

[Cymraeg](#) / English



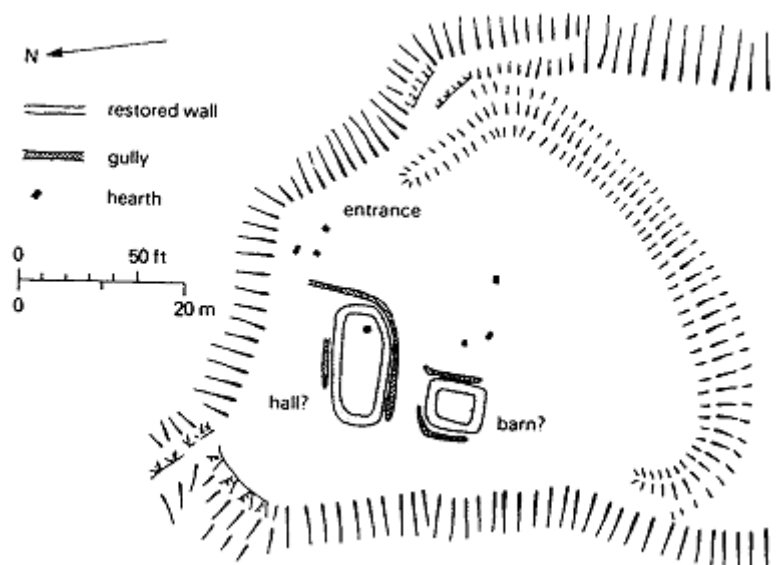
## Key Stage 3: Wales and Britain in the Medieval World

# Medieval Settlement and Landscape

**At the end of the Roman period** in Britain the forts which had housed the soldiers of the Roman army were abandoned and gradually the prosperity of the towns declined as people moved away. This was probably partly due to the disruption of trade and industry during this period of instability when fighting between emerging kingdoms was common. The old Roman roads fell into disrepair making travel more difficult and dangerous.

During the **early medieval period (from the 5th to 11th centuries AD)** there emerged a number of Welsh kingdoms in what had been the western part of the province of Britannia. These included the **kingdoms of Gwynedd, Powys, Dyfed, Ceredigion, Builth and Brycheiniog**. The rulers of each kingdom belonged to noble families the members of which held land from the king and owed him taxes in goods, money and could be called upon to fight in his armies.

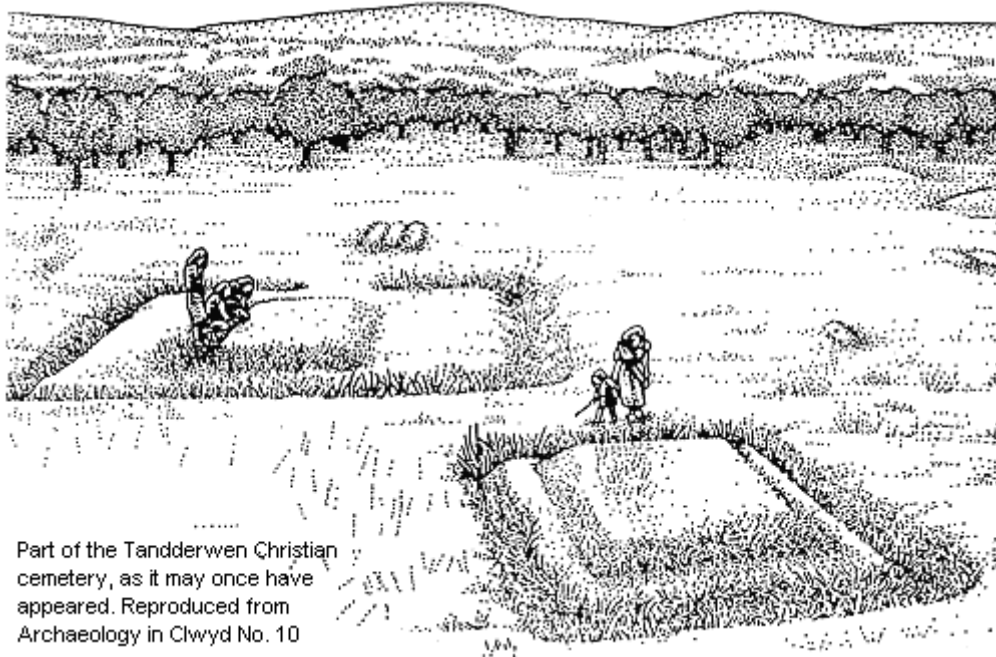
Our knowledge of the types of settlements in which people lived comes partly from archaeology but also from written history and historic documents. The kings and other nobles lived in a court of *llys*. This was a defended settlement consisting of a collection of buildings which housed the lord's family, workers, soldiers, craftsmen and their families. The largest building was a wooden **hall** where the lord and his followers feasted. Other buildings included workshops, kitchens, storerooms and stables. The whole complex would be surrounded by a wooden palisade or fence often built on top of an earthen or stone bank. In some cases the *llys* was established in an old **hillfort** whose defences were modified. Usually the area within the hillfort banks was too large to be easily defended so one part was walled off to make a smaller enclosure. An example of such a re-used hillfort is at **Caer Drewyn** in Clwyd. Occasionally a **Roman fort was refortified** and became a *llys* such as at **Brecon Gaer** or **Forden Gaer** near Montgomery. Other courts were built on **new sites** and lay within a **circular enclosure**.



