

THE CORN MILLS OF LLŶN IN THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY

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The land-holding units that characterised society in the Welsh heartlands about the time of the English conquest in the late thirteenth century were known as the gwely ('resting place') and the gafael ('holding'). These had been formed sometime after 1100 when an individual founder appropriated arable land in a particular area. After his death his descendants spread out from the original location, so that the gwely (usually called after the founder or his sons) would hold land in a number of neighbouring trefi or townships: indeed, the holdings of many gwelyau often spread over a wide area. In cases where the founder's sons continued to hold the land jointly, partition amongst the grandsons produced smaller resting-places, one to every grandson and each known as a gafael[1]. Since the basis of medieval Welsh agriculture was to have all the lands of the township together in open, hedgeless, fields, a closely-knitted mesh of lands belonging to various gwelyau or gafaelion existed in any one township. The lands of free tenants were divided between the members of the gwely, with sons receiving equal shares on the death of their father; the lands of bond tenants, on the other hand, were shared out anew each time one of their number died. The pattern of land-holding in north-west Wales in the fourteenth century was thus extremely complex, and the gwely comprised both the territorial structure and the persons bound together in it.

All the land belonged to the lord. Rent for the land was paid by the gwely as a unit, before 1282 to the Welsh princes and thereafter to the English Crown. Apart from rent, all sorts of other rights belonged to the lord, so that villagers were obliged to work a certain number of days free for him, carry food to his manor-houses, and pay dues on occasions such as marriage and death. In addition, tenants were obliged to grind their corn in the lord's mill and pay for that privilege, and the purpose of this short article is to assess what light a number of surveys of Crown assets in Gwynedd in the early fourteenth century can throw on the mills of the hundred of Llŷn and on their users.

Apart from a few mills in private hands there were some two dozen that belonged to the Crown in Llŷn, namely those taken over at the conquest of 1282 and retained by the central administration. Suit of mill formed a substantial source of profit to the exchequer, and in the early days the onus of being responsible for the maintenance of the mills fell on the sheriff of the county, and later on the person to whom a mill might be granted. In 1317 the Crown granted the new borough of Pwllheli, the manor of Neigwl and the profits of the mills of Geirch and Gwerthyr to a relative of the sheriff, Edmund de Dynieton. In 1318 the mills of Neigwl were added, but in 1319 all the named sites were transferred instead to Hugh de Foston. In 1349, again, the boroughs of Pwllheli and Nefyn and certain suits of mill were granted to Nigel de Loryng, the hero of Conan Doyle's Sir Nigel[2].

All mills retained by the Crown and administered by the sheriff were included in an annual report submitted to the Exchequer. That of 1303-4, for example, mentions only the mills of Geirch, Gwerthyr, Nefyn, and the two mills of Neigwl (duobus molendinis de Neugolf), the latter an important centre in the commote of Dinllaen[3]. In the report for 1306-

7 thirteen mills are listed, and details of repairs to Gwerthyr mill are appended, including the wages of Madoc the carpenter and Iorwerth Ddu his assistant, for certain items of ironwork and for repairing the woodwork[4]. The mill is recorded as being newly built, but we cannot say with certainty whether the two carpenters were rebuilding an old mill which had stood on the site or repairing a mill which had been built only a few years previously. The annual report for 1350-1 refers to the mills of Geirch and Gwerthyr and the two mills at Abersoch, these last held by Wyn Fychan[5].

In 1343 Edward, the Black Prince, was created Prince of Wales, but he had held the lands which constituted the Principality (mostly in north and west Wales) before his formal creation. It is a survey made of some of his possessions in 1335, a survey later to be known as The Record of Carnarvon, that provides us with the best evidence about the mills and milling arrangements of Llŷn in the fourteenth century. This survey lists every township that belonged to the Crown in the region and every gwely and gafael in the hundred together with the chief landholders in each land unit and also where they ground their corn. Twenty-four mills are listed in Llŷn, and the remainder of this article will be concerned with the light this document throws on the arrangements that existed between the townships and the various mills.

