

Post-roman history of Llanmelin hillfort (“Llanmelin”) by members of local history societies

Llanmelin is situated on a ridge 100m above sea level overlooking farmland around Caerwent. It sits on a promontory where the Castrogi brook descends from the higher plateau behind the fort to the flatlands below. The topsoil is thin, covering limestone. The land drops steeply for about 60m to the NW, W and S, but is approached across fairly level ground from the E.

Nash-Williams’ excavations identified two medieval stone huts in the Annexe, containing several fragments of C12th or C13th pottery, and one hut in the Outpost (two fragments of C12th pottery). No evidence of their purpose was discovered. The unusual “ Outpost” , assuming an Iron Age date, might perhaps provide early warning of anyone approaching from the East.

Today , most of Llanmelin lies in the parish of Caerwent, with a small portion (together with the Outpost) lying in the parish of Shirenewton.

Wendy Davies suggests an early reference in the Llandaff Charters c980 to Lann Mihacgel Lichrid. may be Llanmelin. However other commentators Bradbury and Rees place this about three miles further north at Wentwood mill on the Castrogi brook (also identified as Llandegelly).

No other documentary references are known until the 1500’s .

Whilst the lowlying land, around Caerwent and up to the foot of the hillfort ,was undoubtedly cleared by Roman times, it is not known when the land to the N and E was cleared (Gwent County History). After the Conquest the area formed part of the Lordship of Chepstow, with the Lordship of Caldicot and Newton (Shirenewton) carved out from that c1200 (Birbeck). At that time vast quantities of timber were being extracted in the area for building castles, locally and further afield. Woodland was also of course being cleared for agriculture and in some places for security from ambush.

The curious zigzag parish boundary at the E of the hillfort may possibly originate in the heads of earlier fields. Perhaps the medieval house identified by Nash-Williams in the Outpost (and those in the Annexe) are contemporaneous with clearances.

By the 1500s we find references to properties called Llanmelin, being substantial farms to the W of the fort (now Great Llanmelin Farm) and to the south (Lower Llanmelin Farm – now subsumed in the RNPF and demolished). Bradney sets out partial histories of these farms; they changed hands many times. It appears probable ownership of most of the hillfort was with Lower Llanmelin Farm.

The hillfort sits in what has been known for many years as Llanmelin Wood (c 44 acres). What is now called the Poor Wood (and previously Sharkey, Sharbey or Shabby Common) covers the northern slope up to the hillfort and contains at least two cottages built for the poor of Caerwent parish in 1830-1840.

The Poor Wood seems in Victorian times to have been owned by the Reverend Freke Lewis of St Pierre. Freke seems to have acquired the wood in 1807 from Colonel Mark Wood (then owner of Piercefield), and Colonel Wood or his father probably acquired it from the owners of the now demolished Lower Llanmelin Farm, about 1750, either the Blethin family or the Van family of Llanwern. Buying and selling land was a popular pastime among Georgian gentry. The Lewis family sold it in 1908 and it eventually ended up in the hands of the MOD (and now Cadw).

The Bengough family of Gloucestershire owned Lower Llanmelin farm by 1818, and it may be the hillfort was part of the farm for several hundred years prior to that. They certainly owned the hillfort and land to the East by 1841. They sold in 1918 and again this found its way into the hands of the MOD in 1937.

The name Llanmelin has been the subject of speculation. Rees was sure it meant ‘church of the mill’, but there doesn’t seem to be a church there. It has been spelt several ways in the last 500 years. Others have suggested the name started life as Nant Melin (valley of the mill), or as Glanmelin (loosely Mill Bank) derived from the several mills up the stream flowing out of the Cwm: from below the steep bank is impressive. Alternatively lan or llan might mean eminence or enclosure, and thus Mill Knoll or Mill Fort is possible.