Plan view of Dinas Powys (source: Alcock, L. 1963)

**Churches and monasteries** were also often enclosed by a circular bank or *llan*. These early religious foundations housed small communities of monks or nuns who lived in wooden buildings. Their daily life was one of physical work on the land as well as prayer. Some of the more notable

were involved in missionary work while others were scholars known well outside their own communities. Few physical remains of religious buildings survive from the early medieval period although evidence of earlier foundations are sometimes found beneath later churches such as at **Capel Maelog** in Llandrindod Wells where an cemetery of the 10th century has been excavated. **Cemeteries** of early medieval date have been found elsewhere in Powys including at **Tandderwen** near Denbigh where some of the graves lay within small enclosures.



Part of the Tandderwen Christian cemetery, as it may once have appeared. Reproduced from *Archaeology in Clwyd* No. 10

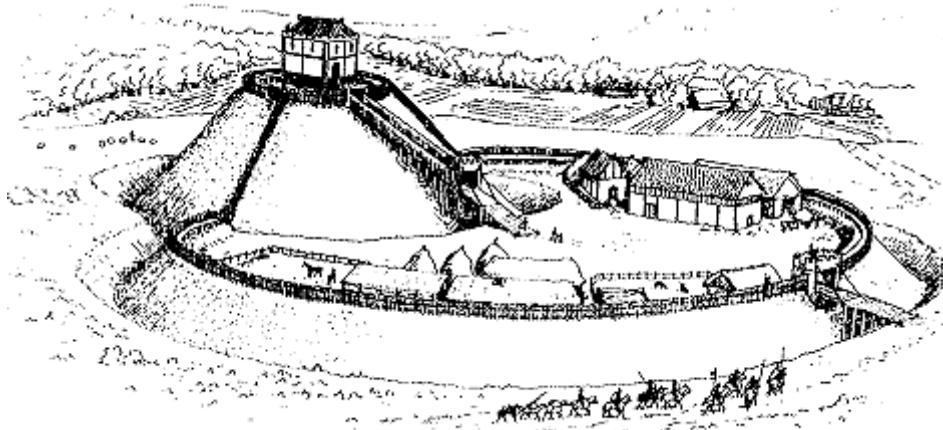
**The houses of the ordinary people** are less well known. This is partly because the lives of many people who lived in the Welsh countryside changed little from the late prehistoric period up until the Norman conquest. The other difficulty is that archaeologists rely heavily on pottery for dating and in much of Wales pottery was little used. On some sites where there is survival of organic materials eg. wood, leather, bone, the site can be dated by radiocarbon analysis. Those **farmsteads** that are dated to the early medieval period, like one at **Cefn Graenog** in the Llyn peninsula, consist of **circular buildings of stone or wood set within a small enclosure**. The settlement at Cefn Graenog had a garden and a rectangular barn or byre for animals. Pollen analysis from rural sites give a picture of a landscape of pasture, scrub and woodland but show also that arable crops were grown including Spelt and Emmer wheat and barley. Seeds from early medieval towns such as Rhuddlan include oats, field beans, pea, rye, bread wheat, hemp and flax.

