The church apart, there is apparently nothing in Llanidloes that pre-dates 1600, and it is apparent that as in Welshpool the older properties are a little away from the centre of the town.



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