

## **DINAS POWYS THROUGH THE AGES: DINAS POWYS TRWY'R OES OEDD**

### **A SHORT HISTORY**

The origin of the name Dinas Powys remains unclear. The Welsh word "Dinas" means "stronghold" or "fortress", but the second element of the name is obscure. It could derive from the Latin "pagenses" - "the people of the pagus" (pagus being a term given to a Roman administrative area) - but this cannot be substantiated historically. There are some who claim that the place name evolves from the naming of the Iron Age Settlement above Cwm George by Iestyn, Lord of Morgannwg in honour of his first wife Denys, daughter of the Prince of Powys - but this is most unlikely and can almost certainly be discounted.

The discovery of historic remains around and about Dinas Powys has, over the years, helped to provide clues about the status and influence enjoyed by the small community here in the past. Such clues have also helped to show how this influence has marked out this community from other, similar communities in the Vale of Glamorgan. A glance at a map of the area for the 16th century will reveal the very large expanse covered by the Hundred of Dinas Powys stretching from the mouth of the River Ely up to Llandaff then westward to Peterston-super-Ely and south again following the valley of the River Thaw to meet the sea at Aberthaw. In some respects this self-supporting community, at the centre of the Hundred, occupied a central position between the fertile lands of the Vale and the wilder uplands of Glamorgan. It also marked a division between the areas of Saxon/English influence to the east and the Welsh/Celtic world to the west.

Today, the once small community of Dinas Powys is much expanded, relying mainly for its livelihood on the City of Cardiff and the towns of Penarth and Barry. In spite of this growth it still retains, at its heart around the Twyn, the atmosphere and charm of a Vale village.

That man arrived early in these parts is undeniable, for it is clearly indicated by the discovery of Neolithic axe heads on the Sully road, at Coed-yr-eglwys, Cwrt-yr-fil and in St. Andrew's Quarry. This early arrival is further amplified by the presence, a few miles away at Tinkinswood and St. Lythans, of the standing remains of the two great burial tombs constructed there some 2,000 years B.C. and also the discovery, on Dinas Powys common, of the scant remains of a Bronze Age burial mound dated to around 1,000 B.C.

Evidence of the four hundred years of Roman occupation was once sparse in the district, but has grown over recent years with the finding and excavating of a substantial Roman villa at Llandough and a Roman/British farm site on Dinas Powys common, with enclosures and a number of long huts. The most notable archaeological sites in the near locality are however, the strategically positioned banks and ditches of the hill fort or defended settlement at the northern end of the steep sided gorge known as Cwm George.

These clearly substantiate the one-time presence there of an Iron Age settlement which has been dated back to several hundred years B.C. The defensive banks are still quite well defined and enclose an area approximately 80m x 60m; but the outer banks, some 200m further to the south, appear never to have been completed. As a result of the excavations carried out at the Cwm George Iron Age settlement in the 1950's, Professor Leslie Alcock was able to indicate that the time of greatest activity at the site was between 500 and 750 A.D. The period falling between the departure of the Romans and the arrival of the Normans; often referred to as the Dark Ages. In these latter days the site was shown to have been occupied by a chieftain or ruler who enjoyed a standard of living previously unrecognised historically during this period. For example, among the archaeological finds, many of which are exhibited in the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff, there are parts of vessels that would have held wine or oils imported from the Mediterranean lands and glassware that had been manufactured around the Rhine.

Other items found include lidded crucibles, used for smelting metals, Celtic type jewellery and decorated bone hair combs. A fine glazed red Samian ware bowl, engraved with gambolling leopards, was also found during the excavation; as were the remains of mortarium-grey pottery bowls with grit studded interiors which demonstrate that Roman methods for preparing food had survived to this time and were probably still being used. A far cry from the levels of barbarism into which the country has often been considered to have sunk after the departure of the Roman rulers.

The location of the hill-fort and its apparent usage during the so-called Arthurian period led some historians to connect it with the legends of King Arthur and the contemporary strongholds across the Bristol Channel. It is however possible, that the final occupier of the site was one Iestyn ap Gwrgan, the last of the princes of Glamorgan and that when the hastily strengthened ramparts were overwhelmed by the advancing Normans, Iestyn was forced to flee Dinas Powys to end his days in exile. Or, if one prefers an alternative story, he fled only to fall in yet another battle near Rhiwbina to the north of Cardiff.

Whatever the truth may be, it seems that this event finally brought to an end the long centuries of occupation at this well defended site. At the same time it remains unclear as to whether the Normans ever used the site as an interim defence before and/or during the construction of the more formidable castle that they later built on top of another, earlier defensive site, already established on the promontory by previous occupants. Although the site has not yet been scientifically excavated, claims have been made about signs of occupation found lower down the mound, below the Norman walls, where at one time defensive banks and palisades could have stood. But this, for the time being at least, must remain as speculation.

Norman rule in the area was entrusted to the de Sumeri family whose tenancy was neither long nor peaceful. The sudden demise of the male line of the family appears to have brought about a marked decline in the standard of the defences at the castle which changed hands on many occasions between the warring Welsh and their Norman "rulers". The ending of the uprisings under Owain Glyndwr eventually reduced the need for continuing to live in such strongly defended castles and the inhabitants were able to move out into the less strongly defended and more comfortable country houses.