To the east of the Welsh kingdoms the settlement of the Anglo-Saxons led to the formation of the **kingdom of Mercia**. Over the next couple of hundred years the English penetrated much of eastern Clwyd as well as attacking further south in Powys. In the latter part of the 8th century **Wat's and Offa's dykes** were built by the Mercian kings to delineate the western limits of their kingdom and to hinder Welsh raids.

During the 10th century the English founded several **towns** or *burhs* in Clwyd including *Cledemutha* at what is now **Rhuddlan**. Excavations over many years have identified the defences of the burh, which enclosed about 74 acres, as well as the remains of sunken-floored houses, Anglo-Saxon pottery and loomweights. *Cledemutha* may have been built partly to combat Viking raids and settlement on the north coast of Wales.

The **Norman conquest** of England in 1066 created a new situation on the borders of Wales which were for the most part granted to Marcher Lords who ruled almost as kings in their own lands. After the death of William the Conqueror the Marcher Lords began a series of private wars with the Welsh kingdoms. They were particularly successful in the southern part of the country taking

much of Brecon, Glamorgan and Ceredigion. In mid and north Wales the borders were secured by building **castles**. The early castles were constructed in **timber and earth**. A wooden tower was built upon an artificial earthen mound overlooking an enclosure, known as a bailey, which contained wooden houses for the soldiers, cooks, blacksmiths and other workers. There was usually a timber hall and sometimes a chapel. Castles such as these were very numerous, about 300 in Wales with over half of those in the Borders. Today the earth mound and earthen bank which surrounds the bailey are often preserved although the remains of the buildings can only be discovered by excavation. The most extensively excavated wooden castle is that of **Hen Domen** near Montgomery which was built by Roger of Montgomery in the 1070s. Other well preserved **motte and bailey** castles are at Castell Cymaron near Llandrindod Wells, Tomen y Faerdre, Llanarmon yn Ial and Sycharth near Llansilin in the Tanat valley. The latter continued in use until the early 15th century when it was the home of Owain Glyndwr. Not all timber castles had tall mottes, some, known as ring-works, had a single flat enclosure defended by a deep ditch and bank with strong timber gate-towers such as the one at Waun Gynllwch near Builth Wells.



### Reconstruction of a typical motte and bailey castle

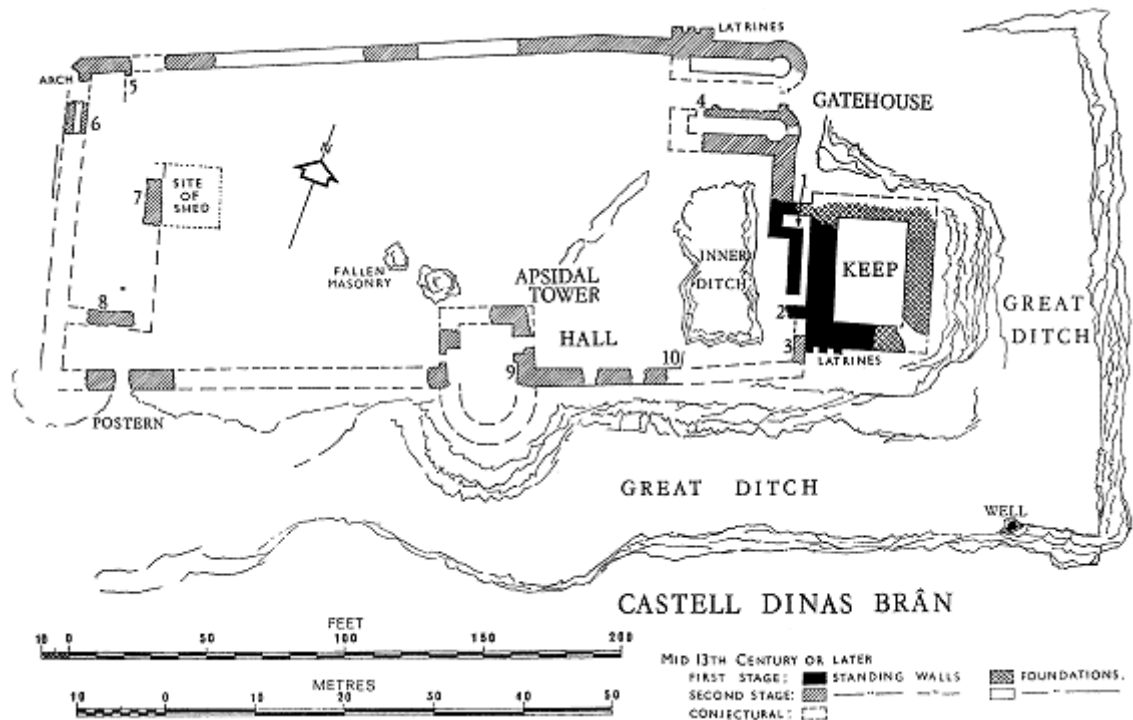
During the medieval period not all nobles lived in castles, other manors were built within a rectangular **moated enclosure**. The moat gave little protection from attack but was more an expression of status. These are particularly common in the low lying areas of Clwyd and are mainly dated to the 12th to 14th centuries. They are a form of settlement which is very common in England and it has been suggested that they show the expansion of English settlement into the densely wooded country in Maelor during the 14th century. Today not many have water in their moats and some have been ploughed over or lie in woodland. Good examples are preserved near Hanmer at Peartree Lane and Halghton Lodge.

