

Pocket history

A POCKET HISTORY OF CAERWENT

Our locality was better known in antiquity than it is now, an area renowned for its beauty and fertility, a magical landscape. The focus of all this is Caerwent. And somehow it all remains a secret, there are few who know about it except for us who live here.

The key to understanding is Gray Hill, *Mynydd Lwydd*. Stand on top and look around. Spread out below you is the land of *Gwent Iscoed* – Gwent below the Wood. It runs down to the Estuary and the eye is beckoned out westward to Flatholm, burial place of kings, and beyond to further centres of the Celtic civilisation. It's a Sacred Landscape, and why? Because it lies beneath the great sanctuary of the Sun. More ancient and more accurate than Stonehenge, for 5000 years the standing stones have marked the rising point of the midwinter Sun. Here great ceremonies were held to greet the rebirth of the waning Sun, the promise of another year.

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The ancestral bones, now in Newport Museum.

In this landscape people have lived for about 10,000 years, as we know from flints found around Llanmelin. Between Caerwent and Rogiet were found skulls looking outwards from the back of a cave, the sign of people with similar beliefs to those around the Mediterranean and Middle East at that time (there is a continuity here with the keeping of the skull of St Phillip in Cyprus and the candlelit faces we show on Hallowe'en). These people lived about 6000 years ago. Then artificial caves were built, like the burial chambers at Heston Brake and Gaer Lwydd. From them the ancestors looked out towards the sunrise.

Towards the end of this period of megalithic building the stones were erected on Gray Hill, beside them a Stone Circle, and below them over the following millennium a cemetery of somewhat less ambitious burial cairns developed. Watched over by Gray Hill were a number of further important burials, in barrows at Crick, Caerwent's Brook, Five Lanes and St Brides. These date from 4000 years ago and show that people lived here in a highly organised way, though it isn't clear that they made any fixed dwellings – perhaps they were nomadic over a certain range. Because their materials were almost entirely wood, leather and other natural products very few artifacts have ever been found.

There seem to have been links with civilisations in the Middle East and Mediterranean. One of the sanctuaries visited by Abraham was Gilgal, thousands of miles from here, but it means stone circle. After the sack of Troy, some of the survivors were allowed to set off in ships and are reputed to have reached Britain, which indicates a link with the archaic Greek world and may explain why the Mediterranean physique is still widespread in Wales. In the last millennium BC a different organisation developed, probably due to immigration from the nearer part of Europe (notably people from Siluria, an area in northern Germany) and the construction of Hill Forts began. This may mark the establishment of clear cut territories for tribes or clans.

Thus the Silurians were the tribe or federation of people occupying South and East Wales when the Romans arrived. It's possible that the Llanmelin Hill Fort served as their capital or redoubt, but far from certain. They were tough opponents, especially when joined by the great leader Caractacus, who had originally opposed the Romans further east. Eventually Caractacus was captured taken to Rome, where he made an excellent impression and was converted to Christianity. Perhaps on account of this the Silurians were pacified, the construction of Caerwent began and Caractacus is said to have been given an honourable burial at Dinham.

The Roman Town straddled the main road and we must imagine regiments of soldiers pausing for refreshment here before resuming their march over to Caerleon. Although the town, established about 100AD had impressive gateways at east and west, it does not appear that walls were needed until much later. Prosperous farmhouses occupied plum situations in the surrounding countryside, like at Five Lanes, the Brockwells and above Church Farm Caldicot (where a new housing estate has recently appeared). The Silurians were permitted to establish their own self-governing Civitas, a precursor of the modern Welsh Assembly. Only about 300AD were the walls finally built and opulent villas established within them. The oldest Christian relics in Wales are from Caerwent and date from about 350AD. By this time the power of Rome was starting to crumble and security becoming a problem. St Patrick's father was a member of the Silurian Council but the young Patrick was kidnapped by raiders.

When the Romans eventually withdrew, the remaining population reverted largely to the former Celtic lifestyle, which after all would have survived to a great extent in the countryside, and probably to their beliefs as well, which had never been suppressed by the Romans. They didn't like towns and they didn't like slavery, so such a highly organised place as Caerwent wasn't viable. The defensive organisation set up by the Romans was maintained - war leaders such as Tewdrig and Meurig (associated with Mathern and Pwllmeyric) followed by King Arthur did their best to keep the Irish and Saxon raiders out of southern Britain. The language of most of Britain at that time was Welsh – it's strange how the English seem to have appropriated Arthur as their epitome of chivalry and use him so effectively in marketing cream teas! St Tathan arrived by boat up the Neddern and realised that Caerwent was his special place. He was granted land by Caradoc (Sir Craddock of King Arthur's Round Table) to establish his church and monastic community. A recent find by Mr Pat Bladon shows that this was on the same site as the present Church.

A continuing feature from this time was the apparently watery environment south of Caerwent. It seems that access to Caerwent and Crick was often most convenient by boat and we have recently realised that the lost lake of ancient stories is likely to be the Neddern wetlands, which still show up as a lake in wet seasons today.



Llyn Liwan, Caerwent's lost lake, Crick in right foreground (*Eric Woods 17.3.2007*)

In about 800AD King Brockwael gave away half of Caerwent as a penance to the Bishop of Llandaf! This was all the area to the south of the Neddern (whose name in those days was the Troggy) and became the parish of Caldicot, hence the name

Brockwells – the first prominent piece of land in this gift. Maybe this gift saved Caerwent from being strongly influenced by the Normans – only a little fort was built on one corner of the Walls. Caerwent became a backwater and followed the lines of development typical of country villages. The influence of the 17th century Puritans is marked by the inscription now in the Church porch at Llanfair Discoed and the establishment of the first Non-Conformist congregation in Wales at Carrow Hill (led by the defrocked Vicar of Llanvaches). This ideological struggle is not so obvious in Caerwent village but is referred to on the Church pulpit.

Over the centuries Caerwent became more busy with through traffic, as on the main route from London to South Wales. Caerwent House, and Brook House at Crick, became major coaching stops. The by-pass was not built until 1931. From the 18th century onwards Caerwent began to interest intellectuals due to the uncovering of various mosaics. These were displayed by local people but invariably ruined after a few years. The Enclosures Acts of the 19th century resulted in the selling or renting of Great House Farm and other estates – often to English people who brought their own staff with them. I suspect that this caused the displacement of a number of poorer people from the local population. The Roman remains were never fully appreciated until the excavations of 1899 – 1913. The construction of the Dinham factory, started 1939, marked the beginning of changes which have continued apace to this day.

John Nettleship – a personal view of a steadily unfolding history 31.10.2007