Corwen

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Introduction

Corwen shelters beneath the crags of Creigiau Llangar where the broad U-shaped valley of the River Dee drives eastwards, edging the Berwyn Mountains. Facing north, the core of the town sits on a low river terrace, with more modern development reaching up the steep slopes behind. The A5 trunk road passes through the town with Llangollen some 14km to the east and Ruthin about the same distance to the north.

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

History of development

The first appearance of the place-name is as *Cornain* in 1206 and a year later as *Coruain*. In the ecclesiastical taxations of the 13th century, *Corvaen* is given in 1254 and *Coruan* in 1292. Its modern form of *Corwen* is documented for the first time in 1443. A possible interpretation of the names sees a combination of the two words *côr* and *maen* meaning ‘sanctuary stone’ and some commentators have been tempted to see this as a reference to the prehistoric standing stone built into the wall of the church porch. An alternative but obscure meaning comes if the first element is *cor* meaning ‘small’.

The origins of Corwen appear to lie in its emergence as a 'mother church' during the early medieval period, a major ecclesiastical centre which controlled its surrounding region, in this case the commote of Edeyrnion. In the mid-13th century it was still an important ecclesiastical centre with sixteen clerics. It has been suggested that the name of the adjacent almshouse, the 'College', retains an embedded memory of a collegiate establishment that had been present during the Middle Ages, though this may be asking too much of the evidence. The secular centre for the area was perhaps at Cynwyd in the adjacent parish of Llangar. But it is worth remembering that in England, minster churches which are the equivalent of the mother churches are viewed by modern historians as the most likely places where secular settlement would have developed, simply because of their stability over several centuries.

There is little in the way of information on the appearance and nature of Corwen during the Middle Ages, but some level of nucleated settlement can be assumed. When Edward Lhuyd’s correspondent replied to the Oxford scholar at the end of the 17th century, there were about 27 houses in the town, and it seems improbable that this degree of growth could have occurred

from scratch entirely after the Reformation, particularly as there was also a market in the town.

Corwen, photo 95-C-0120, © CPAT 2014

The mid 19th-century Tithe map reveals a village of the pre-railway era still centred round the church. Housing had extended along Church Street for only a short distance, though there were more dwellings on the lane traversing the hillside to the south. Eastwards the London Road was also becoming a popular location for housing. The lane leading north from the church to the river served only a few houses before bifurcating and giving access to arable lands (quillets) on the valley floor.

The town was part of Merionethshire (Merionnydd) until 1974 when the region was merged with Caernarvonshire and Anglesey to form Gwynedd. In 1996 Corwen together with several other communities was transferred to Denbighshire.

The heritage to 1750

A Roman tile antefix with the symbol of the XXth legion (102673) was found in Coed Pen-y-bryn Felin on the wooded slopes to the south of Corwen in 1977. An alleged Roman building (102674) is also said to have been uncovered west of Chapel Street in the centre of Corwen in 1909; few details are available and its authenticity remains to be established. But even if either or both of these discoveries ultimately demonstrate the presence of a Roman or Romano-British establishment at Corwen, its existence is not likely to have influenced the foundation and development of the medieval settlement.

Corwen church (105907) is dedicated to two 6th-century saints, Mael and Sulien – though earlier authorities such as Lhuyd refer only to the latter – and its original cruciform shape could be an indicator of its early importance as a mother church. It was first referred to in 1220 and renovated lancet windows surviving in the east wall could belong to this time, from which it might be inferred that the fabric of the church dates to around the 12th or 13th century.

Repairs and refurbishments occurred in 1777, in 1872 and again in 1907, and both the west tower, which is thought to have been constructed in the 14th century, and the body of the church have seen considerable reconstruction. There is a font of 12th-century date, and a priest's effigy in the chancel dating to the 14th century, but otherwise little of medieval date has survived. There are memorials of 18th and 19th-century date and the nave roof goes back to 1687 (though it was heavily restored in the 19th century).

Early medieval stones associated with the church and emphasising its earlier significance are: a cross-carved stone (100817), probably a pillar stone of 7th/9th-century date and utilised as the lintel of the south door from at least the late 17th century; a 10th/11th-century cross shaft with its base (100818) in the churchyard; a now lost stone fragment with plaitwork of the 10th to earlier 12th century; and two further decorated fragments both now lost but both represented by sketches, and thought to fall within the 9th to 12th centuries. In addition a bronze censer (100819), attributable to the 12th century, was discovered in 1858 'a little above Corwen church', but it too is now lost. From a completely different era is a monolith, known to Samuel Lewis as *Carreg i Big yn y fach rewllyd*, which is built into the porch wall and is presumed to have been a prehistoric standing stone; its presence according to tradition dictated the location of the church.

The churchyard (105908) is of moderate size and is polygonal in shape. Its boundary appears to have been cut back on the north side to accommodate both a number of dwellings and a canalised stream. On the south side the 'College' (q.v.) has also intruded into the graveyard, and while it is tempting to see an oval enclosure truncated by later activity, it must be admitted that there is no convincing evidence of it.

Ffynnon y Gloch (100821) lay near the base of the wooded hillside behind the church and is now supposedly represented by a hollow 30m wide and 8m deep. It was mentioned by Lhuyd at the end of the 17th century as the place where a bronze bell was discovered.

There is no evidence of the settlement that existed beside the church in the Middle Ages. What appears to have been a market place lay on the north of the churchyard and is still recognisable as a broadening out of High Street despite post-medieval encroachments. However, we have had no success in locating any records that might refer to a medieval market at Corwen, though Lhuyd in the 1690s referred to it as a market town, so the nature of the urban topography here must for the moment remain a mystery.

No early buildings are known to survive, and most of those in the centre are from the years around 1750 or later. The Post Office in the High Street was built as a house around about 1750, and was extended for its current use in 1936; Waterloo House in the High Street dates to around 1740 but may incorporate elements of an earlier structure; the Owain Glyndwr Hotel is classed as a fine example of an 18th-century coaching inn, and also dates to around 1740; and the six 18th-century almshouses known as The College (105909), and now converted into a retreat, were established in 1750. Interestingly, however, Edward Lhuyd more than fifty years earlier had referred to the existence of six almshouses at Corwen, built by the owners of nearby Rûg.

The open fields worked from the settlement in the Middle Ages lay immediately to the south of the settlement in a large loop of the river Dee – their pattern was fragmented but still recognisable on mid-19th-century maps.