

1 The area down to the end of the 13th century¹

The area down to the end of the 13th century; its original names; the area in the earliest times; the region under the Welsh princes (down to 1282).

It is appropriate to begin with a list of the names given to the area, from time to time, with a view to ascertaining what we can of their history. Possibly its earliest name was *Rhosyr*² and, again perhaps, the reason for this was the long ridge of moorland, stretching ten miles from Newborough to Mynydd Llwydiarth; but this explanation will not hold good if *Rhosyr* and not *Rhos-hir* is the true form of the name. The name of the parish, in any event, was *Llananno*, but no-one knows whether *Anno* was man or woman, nor when she lived. The place was also referred to as *Rhosfair*; that, perhaps, was its name in the time of the princes; it [the element *fair*, *mair* - Mary] is found in the name of the Virgin Mary to whom the chancel of the present church is dedicated.³ After King Edward the First founded his borough here the town became known, naturally enough, as *Novum Burgum*, in English *Newburgh* or *Newborough*, and on the tongues of the local inhabitants, *Niwbwrch*. As time went by, there was a tendency⁴ to refer to the manor or lordship by the name *Rhosfair*, and to the town by the name *Niwbwrch* or *Newborough*. By the 18th century, all memory of *Anno* had been forgotten, but a saint's name still remained, St. Peter,⁵ the church being dedicated to him under the influence of the Normans; and the common name of the place was *Llanbedr Newborough*.

Before the Romans came to Wales in the 1st century A.D, the inhabitants of Anglesey inhabited the coastal regions, especially the southern extremities, because the greater part of the island was marsh and covered with dense woodland, the haunt of many kinds of animal. Here, it is believed, grew oak trees (*Quercus Robur*). It is certain that the region which is now Llanddwyn warren was the abode of people centuries if not millenia before Christ, in the period between the Old and New Stone ages. In this period animal food, almost exclusively, formed the diet of the inhabitants, who were dependent for their food on hunting for meat, and fishing in

1 [The following is a free translation which it is hoped preserves the essence of Owen's text. A literal rendering tends to result in awkward and convoluted English. *Ed.*]

2 The likelihood is that this was originally the name of the *cantref*, the principal township taking the same name. Thus it is, also, with Aberffraw and Cemais.

3 "There is a court in Rhosyr, there is a lake,

There are golden bells,

Llewelyn is Lord there,

Tall men form his retinue,

A thousand, ten thousand, clad in white and green."

4 See *Ministers' Accounts* in the P.R.O in London.

5 When the ancient British Church came under the influence of the Normans and the Papacy, the names of many Welsh saints were altered to scriptural ones. It seems that by some such means Newborough church was named for St.Peter.

the sea and rivers, only occasionally satisfying themselves with roots and tree-berries. Some twenty years ago, between Bryn Llwyd and Llanddwyn Island, on either side of the ridge of rocks, were to be seen the remains of a flint-working area, a place where tool-blades were manufactured by chipping the edges of the stone. There were many stones of this kind, including a number of flakes useful for scraping skin and making it flexible after it had dried, in order to make clothes, together with scores of red earthenware pottery sherds and a few fossil bones.

These flakes were found on the surface, but it is more than likely that there are thousands more hidden beneath the sand.⁶ Samples were sent to experts at the British Museum, in whose opinion the stones belong to a period about 5000 B.C., and the earthenware, beaker fragments, to a later period, about 2000 B.C.⁷ The pottery was ornamented by pressing a cockle shell onto the clay while it was still soft. As pottery did not last long then (any more than now!) it is a good indicator, really the best, for dating the associated period. In one place, flint arrowheads and part of a stone axe were found. Also, over the three miles of coastline between Llanddwyn Island and Abermenai, many unworked flint pebbles are found and it is natural to suppose that along this strand the original natives came for their materials.⁸ Very little *in situ* flint is found in Wales, and almost the sole source of it was on the coast, from the Irish Sea drift. In addition, in the warren large mounds of cockle shells, periwinkles, blue mussel shells and others are seen. The cockleshells predominate. There follows a full list of the tests observed, with their technical names:- *Cardium edule* - common; *cardium norvegicum* - rare; *cyprina islandica* - rare; *mytilus edulis* - rare and small; *tapes virgineus* - few; *mactra solida* - few; *pectunculus glycymeris* - few; *pecten opercularis* - few; *pecten varius* - few; *littorina littorea* - few; *patella vulgata* - rather rare; *buccinum undatum* - rather rare; *ostrea edulis* - a good number at one location, clear evidence that they were one of the main foods of people living here then. Cockles are seen only on the side of Llanddwyn towards the boundary wall from Dir-Forgan to Cerrig Gladus.

