

Extracts from “Walks Through the History of Rural Llangollen” by David Crane copies of the book are available at Llangollen Museum [www.llangollenmuseum.org.uk](http://www.llangollenmuseum.org.uk)

The Eglwyseg Valley, just north of Llangollen, is an area of outstanding natural beauty, as well as historical interest, and is today a popular destination for walkers. Now quiet and rural it was, in past times, a hive of activity, due mainly to the lime and slate mining industries. Llantysilio, the parish to the west of Eglwyseg is also a favourite for walkers. It presents some spectacular views and was also previously a main slate mining area.

The place names

The meanings of individual place names are given throughout the text of the walks. It is interesting, however, to consider the names (past and present) of the areas through which the routes pass.

Eglwyseg (pronounced Egg-lwis-egg) lies in the parish of Llangollen. The name Llangollen is derived from the joining of two words, Llan and Collen. When Christianity was introduced into Britain during the time of the Roman occupation monasticism was rife. The monks of that time lived within a Llan or enclosure, which contained the church, their quarters for living, the hospice and other outbuildings. Collen was a seventh century saint who chose this location to build his church. Llangollen thus means Collen’s enclosure. The ‘C’ in Collen becoming a ‘g’ is a common feature of the Welsh language, where the first letters of words often change, depending upon the word that they are following. With the growth of villages and population around these religious centres, llan has, over the years, become used as the prefix to many place names.

In the name Llantysilio, again we see the word enclosure, followed by the name of the saint to which it is dedicated. Tysilio was the son of Brochwel Ysgythrog, who is thought to have died at the Battle of Chester in 613 (Page 6). He founded a community on Ynys Suliau (Anglesey) by the Menai Straits where he lived for seven years before returning to Meifod, near Welshpool. Having turned down the attentions of his brother’s widow he settled near Malo in Brittany, never to return.

There are many explanations of the derivation of the name Eglwyseg and it is not possible to be certain which is correct, or if, indeed, it is not a combination of more than one. The name has taken many different forms over the centuries – Eggloysesgle, Eglosegle, Eglwysegle, Eglwys Egle, Eglwys Eagle, Eglwis Eagle, Egluyseg, being just a few. Many of these are likely to be simply transcription errors, easy to understand in times when few people could read or write and Welsh, English and Latin were all in use.

It is possible that the name is a simple corruption of the adjective Eglwysig, meaning ecclesiastical, or of the church. Certainly, in the past, some of the land within Eglwyseg was granted to the nearby Valle Crucis Abbey, which could be the church to which the name refers. This would imply that the name, and possibly the settlement, came into being only after about 1200, when the abbey was granted its charter.

A more likely possibility is that the name is taken from Eliseg, whose pillar will be seen on walks 7 and 10. Eliseg ruled in the eighth century and so this would mean that the name would pre-date the founding of the abbey by four hundred years.

Another idea that has been suggested is that the name is derived from Eglwys Tegla. In the same way that Llangollen means Collen's enclosure, the neighbouring parish of Llandegla is Tegla's enclosure or, in more modern times, Tegla's church. Tegla or Thecla was the virgin martyr companion of St. Paul. It is possible that in the Middle Ages her name was prefixed with Llan to give the name of this church and community, in common with many other saints, but she was not a popular saint in Britain. It is possible that there was a Welsh St. Thecla, with a local cult, who, in the Middle Ages, got confused with her more famous namesake. Whichever is true, it is proposed that there may have been a church (eglwys) dedicated to her in the Eglwyseg valley as well. Eglwys Tegla, therefore, would come from Church of Tegla.

A further suggestion is that Eglwyseg stems from Egwestl, in the same way as Llanegwestl or Llanegwestl (Enclosure of Egwestl), one of the early Welsh names for Valle Crucis. The suggestion is that Egwestl is synonymous with Elwystl or Arwystl (Aristobulus), who was possibly one of the first missionaries to Britain and first bishop of the early British church. More certainly it is known that Arwystl was a bishop of St. Davids at the end of the 10th century and it is possible that the name is derived from here.

A final, although less likely, possibility is that the name is a combination of Welsh and English, with Eglwys referring to a church within the valley and Eagle a reference to birds that nested on the crags.

The township of Dinbren was also located within Llangollen parish. The most obvious derivation of the name is that Dinbren is simply a combination of Dinas and Brân, referring to the castle which was at the centre of this township (Walk 6). Later in the book, on the walk that goes past Castell Dinas Brân, we look at the possible sources for the name of the castle. In records from the early 17th century, however, Dinbren is written as Tynbrin. This could indicate another possible derivation of the name, coming from Ty yn Bryn, or House on the Hill, maybe referring to the location of Dinbren Hall (Walk 10, Page 101).