The hundred of Llŷn, comprising most of the Llŷn peninsula, was divided into three commotes. Nine mills were located in the commote of Gaflogion, five in Dinllaeu and eight in Cymydmaen. We know the location of all the mills in Gaflogion and most of those in Dinllaeu, but only four of the eight mills in Cymydmaen, namely those of Tywyn, Neigwl, Bodwrda and Bodrydd. Three of the missing mills bear the names of individuals, and Melin Newydd (the new mill) likewise cannot be located with certainty. All but Neigwl were very small mills, but landholders from five townships came to Neigwl to grind their corn. In Bodrydd township the gwely of Res ap Seisilth patronised the mills of Bodwrda, Melin Newydd and Melin Vagheys, the gwely of Gorid ap Seisilth used Melin Werion Gorid and the gafael of Trefabaythain that of Neigwl. A mill existed in Bodrydd itself, but only the members of one family, Dafydd Fychan and his sons, took their corn to be ground there. We do not know how many families formed each of these landholding units, but Bodrydd was a small township and half-a-dozen families to each gwely is not too high an estimate. We have already seen that only one family ground its corn at Melin Werion Gorid: at Penllech, which was held by one gwely only, half the members of the unit used Melin Verwith and the other half Melin Teg ap Ath.

In Dinllaeu commote, Trefgoed mill was patronised by two gwelyau from Trefgarnedd township; Madrun mill by one gwely from Madrun; while Madrun's other gwely used Melin Vrogheys. Two of Llannor township's three gwelyau used the local mill, while the tenants belonging to the other went to Pistyll. Gwynnys mill was used by one gwely each from Nyffryn, Penwyn Cybi and Trefgoed. The most important mill in the commote was Geirch in the township of Nantceirch. The location of this mill is not known with certainty but it lay somewhere on the river Geirch, not far from the modern hamlet of Boduan. It was used by tenants of one gwely each from Brynodol, Madrun, Nyffryn, Botacho, Treflech and Gwynnys townships.

It is in Gaflogion commote, however, that the full complexity of the arrangements becomes apparent. Four of the eight mills were used by tenants from one township alone (Map 2a). Llannor mill, for example, was used by the tenants of Llandinwael. Llandinwael belonged to the Bishopric of Bangor, with only two plots and six acres (duo mesuagia & sex bovata) belonging to the Crown: the customary Welsh acre was the equivalent of four modern acres, though frequently it was no more than two or three acres. These lands were tenanted by David Yanqor and he ground his produce at Llannor mill. Two mills were located at Abersoch, Melin Uchaf and Melin Isaf. One of these was probably on the site of the existing Melin Sôch, and the other perhaps slightly nearer the sea. Melin Uchaf was used by the freeholders of Gwely Gron ap Kenythli in Bryncelyn and Cilan, and Melin Isaf by aliud wele Kenyng ap Kenythli in the same townships. This latter tribe was a group of free outsiders that did not have the same legal status as its neighbouring freeholders.

Bodfel mill (Map 2b) was used by one of Llangian's ten gwelyau, gwely Ken ap Keythli, and by other members of the same gwely at Carrngwuch, some ten miles away from Llangian, where they formed the only tenants. In 1293 there were twelve tenants in the township and they sent 51 crannocks of corn to be ground: a crannock was three quarters. Gwelyau in Cilan and Bryncelyn also used this mill, one in the former and two in the latter. The two most used mills were Geirch and Gwerthyr. Geirch (Map 3b) was used by gwelyau in six townships. From the joint township of Cae Hwsnin-Bachellyn the two gwelyau and one gafael sent their corn here: in 1293 the ten landholders produced 35 crannocks of corn.