The high walls that once surrounded the castle ward are, to a great extent, still standing although only the foundations of the tower (or keep) can now be seen at the north-western corner, outside the main enclosure. Dinas Powys castle and the hill upon which it stands are now in the ownership and care of Dinas Powys Civic Trust. As well as the remains of the castle, the foundations of the Manorial mill can also still be seen, near to the castle mound, beyond the north east corner of the castle site (see Notes on The Village Trail). Existing manorial records show that the mill was either built or rebuilt in 1426. The records also provide a detailed costing for the work that was carried out then for a total of £8. 6s. 0 ½d. No doubt exclusive of the use of a great deal of enforced local labour.

The churches of St. Andrew's, Michaelston-le-Pit and Old Cogan all date from the 12th century, although all three have doubtless been subject to much rebuilding and alteration over the ensuing years. The oldest surviving house in the district is probably the pre-Reformation parsonage house which stands behind the church at St. Andrew's. Parts of the inns, still surviving in the village centre, have been dated back to the 16th century while some of the long established farms that survive in the area are also of considerable antiquity. The farms at Southra, Cross Common, Beauville, Wrinstone, Biglis, Highwalls and the Mount are included in this category. The former Highwalls farmhouse building now serves as the local Golf Clubhouse and the Mount Farm House, on the Twyn at the centre of the village, is a private dwelling. Many of the older village houses, especially those closely grouped around the Twyn, also date back to the 17th century, some even earlier, although most have been "improved" and "modernised" so that their age is difficult to determine at first sight. Areas of the countryside around Dinas Powys can still be recognised as having a Norman foundation, and there is clear visible evidence of strip field cultivation on the Cog, Sully, Pymbylu and Biglis Moors as well as at Pop Hill.

The Manor, in its earlier days, was an extensive one; covering Merthyr Dyfan, Highlight and Cadoxton. It was broken up when Henry VII assumed the Lordship of Glamorgan in 1495 and the castle and much of the local holding passed into the possession of the Crown. Later, the Manorial lands were again divided and came into the hands of the Jenner family of Wenvoe and the Hursts of Dinas Powys. This latter portion of the Manor finally rested with the Lee family, who resided in the Mount House, near to the centre of Dinas Powys. The last Lord of the Manor was General Herbert Lee, who assumed the title in 1876 and exercised a benevolent, if autocratic influence over the affairs of the village for almost fifty years. When the first Parish Council was set up under the Local Government Act 1894, General Lee was appointed to be the first Chairman. Even so the Court Leets, that were replaced by the Parish Council, while shorn of most of their powers, still managed to linger on for a good while. The last recorded meeting being that of the Wenvoe Court Leet which was held in the Parish Hall, Dinas Powys, in 1920. This same year saw the death of General Lee and brought to a final close a long era in the history of the village. Later, in 1974, the Parish Council was disbanded under Local Government reorganisation and replaced by the now enlarged Dinas Powys Community Council.

Records indicate that for many years the population of Dinas Powys and the surrounding area remained fairly static at around three to four hundred people. Then, in the latter half of the 19th century, workers and artisans from outside the area began to

move into this thriving rural community, many coming from the West Country and as far away as Ireland. The turning point in the history of Dinas Powys was the revolution brought about by the burgeoning of the coal industry in South Wales. This industrial expansion led to the construction of Barry Docks and the Cardiff/Barry railway, including the provision of a railway station near to the centre of the village. Another station has since been built at Eastbrook although the facilities at both now consist of no more than platforms and weather shelters for waiting passengers. The first passenger train ran on Sunday 20 December 1888 and from that date onwards the population of Dinas Powys spiralled upwards towards the present level which is around 10,000. In passing, it is worth noting that part of the proceeds from the sale of a corner of the Common to the Barry Docks and Railway Company, in order to facilitate the construction of the railway line, were used to improve the green in the centre of the village and to encircle it with the low stone walls that stand there today.

In the early days of the 19th century the community depended on wells for its source of water until, in 1875, a piped supply of water was provided from Llandough. Subsequently, a drinking fountain and horse trough were provided with a gravity fed, piped water supply, from the enclosed pond at Springside on Pen-y-Turnpike. The first telegraph office was established at Brecon House, at the bottom of Highwalls Road in 1890 and gas was introduced into the village in 1901 followed by electricity in 1921. Until the middle of the 19th century the Welsh language, in dialect form, was commonly used among the working population. This use had all but disappeared by the 1920's but, more recently, changes in educational practices and options have brought about a revival in the use and knowledge of the Welsh tongue in the locality.

To meet the continually growing demands for better housing and to accommodate the outward movement of population away from the inner city areas of Cardiff, new estates have grown up around the early confines of the village. The major extensions have occurred on the eastern side of the community, across the railway line and away from the old village centre. The new growth has, in its turn, brought about the need to provide additional shopping and recreational facilities as well as a Community Centre to serve this new area. Although expansion in Dinas Powys has now slowed down, what the future holds will continue to depend largely upon the wisdom of decisions made by local planning authorities in the light of demands for change in the patterns of society and general public expectations. The will to concentrate upon the reclaiming and reuse of land and the revitalisation of blighted city areas as an acceptable alternative to an ever outward spreading development must prevail. Stopping the spread of further development, into the vanishing countryside, becomes essential if Dinas Powys is to retain its individual and separate identity. Fortunately, buildings in the central area of Dinas Powys, those in and around the Twyn, have now been awarded the status and protection of a Conservation Order.