The whole hillfort was acquired by the Admiralty (now MOD) in 1937, when they acquired land at Caerwent to build the Royal Naval Propellant Factory (RNPF). Many have wondered what role the hillfort played in WW2. The answer seems to be none. AA gun sites to protect RNPF were situated in fields around RNPF but not on the fort. RNPF acquired the land shortly after Nash-Williams finished his excavations, and it seems no coincidence that the RNPF fence respects the fort and leaves it outside the boundary fence.

In summary, more work is needed to establish the likely functions of the Annexe, the Outpost and the medieval huts, but in answer to the question what happened to Llanmelin after the Romans left, it seems that the answer is 'not much'. It sits hidden in a wood on a piece of land difficult to cultivate, surrounded by good agricultural land. It is telling that visitors to Caerwent in later centuries (see eg Coxe "I could not trace... the slightest vestiges of a British encampment") didn't even notice it was there .

900 words draft 1 ; 24/6/15

Add 6/17

On the 1830 [OS] map the site is described as "The Fortifications ...Ancient British Camp". It seems "The Fortifications" was the local name rather than a description and that it reflects the earlier name "The Garretts" noted in the 1613 survey. This in turn was probably derived from the Old (Norman) French for the site, though whether a name or a description we do not know. It is possible that it was so named as a watchtower policing the Lord's interests in the forest of Wentwood . Such a structure might be of wood and might or might not predate the stone castles at Penyaemawr (Troggy), Llanvair, possibly Dinham, and possibly Itton (reference to 'Garrison' there to be investigated). It is tempting to see a string of points stretching out from Chepstow castle!

A brief word on Prof Wendy Davies attribution of a site mentioned in the Llandaff charters to Llanmelin; I suggest a better candidate would be somewhere near Wentwood mill, about two miles north of Llanmelin up the Troggy brook. It is possible that area, adjoining Earlswood common, was recently cleared at the time of the charter, and 'Stifilot' may refer to land littered with tree stumps.

From 2/16

From surveys of Shirenewton boundary from 1613 and 1697. Reference again to Wm Blethin of (lower) Llanmellin Farm. The 1613 survey mentions the stretch from Dinham to 'the Garrett' then to bridge and up Cwm. The Garrett seems to be the hill fort, not a family or field name. A later survey mentions the same stretch and talks about crossing the lands owned by lower Llanmellin. Bearing in mind the date I'm now guessing that The Garrett is an anglicised version of Gaer/Caer something, or simply Old French for watchtower.

From maps:

- a) the track from lower Llanmellin Farm up to the hill fort...reinforces view the hill fort was in common ownership with the Farm in 1600s
- b) interested in idea that the lane from Crossway Green cut edge of Outpost and joined to track to hill fort entrance..they line up well . Also found there was a storm in 1935 where water flowed down to lower cwm mill with such force the road was entirely ripped up: reinforces idea this may not have been the way down in earlier times. A gentler route via hill fort entrance may have been preferred.

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Llanmelin ownership

Great Farm

Thomas Coes m. Eleanor Coes d.1583
Elizabeth Coes m David Lewis
William Lewis 1665
Morgan Lewis m Rachel Van 1755
Charles Van 1751
Charles Van jnr
Ann Morgan
Thos Bridgen 1826
Edwin Carter d 1847
Robert Bowring 1904
William Price 1925

Lower Farm

William Powell 1584
Walter Howel d.1597
Walter Howell d.1633
Wm Blethin bought 1675
Wm Blethin d 1676
Wm Howells d 1689
Wm Blethin 1697
Temperance Blethin widow occupied 1705
Wm Blethin d 1742
Walter Jenkins?
Wm Thomas 1755
Jane Blethin d 1811
Thos Williams 1804/5
Henry **Bengough 1818**
C O Liddell 1918
W Parker 1928
RNPF 1937- also Poor Wood and Fort/Wood

Poor Wood

As Lower Farm
Mark Wood –acq 1750? Owned 1751
Lewis acq 1807
Lewis sold 1908

Fort/Wood

?Charles Van 1751
Chas Bengough 1831
Geo **Bengough 1841**
Bengough sold 1918

@15.1.2018