During the 13th century many **castles were built in stone**. Some of these were on the sites of a former motte and bailey as at Builth Castle which was partially rebuilt in stone from about 1240, others were on new sites. Castles were built both by the Welsh and by the Normans. **Llywelyn ap Gruffudd** built a number of stone castles many of which lie in Gwynedd but his last lies on the borders of Powys in the old region of Cydwain at **Dolforwyn**. It was constructed between 1273 and 1277. Excavation over the last few years has identified a round tower or armoury, a chapel, hall and Lady's chamber as well as domestic buildings including a buttery, kitchen, cellar, brewery, larder, bakehouse and storerooms. The castle is situated within an old hillfort and lies on the western of the Severn overlooking Abermule.

To the east of the river Severn the motte and bailey of Hen Domen was replaced between 1223 and 1234 by a new castle at Montgomery. **Montgomery castle** was built by king Henry III to strengthen royal control of this area which was threatened by the growing power of Llywelyn. It sits on a rocky outcrop which forms a steep ridge with cliffs on three sides and can only be

approached from the south. The inner ward which contained the royal dwellings was protected by two rock cut ditches and an outer ward. A curtain wall and twin-towered gatehouse gave further protection.

Further north at **Castell Dinas Bran** a stone castle was built within the old hillfort which lies above the river Dee near Llangollen. The castle was built in the later half of the 13th century by the princes of Powys Fadog. It consists of a courtyard with the main buildings ranged along the east side and defended by a rock-cut ditch to the east and south. On the two other sides the hillside falls away steeply. Castell Dinas Bran was burnt by the Welsh before it was captured by Henry de Lacy, earl of Lincoln in 1277. Another castle built within an old hillfort is Castell Tinboeth near Llanbadarn Fynydd in Radnor.