Maes yr Ychen was a township in Llantysilio parish. Like so many rural names, it is based upon the nature of the land and the use to which that land was put, in this case the Field of the Oxen. The name is still born by houses in the area. Before this the township in which Valle Crucis Abbey was built bore the name Llynegwestl or Llanegwestl (sometimes without the final 'l'), with most of the earliest references giving the former. With the presence of the ancient name Maes y Llyn (Field of the Lake) close to the Abbey, it seems quite possible that the first part of the township name refers to a lake or pool. This could possibly refer to a long vanished remnant of an oxbow lake, left behind from when a loop of the River Dee used to run down the valley. When using the prefix Llan (Enclosure), many attempts have been made to locate a saint Egwestl or one bearing a similar name. If the first part of the name is Llyn (Lake), however, it becomes easier to identify possible sources for the second half, although not necessarily to be certain which is correct. Gwestl is an old Welsh word for stormy, giving Llynegwestl the meaning Stormy Lake. Gwest, however, is an old Welsh word which can mean rest, and so Llynegwest would become Lake of Rest.

### Early history

Before starting out on our series of walks, we will give a brief outline of the early history of the valley and how it evolved in relation to what was happening in the country as a whole.

The area around Eglwyseg has been occupied since very early times. Before 6000BC any human presence would have been in the form of small bands of hunters. After this time it is known that Neolithic farmers, originating from Europe, were present in North Wales, although it is only after 3000BC that we have any direct evidence of their presence in this area, in the form of many tumuli, cairns, stone circles and standing stones. The tumulus directly above Dibren Uchaf Farm (Walk No. 4), on the border of Eglwyseg, was found to contain the remains of a cremated human body, as well as ox and sheep bones. A cairn near Aber Sychnant, 1 ½ miles to the north of World's End, was opened in 1890. It was found to contain some ashes, a horse's tooth, some small bones and a flint arrowhead.

Population of this area continued into the Bronze Age. The hill to the south of Eglwyseg, on which Castell Dinas Brân stands, was certainly occupied during this period. Four bronze axe heads have been found on Dinas Brân, one of which is preserved at Chirk Castle. Another axe head was found towards the southern end of Fron Fawr in 1933. This axe head is presently in a private collection. Two bronze spearheads were discovered in 1890 at, or close to, a quarry near to World's End, although it is not known which one. These spearheads are also still presently in private hands.

The arrival of the Celts in Britain around 600BC heralded the start of the Iron Age. The Celts spread over the whole of Britain and brought with them the language from which present day Welsh is derived. The Celtic tribe present in Clwyd and along the northern border with England was the Deciangli.

In 43AD the Romans invaded Britain, although they had considerable difficulty conquering Wales. In 61AD a large invasion of Wales was mounted, with the intention of smashing the druidical centre on Anglesey. This aim was achieved, but the Romans then had to withdraw to fight Boudicca in East Anglia. Eventually north and mid Wales were "crushed" by the Roman Emperor Agricola and ruled from two bases, Chester in the north and Caerlŷn in the south. The northern areas of Wales, especially the mountain regions, never became fully integrated and Roman culture did not put down deep roots as it did in the Southeast areas of the country and in the lowlands. So although the Romans were present in this area for around 400 years, and had a significant influence in Wales, little evidence of their presence remains in the area around Eglwyseg. One exception was the finding of a Roman silver coin in the seventeenth century near to Pen y Bryn (Walk 8, Page 72). Another was a possible Roman floor tile found in 1893 in peat dug from near to the cairn to the north of Plas Uchaf (Walk 1, Page 11).

When the Romans withdrew from Britain at the end of the 4th century, Saxon raids on the East Coast became more severe. On the Welsh coast pressure came from fellow Celts in Ireland, who took the opportunity offered by the Roman withdrawal to make some permanent settlements in Anglesey and on the Lleyn Peninsula.

Legend has it that at this time Cunedda, of the lineage of the Men of the North, came down from Scotland and drove out the Irish. It is possible that Cunedda was friendly with the Romans and was brought in to maintain North Wales whilst Magnus Maximus, possibly the Dux Britanniarum (duke or leader of Britain), made a bid for imperial power in Rome. Maximus did not return but Cunedda founded the royal house of Gwynedd. It is difficult to be certain about this period of history, because in the Dark Ages after the Roman occupation, very few records were kept.