We need not necessarily assume that these shell mounds retain their original height and form, being altered over time, the movement of the sand and action of rain causing them to be reduced many feet in height and levelled. On one mound near Bryn Llwyd, some thirty years ago, a bone needle was discovered, two inches in length, pointed at each end. The end next to the eye was worn, probably from being pushed through material during sewing, protecting the eye of the needle from breaking. This needle is believed to date from the end of the New Stone Age [Neolithic period].⁹ Associated with it were things belonging to the Roman era, circa 300 A.D., such as a small spoon, like a mustard spoon, used, together with tweezers,

6 Nearby are vestiges very like a plough cut [? *Ed.*], some 20 feet [6m] across with stones round. The Bryn Llwyd rock itself, steep on three sides, seems to form a natural citadel.

7 Anglesey Antiquarian Society's Transactions, 1927, pp. 23-33,36.

8 A.A.S.T. 1928 pp.21-7

9 A.A.S.T. 1927 p.35

by high-status Romans to clean their ears. Perhaps, where the sands now lie, some lady once lost her ‘vanity set’.¹⁰

Before King Edward 1st conquered North Wales, when Gwynedd comprised Merioneth, Eifion, Lley, Arfon and Anglesey, the Welsh Princes’ high road ran through Harlech and Criccieth to Aber Menai and thence to Aberffraw, where the principal court of the princes of Gwynedd was situated. There, according to the Life of Gruffydd ap Cynan, that Prince gathered his fleet with the intention of reclaiming his inheritance. Having set out from Ireland each time, he always landed at Abermenai¹¹ because men from all parts of Gwynedd could take the high road to that place. Before the sands formed Abermenai spit and the Tal y Foel sandbanks, there was a wide, convenient anchorage here for fleets of ships and wherries.¹²

According to the old Welsh laws, the testimony of an 11th century chronicler and the later writings of Giraldus Cambrensis, at this period Wales comprised a number of kingdoms each ruled by its own Lord. Each kingdom embraced one or more cantrefs and each cantref consisted of two or more commotes.

The inhabitants of Anglesey were primarily farmers, living in small family groups according to the ancient Welsh tribal customs and traditions. The privileged villeins (*liberi nativi*)¹³ lived in scattered small-holdings and the other unfree bondsmen in more communal hamlets.¹⁴ In each commote, there was a *maenor* or *llys* [court] of the prince. In the commote of Menai the *maenor* was at Rhosyr [Newborough] and supported the court, being liable for every tax and service to the prince and the steward presiding over the court. It stood, very probably, in that place now called *Cae Lllys* [Court Field]¹⁵ but not so much as a stone is now visible.¹⁶ The

10 A.A.S.T. 1928 p.26

11 A reference to Abermenai occurs in the *mabinogi* of Math mab Mathonwy in which Gwydion and his young boy companion are said to travel to *Caer Dathyl* [probably *Tre Ceiri Ed.*] walking along the seashore between that place and Abermenai, seeing sedge and seaweed and making from them a vessel to go to *Caer Arianrhod*.