**Plan of Castell Dinas Bran (source: Cathcart-King, D.J. 1974)**

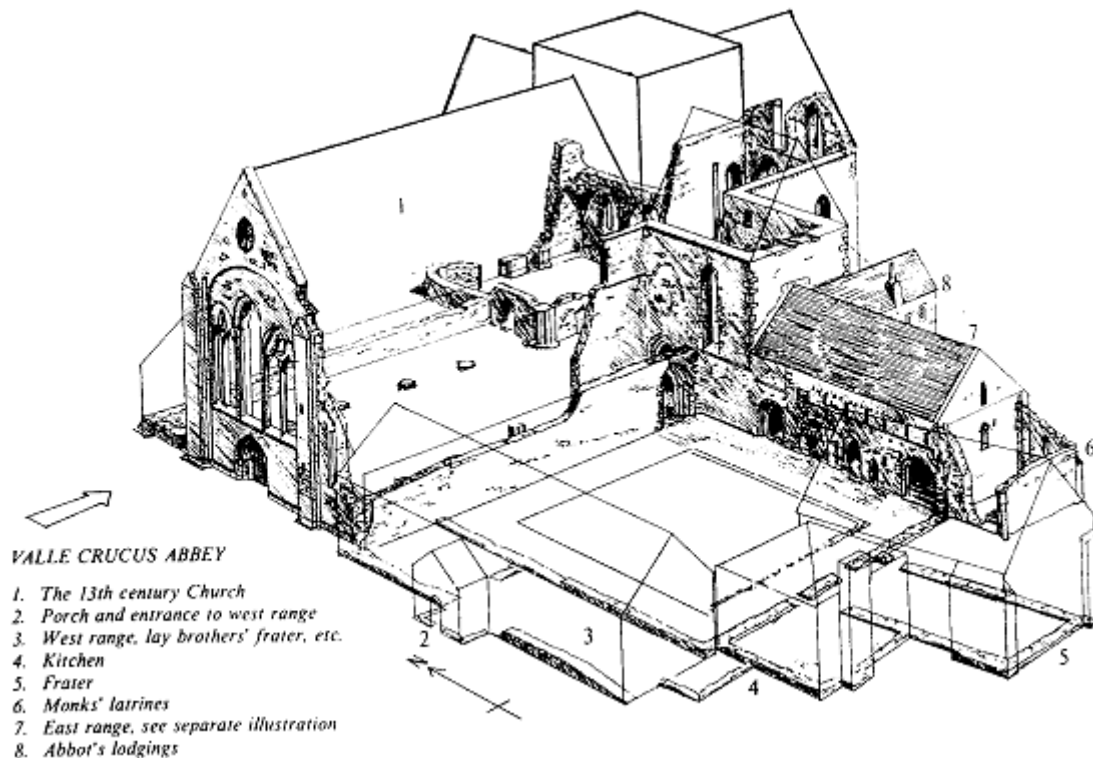
Continuing warfare between the English and Welsh in the north led to the construction of a number of castles by both sides including those at **Degannwy and Ewloe**. In the late 13th century the advance of Edward I's armies into north Wales was followed by a campaign of castle building to ensure his continuing hold on this area. Massive **stone castles were built by Edward I at Flint and Rhuddlan**. Flint castle, which was constructed in 1277, is sited on a rocky outcrop on the estuary of the river Dee. It had two wards, the inner protected by a tower at each corner. Unlike most castles no evidence of domestic buildings have been found. Rhuddlan, built between 1277-82, lies on the banks of the river Clwyd which was straightened and dredged to improve access to the sea. Another castle which was built following Edward's victory over Llywelyn ap Gruffudd was at **Denbigh**. Although it belonged to Henry de Lacy it was built with aid from Edward. Like a number of castles its defences were directly linked to those of the town.

**Medieval towns** were often deliberately founded, often close to castles, to encourage craftsmen and merchants to settle and stimulate trade. Towns were founded at Montgomery, Welshpool (La Pole) and Newtown (Llanfair Cydewain). At Rhuddlan the Saxon town was remodelled by the Normans and again altered following the building of the castle. Other medieval towns were built at Brecon, Hay-on-Wye, Knighton, Llanidloes, Wrexham and Ruthin. Mainly these were located in the eastern part of Wales along the borders where Norman and English influence was greatest. Towns were not always successful. A town was founded below the castle of Dolforwyn near the

river Severn but failed following the capture of the castle in 1277 and the foundation of Newtown just upstream.

Medieval towns were commonly laid out in a **grid pattern of streets** with narrow plots of land (**burgages**) running back from each. The buildings which fronted the street contained the shops, workshop, dwellings and gardens of craftsmen and merchants. Most towns had **defences** or were protected by the proximity of a castle. Some were enclosed by a ditch and bank topped with a wooden palisade. During the 13th and 14th century many towns rebuilt their defences in stone often enclosing a larger area as the town had spread since its foundation. Towns with partially surviving stone defences include Brecon, Denbigh and Montgomery. The other principal features of the town included an open **market place, a market hall, a town hall, mills and churches**. Markets were often held weekly usually under licence from the king. Annual fairs were also a coveted privilege that brought extra trade and dues to the town. With the exception of the castle and church most buildings were timber-framed. Few medieval wooden buildings survive owing to the vulnerability to decay and fire.