Certainly by the 6th century the Welsh were faced with mounting Saxon pressure from the east and the border area became the ground of many battles. The leader of the Welsh in Powys (of which this area formed a part) was Selyf, who was killed in the Battle of Chester in about 616. In this battle the Welsh were defeated by the forces of Aethelfrith, who had come down from his kingdom in Yorkshire, having first annexed part of Cumberland in 604. From around 640 Mercia (midland England) became the most important of the English Kingdoms, expanding ever westwards into the lowlands of Powys. By the mid seventh century the Saxon settlers had driven the Welsh out of the plains into the foothills of the mountains, where they made a stand.

In the latter half of the seventh and early part of the eighth centuries, the Welsh made a number of efforts to reclaim their land, and it was in response to this that Aethelbald, king of Mercia, built Wat's Dyke, running northward along the border from what is now Ruabon. After his reign was over it appears that the fortunes of Powys recovered. Selyf's descendant, Eliseg, won a crucial victory against the English in the mid eighth century, saving the inheritance of Powys (Walk 9, Page 85).

Offa succeeded Aethelbald as king of Mercia and also made a number of attacks on the Welsh border. It was during his reign (757 to 796) that the remarkable structure known as Offa's Dyke was constructed. Offa's intention appears to have been to set up a well defined western boundary for Mercia, rather than to provide an impassable barrier. In support of this there is evidence of a certain amount of consultation with the Kings of Powys and Gwent in planning the route of the Dyke.

Eliseg's great grandson Cyngen, was the last in line of that dynasty of Powys. He erected a cross in memory of his great grandfather sometime between coming to power in 808 and his death in 854. Eliseg's pillar (Walks 7 and 10) is what remains of the cross. Cyngen, having no children, was succeeded by Rhodri Mawr (Rhodri the great), son of his sister Nest and Merfyn, Frych (Merfyn the freckled), and thus the second ruling house was founded.

Rhodri gained the epithet "Mawr" from his prowess as a warrior, being acclaimed after his victory over the Danes on Anglesey in 856. However, it was not only the Danes that Rhodri had to defend his kingdom against. Having inherited the rule of Powys, he had the continuing battle against the English in the form of the kings of Wessex, who had won overlordship of Mercia in 829. Rhodri and his son, Gwraid, were killed in a battle against the English in 877.

At this time Alfred enjoyed great renown in ruling England, having had significant success against the Danes. Some of the smaller rulers in Wales asked him for his patronage, and it would appear that this example was followed by Anarawd ap Rhodri, king of Gwynedd and Powys. The use of ap or ab in names at this time was used to denote "son of". This was important in days when surnames did not exist and lineage was important for determining status. This practise was in use into the start of the 20th century and many present Welsh surnames are derived from this (e.g. John Thomas comes from John ap Thomas).

In 1039 Gruffud ap Llywellyn killed Iago ab Idwal, great great grandson of Anarawd, and so became ruler of Gwynedd and Powys. Around 1055 he took Deheubarth (the kingdom covering south west Wales), followed by Glamorgan a year or two later. By 1057 Wales was under one ruler and Gruffud set his sights on the lands beyond Offa's Dyke. By 1063 Hope, Bangor Is-Coed and a number of other towns had been re-claimed, but English revenge came in that year when Harold led forces to defeat

Gruffudd. Gruffudd was killed somewhere in Snowdonia in August 1063. Three years later, partly because of his victory over Gruffud, Harold was elected king of England.

### The Normans and the Marcher Lordships

1066 saw William of Normandy's victory over Harold in the Battle of Hastings. Not many years later the Normans were at the Welsh border. William had no intentions of annexing Wales but wanted to secure a frontier. This he did by giving lands along the borders to some of his most faithful supporters, creating the Marcher Lordships. However, some border areas, including the three main Lordships in this region, Bromfield, Yale (lâl), and Chirkland, remained under Welsh rule until late in the 13th century.

The Lordships were split into a number of townships and Eglwyseg or Eglwysegle was a township within Bromfield Lordship, later transferred into the Parish of Llangollen. To confuse matters, a number of townships (not always next to each other) were grouped together to form Manors. One of these manors also went by the name of Eglwysegle and so some care is needed in interpreting records.