12 In the ‘New Map of the Island of Anglesey drawn by the best authorities’ by T.Kitchin (Baldwin, Pater Noster Row, 1755) a road is shown from Abermenai through Llanbedr (where the parish church stands) onwards to Aberffraw; and also another road from ‘Newburgh’ joining the first at Llanbedr. About halfway from Bodeon Farm to Abermenai, in the warren, there is an enclosure 22 yards by 40 yards, containing many cattle bones and teeth. This was possibly a ‘halt’ used by the drovers on their way to London, and occasionally an animal was killed in the crush of such a confined place. There were two fords crossing Malltraeth Marsh when coming from Aberffraw to Abermenai: (1) from the place where Malltraeth village now stands, in the direction of a black rock in the marsh (a cottage called *Rhyd-y-maen-du* [Ford of the Black Stone *Ed.*] is nearby). (2) from Trefdraeth church, past a white stone and towards Lon Digoed in the direction of Llangaffo. The ancient house of Tanllan stands at the edge of the marsh and travellers regained *terra firma* there when crossing from Trefdraeth to Newborough.

13 See below

14 Nucleated settlements or ‘townships’ as distinct from *patria* - ‘the country[side]’.

15 The *englyn* of note 2 above suggests that Rhosfair was a place of residence of Llywelyn, as also does the following extract from the *Charter Rolls* II 460: “A Charter, whereby Llewelyn, prince of Aberffraw, lord of Snowdon, gave to the prior & canons of Insula Glannauc all the Abbey (Abadaeth) of Penmon &c. dated at Rosver, 4 Ides April, A.D. 1237”. In suggesting this there is no intention to deny the existence of the Prince’s hall at Aberffraw, as there is a note dated 20 Feb 1317 directing that timbers

antiquary Henry Rowlands¹⁷ saw the rectangular outline of its walls but since then they have been covered by the sands.¹⁸

In the 14th century¹⁹ the inhabitants of the *maenor* included three sorts of tenant; firstly, *puri nativi vocati mairdreve*.²⁰ Secondly, *nativi qui se dicunt esse liberos nativos*; those who said they were free villeins; thirdly, *nativi vocati Gardynemen*, the so-called ‘garden-men’. The conditions under which these latter held their land are known, but we are not certain about their free or unfree status. Therefore, the explanation proposed below is, of necessity, tentative.

(1) THE TENANTS OF THE MAERDREF

Because they were termed *puri nativi* it is clear that these were considered serfs. They held between them, twelve and one half *gafaelion* [tenements] and each paid 2 shillings, eight and one half pence [14p] rent at each quarter-year’s end. Total rent was therefore six pounds, sixteen shillings, five and one half pence yearly. However, in addition to money, these tenants were also liable for renders in kind and service, such as to make repairs to the court and the mill whenever necessary and to provide food for the Prince and his retinue or to pay one penny-halfpenny daily in commutation thereof. Each was also obliged to pay five shillings whenever they inherited land and five shillings on the occasion of the marriage of a daughter. In the Statutes of Hywel Dda, the duties of the men of the *maerdref* or tenants of the royal *maenor* are described thus:-²¹

“They are bound to make a limekiln and a barn for the King and to repair these when necessary. It is right for them to pay the *twnc* of their lord into the dung master’s hand and they are bound to support him twice a year; and they are bound

from the hall and other royal buildings at Aberffraw were suitable for use in repairing Caernarfon Castle. The *Record of Caernarvon* 1335 [1352 *Ed.*] calls Rhosfair a ‘palace and Royal chapel’. It seems reasonable to assume that the Welsh princes resided at Rhosfair after the royal court at Aberffraw was burned by the Irish [Dublin Norse *Ed.*] circa (*Brut y Tywysogion* s.a. 966 A.D.).

