

Once a thriving town - one of the largest in Glamorgan, today not a trace remains.

The Lost Town

Although it is claimed that a Viking town existed at Kenfig in the 11th century, in the main this rested upon the evidence of documents that have since shown to be forgeries. Other, more circumstantial evidence, may point to such a settlement somewhere in the Porthcawl or Pyle area, but other than this it appears that the earliest urban settlements of any description in what is now Bridgend County only appear to have followed the Norman invasion of 1093. Prior to this the countryside was marked by isolated chapels and the scattered homesteads of the resident population.

The first Norman settlements were villages that sprang up along the lower reaches of the Ogmores River between Coity and the coast – each set amidst arable fields and clustered round a church and possibly a castle. The first real town in the area only came into being when Earl Robert of Gloucester annexed the Welsh lands between the Ogmores and the River Avan about 1145/6 and also opened the coastal area here to Anglo-Norman settlement.



Castle keep viewed from the east.

A document to which the Earl set his seal sometime before his death in October 1147 records his grant of a “burgage” at Kenfig to Ewenny Priory – proof positive that by this time the town was indeed in being. “Burgages” were properties that lay within chartered Boroughs - towns created by a charter whose inhabitants were given rights and freedoms denied to the ordinary serfs and peasants that made up the vast majority of the population. Burgesses enjoyed a considerable measure of self-government and personal freedom, and were granted privileges designed to enable their settlements to prosper and thrive as centres of trade and manufacturing.

This document which first mentions Kenfig also refers to walls and a gateway which at first sight tends to suggest that it was already equipped with

its own rudimentary defences, but this is highly unlikely to be the case. Instead these first houses almost certainly stood within the huge (8 acre) outer ward of the castle that had been built here alongside the River Kenfig. Such an arrangement was common in Wales since the idea of creating the town was to attract a sizeable Anglo-Norman population into an area with a hostile native Welsh population. The early arrivals therefore lived cheek-by-jowl with the castle garrison and shared with them the duty of manning the defences whenever danger threatened.



Castle keep viewed from the west. The bank in the foreground marks the outer ward in which the town is believed to have been initially situated.

The first burgesses also shared with the soldiers the use of the garrison chapel (probably one dedicated to St Thomas mentioned in later documents) for the purpose of worship. When the population became large enough for them to construct and man their own defences, Earl Robert's son and successor, William, moved them out of the castle and built them a church of their own dedicated to St James, an event which had occurred by the year 1154. He also constructed a water-mill on the river for them to grind their corn upstream from the town and outside its wall and ditch.

The heart of the town itself was the market square marked by a cross and the Town Hall – a first-story story building mounted on pillars and reached by an external stone stairway beneath which was the town's "lock-up" or gaol cell. The rest of the ground-floor was used by traders on market days, their stalls spreading out from under the canopy into the square beyond. Markets were held every Friday and drew in people, English and Welsh, from miles around as the only such centre for buying and selling goods closer than Neath. Every year, however, there were the two annual fairs, one of which lasted eight days at the end of July, and another shorter one in Whitsun week during the Spring. These drew traders and merchants from far and wide offering new and varied ranges of goods from those normally available.

By and large the population of Kenfig was mainly traders and craftsmen trading from their own business premises. Contemporary documents mention butchers, bakers, brewers, innkeepers, tailors, tanners and blacksmiths amongst others, but the most important were undoubtedly the

“Glovers & Cordwainers” (shoemakers) who operated their own guild to control and maintain the standard of their work.

In 1346 we know that the town contained 144 burgages or houses which, with the castle garrison and servants probably meant a total population of 7-800 people. Whilst tiny by today’s standards, this made it a middling sized Welsh town of the time. Indeed, had it not been for its situation it might have proved even more prosperous for in the three centuries following its foundation it was repeatedly attacked and burnt by its Welsh neighbours. I can identify nine such raids with some certainty, and at least two other occasions when it was probably attacked and at least partially destroyed. For good measure it was also once destroyed by a fire started when a lightning strike set fire to the thatch of one of the houses.



The Castle ruins from the presumed location of the later town.

The year 1346 probably marks the zenith of Kenfig’s fortunes. In 1349 the Black Death arrived in Wales and is likely to have carried off a third or more of the town’s population. Coastal dunes which separated the town from the sea had begun moving inland and were already encroaching on the burgesses’ common which surrounded the town walls. More significantly perhaps this was a period of increasingly high tide levels due to an approaching conjunction of the sun and the moon in 1433. The town was only a little above normal high-tide levels, and a Margam Abbey document of 1440 mentions repeated sea flooding in the district “up to four miles inland”.

These natural disasters made the site uninhabitable, and about the time of the Margam document the remaining inhabitants took the decision to abandon

the site which was then quickly engulfed by the encroaching sand. After four centuries of existence the town of Kenfig became nothing more than a memory and although through a quirk of fate the area retained its status as a Borough, the business and trade that had been its lifeblood had disappeared for ever.

