

BARRY LEWIS explores
‘THE LANDSCAPE OF PENTRICH’.

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First recorded in 1087. Pentrich was the more eminent of the two hamlets of Ripley and Pentrich right up until the Industrial Revolution, when it was superseded by Ripley; because of this Pentrich remains a quiet rural backwater, largely unchanged since later medieval times.

Pentrich is blessed in having largely escaped the ravages of the Industrial Revolution and its hunger for coal to fuel factories. This has meant that aspects of its landscape archaeology have been preserved in a way that is rare in this corner of East Derbyshire.



<< Roman Road ‘Ryknelde Street’, looking towards the hamlet of ‘Street Lane’; just to the west of Ripley. This particular stretch forms part of the ancient parish boundary of Pentrich. Somewhere in Ripley, in 1730, an urn full of Roman coins was found.

The Roman Road, Ryknelde Street, runs within a few hundred metres to the west of the village. It behaves for much of its course like an ancient ridgeway – a straight road prehistoric in origin that follows the crests and ridges of hills for much of its course. At an archaeological excavation carried out at Castle Hill, Pentrich, in 1909 a prehistoric flint tool was discovered and more recently at excavations in Chesterfield, evidence of prehistoric activity has been recovered; suggesting that there must have been some form of road communication in-place long before the Romans.

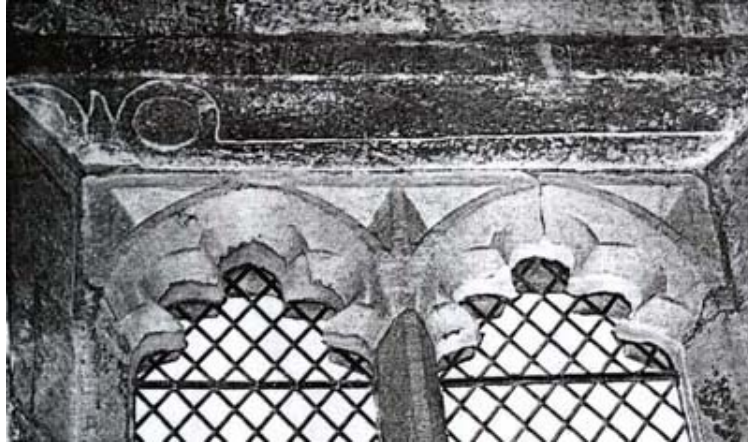
>> A turn of the century postcard view up 'Main Road' has changed very little since this photo was taken. The 'Dog Inn' can be seen in the distance, just after the long white building on the right.



After the Norman Conquest the first stone building was erected in Pentrich. This was the church of St. Matthew's, which was built during the reign of King Stephen (1135-1154). The architecture of this period can still be seen in the form of Norman arches and the great thickness of the walls in the lower part of the tower.

Other evidence of the Norman period has been built into later additions to the church in the form of some reused 12th century grave slabs that were used as lintels for 14th century windows. These five lintels are easily identified as they bear crosses or parts of crosses on their surfaces.





<< One of five 12th century cross-slabs. This one is from the clerestory above the south aisle. Each one of the slabs is different and would have represented five distinct burials.

Photo by A. Boot

In the fields to the rear of the church are several lumps and bumps; amongst which fairly distinctive doughnut-shaped earthworks can be identified. These are the remnants of bell-pit workings (for coal), which date to the late medieval/early post-medieval, period (1600 to 1700). Signs of ridge and furrow are also present, as are the linear banks of long removed field boundaries. In a field to the south there are two more linear banks, which terminate at two oak trees. There are more bell-pit workings in this field as well as an unusual pond feature, which may in some way be associated with these coal workings.

The layout of strip fields, which radiate off the axis of Pentrich, are still recognisable as being medieval. On a map in the care of the Devonshire collection ¹ dates to the 1580's, one can see the layout of Pentrich and its strip fields has changed very little since then. Field boundaries that were already 'old' by the end of the 16th century have been 'fossilized' ever since.

The name 'Pentrich' is very old, a primitive Welsh place-name which dates to a fairly brief period of topographical naming from around 550 to 700 AD, and means 'hill of the boar'. Nearby Crich, also has a primitive Welsh place-name meaning 'hill' and there is no doubt that a long-standing link exists between Pentrich & Crich. Just a few hundred metres to the northwest of Pentrich at 'Castle Hill' there are the remains of a Roman fortlet, indicating some form of interaction with local people, perhaps with those occupying a small farmstead in the vicinity of Pentrich. Crich was an important lead mining area during the Roman occupation and was somewhat off the beaten track. However, it has recently been pointed out to me that there is a section of track, which is now a farm track and bridle way, in the Wingfield Park area known to some as 'Street Lane'. This small section of track can be easily joined to

other paths, tracks and lanes to form a direct route between Crich and Pentrich. Local field-names strengthen this argument.

The Roman fortlet at Pentrich is easily accessible to the walker and is a place well worth visiting, if only for the splendid views of the Amber and Derwent valleys. There is also a sense of being in on an ancient secret here, with all the layers of the landscape's history peeling away before you.



(Above) St. Matthew's church - much of the nave is the original Norman construction, as are parts of the south aisle and the base of the tower. The clerestories, chancel, porch, north aisle, tower and the windows of the south aisle date to the 14th, 15th, 17th and 18th centuries.

References

1. 'Devonshire Collection'; part of archives held at Chatsworth House, Derbyshire.