At the time of Domesday (1086) a considerable portion of the Dee Valley was occupied by the English, with the Welsh free tribesmen living on many of the upland tracts. One section of the free tribesmen, spoken of in the Extent as the "progenies of Ken" occupied the ville (township) of Trfydd Bychain to the north of Eglwyseg (See Map, Page 2). Sometime after Domesday, probably during the reign of William Rufus between 1087 and 1100, they swept down from their hills and drove the English occupants across the Dee. The leaders of this Welsh re-possession were Sandhe Hardd, Elidir and Ithel ap Hunydd and direct descendents of these men can be found in records to be living in Eglwyseg as late as about 1600. The earliest written records giving some information about the people in this area come from the First Extent of Bromfield and Yale in 1315. Then we find that the progenies of Ken had divided into a number of groups and occupied land in the villes (townships) of Cristionydd Kenric, Esclusham, Morton, Bersham, Broughten Brymbo, Acton, Erddig, Burras, Hova, Gorton and Cacca Dutton.

In addition to the major tribal units there were also a number of smaller groups holding land in other villes in Bromfield. Eglwyseg ville was held by a group of 12 men:-

Ienna ap William      Eigon ap Owain

Llewellyn ap Griffri      David ap Owain

Hywel ap Madoc      Madoc ap Eigon

Madoc Fychen      Cadwgan ap Madoc

Eigon ap Madoc      David ap Madoc

Ior ap Owain      David ap Tharlyn

All of these men were related or “blood co-sharers” and “hold the ville of Eglwyseg in chief from the Earl by homage and fealty, and render 12d. annually and 2 ½ bushels corn, Wrexham measure, extended at 12d. per bushel.”

The next paragraph of the Extent outlines some further interesting duties and monies to be paid to the lord.

“The same ought to give for each daughter marrying, as often as she is married, 20s. Also they give the lord 20s. whenever she is led astray by different men. And if she has not the wherewithal her next friends pay. And they make and maintain a hall, cookhouse and chamber at the manor of Wrexham for their own part at their own cost, and all the tenants of the aforesaid co-sharers who hold a house in which there is a hearth 1d. for ...(unclear)... or not annually at Michaelmas, and every of the said heirs and each co-sharer gives by way of relief 7s. 6d. to the lord after the death of his predecessor. Also they give for their own part for pannage (feeding a pig on the lords land) with all the other tenants of Bromfield, as is fitting, towards the £20 10s. which the freemen of Bromfield render annually at Martinmas. Also they ought to go with the lord to war in England, Wales and Scotland with the lord’s body at the charge of the said lord, and they stay with the lord at his will.”

The township of Llandynan was held by 35 men, although at that time the area of the township was probably larger than the small hamlet that is there today. At the end of the century in the survey of 1391 the township of Dinbren contained 5 gafael (holdings) belonging to 18 men.

The latter half of the 14th century and the 15th century saw some significant changes in the distribution of land and the gafael system (whereby a man’s holding was divided amongst his sons at his decease) was breaking down by 1390. The exact causes are not easy to identify, but the ravages of the Black death in Chirkland and Denbighshire undoubtedly had a major effect, with whole kindreds being wiped out or survivors being too poor to pay fines when they inherited the land.

The beginning of the 15th century saw the start of the campaign by Owain Glyndwr to wrest back Wales from English control. With discontent rife amongst the peasantry, many of them flocked to support Glyndwr, as did Welsh landowners whose land had been claimed from them by the English Crown. What effects of the conflict were felt in the area around Eglwyseg is not clear, but some of the action was close at hand. Although Glyndwr controlled most of North Wales, some areas evidently remained under English control as, in 1402 he tried, unsuccessfully, to capture Castell Dinas Brân. By 1405 Glyndwr controlled nearly all of Wales, but then started to lose ground, and by 1413 was a spent force. There is little material from which to gather the true effects of the war of Glyndwr and the following Wars of the Roses upon the ordinary population of Bromfield and lâl. There were, however, frequent changes in control of the lordship and in the disorder of the 15th century a small number of families became predominant.

The 16th century saw even more opportunities for the families in better positions, with the increased possibility of being granted appointments with influence, and of obtaining land. An example was the allocation of the lands of Valle Crucis Abbey, upon dissolution in 1536, to people in the right positions and with the right connections. It was a period that saw much of the land in the Eglwyseg and Llantysilio areas come under the ownership of a few families, who then rented the land out to the general population.

The rich landowners were by no means bad people of course. Families such as the Williams Wynns and the Myddletons were generous to their tenants. Because of this the landowner/tenant system continued to operate over much of the area until well into the 20th century. From an historical viewpoint this is fortunate, as, from the beginning of the 17th century, better records were kept than might otherwise have been the case. So from the beginning of the 17th century it becomes possible to start to trace the history of individual buildings and families. From this time onwards, therefore, the historical detail is given for each building as it occurs on the walks.

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