Tenants from nine townships sent their produce to Gwerthyr mill (Map 3a). No mill remains on the site today, but an old-established farm and small estate was taken over by the larger Nanhoron estate in the nineteenth century, and the mill will therefore have been fed by the river, Sôch[7]. Several of Llangian's gwelyau sent their produce to this mill, as did others more distant such as those from Bodfel (where there was a mill), Nantceirch, Cilan and Marchroes. The twenty tenants of the two gwelyau at Marchroes produced 54 crannocks of corn in 1293. The township of Botwnnog belonged to the Bishopric of Bangor, but the freeholders of the three gwelyau there likewise sent their corn to Gwerthyr.

We can now begin to ponder the significance of these hugely complicated arrangements. It appears that the two chief influencers on permanent settlement in the arable lands of Gaflogion commote in the twelfth century were called Cenythlin and Dywrig, with the former heavily represented in the Cilan peninsula and the latter in Nantceirch and Bodfel townships near the north-eastern border of the commote. Much of the land of the Llyn peninsula was of poor quality and a high proportion of it remained common land until the great enclosures of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Settlement was therefore scattered, with gwely founders carefully searching out the best lands. Communications between townships were also rudi-

mentary: the routes shown on the maps are by no means the shortest distances between two points but rather the roads that are known to have been in existence before the nineteenth century.

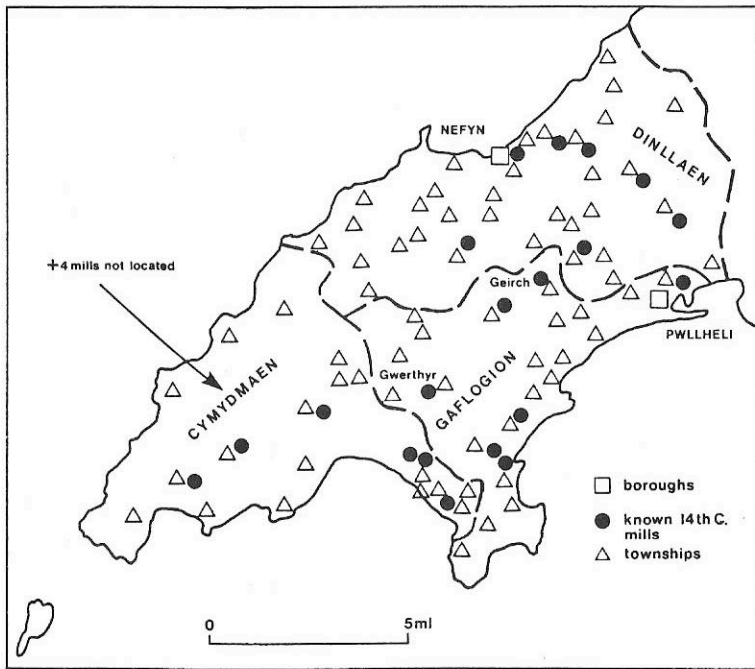
It was entirely logical for some of Dywrig's descendants to use the mill at Geirch, but it was not so logical for them to use Gwerthyr (a considerable distance away over poor trackways) and it is not at all clear why the family of Cenythlin used Gwerthyr mill in preference to the mills at Abersôch. The descendants of Cenythlin had no permanent territorial link with Gwerthyr, any more than many other families had with other mills. There are only two possible explanations for the apparent total chaos of tenants hauling their produce on horseback or in sleds past one or two mills before finally getting it ground at a mill up to ten miles away: either the suits of mill noted in these documents are a fossilised record of lost links between gwelyau and mills which were once local to them before non-static settlement became permanent, or there was some external compulsion.

Gwerthyr mill is described as ново velenando, a new mill, in 1306-7, and that may provide a clue. Only two authorities would have been strong enough to force such a new arrangement upon their tenants, namely the Welsh princes before 1282 and the English Crown thereafter. These mills, particularly Geirch and Gwerthyr, formed one of the Crown's prime sources of income in the Principality, and it may be that the complex situation that existed in 1335 was of fairly recent creation. Whatever the true reason, the situation did not exist for long: the uprising of Owain Glyndŵr in 1400 made chaos of the English economic system. Many of the mills recorded in these documents were destroyed and allowed to lie disused, while the others were either leased to Royal favourites or sold, and gradually this led to the dominance of the independent and estate millers and the milling systems with which we are most familiar.