The medieval period saw not only the building of massive stone castles and new towns but the foundation of **new religious houses**. In Wales many of the abbeys were founded by the **Cistercian order** whose mother house was at Citeaux in Burgundy. These monks, who wore white, lived in large communities which included lay brothers and servants. They offered hospitality to travellers, charity to the poor and medical treatment to the sick. The monks also played a part in political life having considerable influence on the rulers of the Welsh kingdoms as well as on the Norman nobility. They sometimes acted as messengers and arbitrators between the warring factions and were instrumental in arranging treaties. The monasteries were also places of learning and education where the annals and chronicles were compiled such as *Brut y Tywysogyon*.

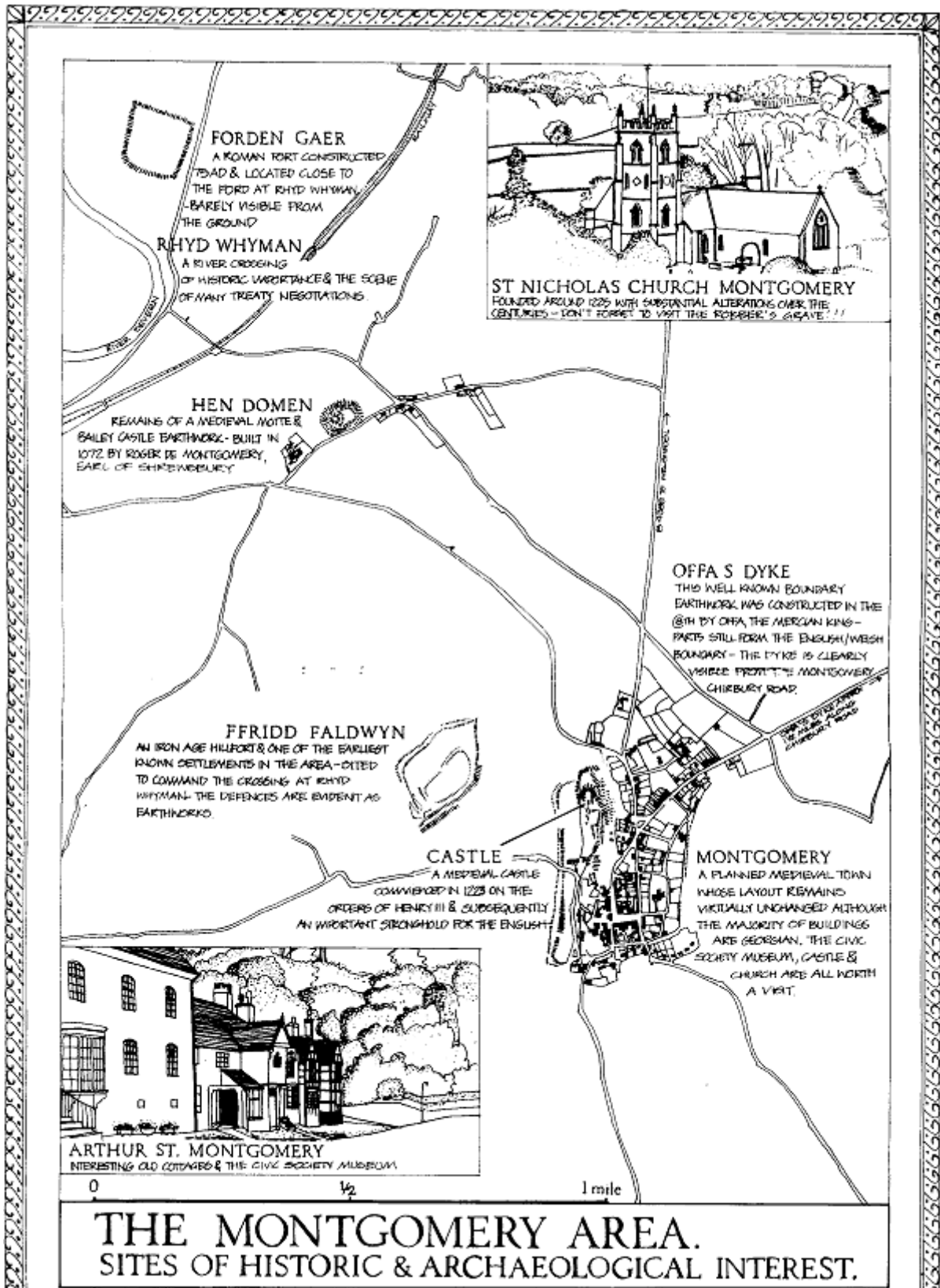


**Valle Crucis Abbey (source: Cooper, R. 1992)**

The best known of the Welsh monasteries include **Strata Marcella, Strata Florida, Valle Crucis, Basingwerk and Cwm-hir**. Many of the monasteries buildings were of high architectural merit particularly the churches some of which, as at Valle Crucis near Llangollen, survive largely

intact today. Another important area of influence was in agriculture. Pollen analysis shows that the monks greatly increased the amount of land under arable crops. They were renowned for their good estate management and improvement of agricultural land by ditching, building of hedges, banks and stone walls and for the development of improved breeds of cattle and sheep. They were also involved in the mining industry in Wales.

Archaeological knowledge of rural settlements is not as extensive as that for castles, towns and religious buildings. However we know from documentary sources that the Welsh kingdoms were divided into **administrative units** known as comotes which were in turn sub-divided into trefi or townships. Within each trefi land was allocated to the free men of the tribe or family in group in sharelands (rhandiroedd) within which lay homesteads set in small enclosures arranged around an area of open arable land divided into strips (or quilletts). There were also areas of common