16 [The situation today is quite different and the archaeological excavation of Llys Rhosyr in Cae Lllys is described in the appendices at the end of this document. *Ed.*]

17 *Archaeologia Cambrensis* I. i. 311 [‘Antiquitates Parochiales’ *Ed.*]. The original is Panton MS 36. [See appendices at the end of the final chapter. *Ed.*]

18 See, further, the history of the Parish Church in Chapter 12.

19 See *Record of Caernarvon* pp. 83-4. Although the details that follow (see pp.6-7) were recorded after the Edwardian conquest, it may be assumed that these were the duties of the tenants under Llywelyn and former princes. At this time the value of land was so little that it is unclear whether unenclosed land was of much importance; that is why there were no definite boundaries to the *maenors*. People who lived in particular places and performed similar services, were considered as a group, whatever land they held. Rates were only paid for enclosed land, or land which at least had some sort of boundaries [typically, *mere* or boundary stones *Ed.*]

20 The bondsmen of the *maerdref*, the Prince’s farm, referred to in the Statutes of Hywel Dda.

21 [The translation follows that of Prof. Dafydd Jenkins published in *The Law of Hywel Dda* 3rd Edn., Gomer Press 2000 pp. 125-6. *Ed.*]

to thresh and to dry and to reap and to harrow and to mow hay and to gather straw and fuel as many times as the King comes to the court;²² and it is right for them to honour the King when he is in the court, according to their ability, whether with sheep or with lambs or with kids or with butter or with cheese or with milk.”

(2) THE PRIVILEGED VILLEINS

It is possible that these correspond to the class of tenants called, at Cemais and Penrhos[lligwy],²³ *Gwir Male* or ‘prince’s men’, who paid their dues in money and not in produce or labour. Money payment seems more respectable and appropriate to free tenants and perhaps this is why they claimed to be free. It is indeed possible that their grandfathers *were* free in the days of the Welsh princes but that the officers of the English king, falsely or by mistake, reckoned them amongst the villeins. On the other hand, perhaps their ancestors were serfs but somehow they succeeded in raising their status to the borderline between villeins and freemen. They duly paid, between them, for eight *gafaelion* at each quarter-year ending.²⁴

All those said to belong to this class were obliged to use the lord’s mill of Rhosyr, to contribute stock to the prince’s farm, to pay ten shillings whenever they inherited land and ten shillings on the marriage of a daughter each time this took place. The total annual revenue from this class was five pounds. From the annexed list, it appears that the majority of these tenants had inherited land from their fathers.²⁵

(3) THE ‘GARDEN’ TENANTS

These were also considered serfs. They held twelve plots. Their names and annual rates follow [see table in Welsh text]. Two plots included stony pits, viz *Gardd Map Bole* at an annual rate of five pence and *Gardd Cernestrens* at four pence. The total annual revenue from these ‘garden tenants’ was thirteen shillings and one penny. They also had to use Rhosyr Mill, paid two shillings on inheriting land and two shillings on the marriage of a daughter whenever this took place. In addition,, they had to guarantee the king a supply of horses to ride in battle, but they

22 It seems that, in about 1337, the men of the *maerdref* informed the King that there was nothing to be gained by repairing the old *llys* and chapel. After inquiring into the matter, the King established that the cost of annual repairs was £1-3s-4d [£1-17p] and it was decided to accept this sum annually from the men of the *maerdref* in commutation of the repair work. *Sebright Papers*; see Angharad Llwyd *History of the Island of Mona* New edition, Magma Press 2007 pp. 309-10. [The matter is also mentioned by Thomas Pennant in his *Tours Ed.*]

23 [Two other commotal centres in Anglesey, each with a *llys. Ed.*]

24 w.r.t. the Table; the porter summoned the men of the *maerdref* to their work and often also superintended the gaol.

25 w.r.t. the Table; a *bovate* was the land allocated to one ox from a team for ploughing. [One-eighth of a *carucate*, assuming a team of eight oxen as was normal *Ed.*]

were free of any other form of service. The total revenue from the three classes of tenant combined was £12-9s-6½d [£12-48p].

In more recent times, the *maenor* and adjacent prince’s *llys* have become a borough. The remainder has become known as *Hendre Rhosyr* [Rhosyr Old Township] supplemented by the hamlets of Rhoscolyn, Sybylltir and Bryngwallen.