References

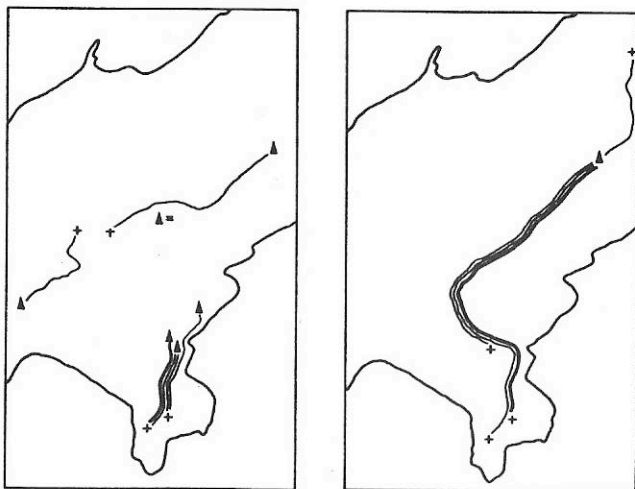
- [1] e.g. J. Beverley Smith (ed.), Medieval Welsh Society: Selected Essays by T. Jones Pierce (1972), and G. R. J. Jones, 'The Distribution of Bond Settlements in North-West Wales', Welsh History Review II, 1 (1964), pp. 19-36
- [2] T. Jones Pierce, 'A Caernarvonshire Manorial Borough: Studies in the Medieval History of Pwllheli. Part I', Trans. Caernarvonshire Hist. Soc. III (1941), p. 32
- [3] Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies [BBCS] vii (1933-35), pp. 143-53
- [4] BBCS v (1929-31), pp. 149-55
- [5] BBCS vi (1931-33), pp. 255-75
- [6] Record of Carnarvon, extentae temp. 26 Edward II (ed. H. Ellis, 1838)
- [7] E. Wiliam, 'Gwerthyr', Country Quest March 1969, pp. 31-2

Fig.9



Map 1. The commote of Llŷn, showing the most important sites mentioned in the text

- Map 2. In this sequence of four maps the thickness of the line represents the number of gwelyau involved, and the most likely route to be taken:
- shows the routes along which corn came to six mills, only one of which (Bachalleth) was supported by its local township
 - Bodfel mill was used by the tenants of Carrnguwch to the north, and Llangian, Cilan and Bryncelyn to the south



- Map 3(a) Gwerthyr mill was patronised by tenants from nine townships, including Nantceirch where Geirch mill was located and Bodfel which had its own mill. These two townships each lay some five miles distant from Gwerthyr mill
- Geirch mill was used by the tenants of gwelyau in twelve townships, the furthest of which was Llangian

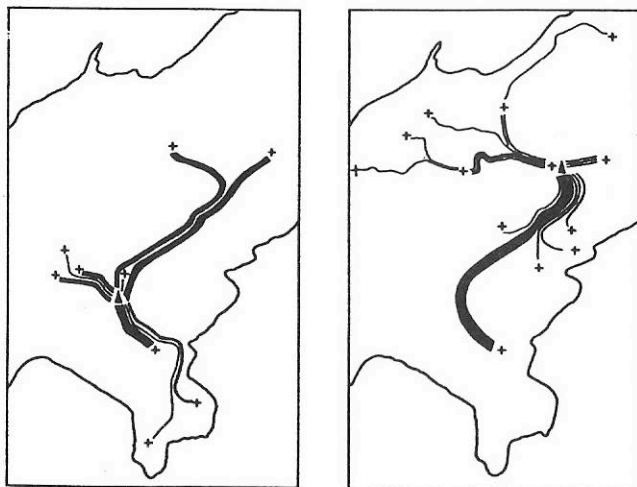


Fig.10