pasture (cytir). Settlements of bondsmen were generally more nucleated. This system was gradually modified or abandoned in areas which came under English control. In parts of north Wales in particular the land was divided into berewicks or vills before the Norman conquest and are recorded in Domesday Book. The land was mainly farmed by villeins who were bound to the land. The vills sometimes lay within the bounds of a manor often of considerable size: the manor of Bettisfield (Clwyd) covered nearly 6,000 hectares and included the parish of Hanmer. The administrative centre of the manor may have been based on a motte and bailey. Upland farms were usually secondary settlements taken into cultivation at a later date than the lower lying settlements. Summer pastures in the uplands were also used by the tenants of the lowland vills.



### Suggested sites to visit:-

#### Castles at:-

Flint (SJ 24717333)

Rhuddlan (SJ 02447791)

Denbigh (SJ 051657)

Montgomery (SO221967)

New Radnor (SO 21176100)

Tretower, near Crickhowell (18462125)

Castell Dinas Bran, near Llangollen (SJ 222430)

Castell Tinboeth near Llanbadarn Fynydd (SO 09017544)  
Builth (SO 04395103).

**The Abbey of Valle Crucis** near Llangollen (SJ 20454415)

**Town defences at Denbigh, Brecon and Montgomery.**

(Leaflets prepared by the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust are available for some of these sites. Details of other sites in your area can be obtained by contacting the SMR officer.)

**Further reading:-**

**Arnold, C. J.** 1990. *The Archaeology of Montgomeryshire*. The Powysland Club.

**Cooper, R.** 1992. *Abbeys and Priors of Wales*. Christopher Davies Ltd.

**Howell, R** (ed) *Archaeology and the National Curriculum in Wales*. CBA/National Museum of Wales/Cadw.

**English Heritage.** *Resources 1994* (practical materials for teachers to use the historic environment for any subject).

**English Heritage.** *The Archaeology Resource Book 1992*.

**Manley, J., Greuter, S. and Gale, F.** 1981. *The Archaeology of Clwyd*. Clwyd County Council.

**Musson, C** 1994. *Wales from the Air*. RCAHMS.

**Soulsby, I.** 1983. *The Towns of Medieval Wales*. Phillimore.

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