

Abergele

**SH 9464 7754
105485**

Introduction

Abergele is situated a short distance inland from the coastline of North Wales, and is five and a half miles east of the coastal resort of Colwyn Bay and four and a half miles west of Rhyl. The A547 runs east to west through the town centre, and the A548 north to south, whilst the A55 expressway skirts around the north and east edges of it. Although situated near the coast, Abergele has remained a market town and has not developed into a resort.

The town centre is situated on flat land, west of the low-lying marshy area of Morfa Rhuddlan and below the limestone hills which rise to the south. The valley of the River Gele cuts through these hills, running northwards into the town; it now runs eastwards across Morfa Rhuddlan before entering the sea, but probably originally ran directly north to the sea.

The town expanded greatly during the 20th century and modern housing estates now stretch uphill from its historic centre to the south and west to the foot of the surrounding hills.

This brief report examines the emergence and development of Abergele up to the year 1750. For the more recent history of the settlement, it will be necessary to look at other sources of information and particularly at the origins and nature of the buildings within it.

The accompanying map is offered only as an indicative guide to the historic settlement. The continuous line defining the historic core offers a visual interpretation of the area within which the settlement developed, based on our interpretation of the evidence currently to hand. It is not an immutable boundary line, and will require modification as new discoveries are made. The map does not show those areas or buildings that are statutorily designated, nor does it pick out those sites or features that are specifically mentioned in the text.

We have not referenced the sources that have been examined to produce this report, but that information will be available in the Historic Environment Record (HER) maintained by the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust. The HER can be accessed on-line through the Archwilio website (www.archwilio.org.uk).

History of development

In English the name Abergele means the ‘mouth of the Gele’ and is descriptive of the location of this small town. It first appears as *Opergelei* in the 9th century AD, then, in the 1254 Norwich Taxation as *Abergel’* and as *Abergele* three years later.

Elfod, perhaps later to be referred to archbishop, seems to have been associated with Abergele, dying in AD 809, while Jonathal dying in 858 may also have been in charge of a religious community here. While the nature of these communities may have been different or they may represent different stages in the development of the same community, it seems certain that a mother church, probably with a *clas* community, existed at Abergele before the Conquest, forming the most important church in the region.

Part of the lordship of Denbigh, Abergele was credited with 24 burgesses, a market, a fair and a mill in 1311. This is clear evidence of the town being founded at some earlier date, though presumably not before Denbigh itself which can be attributed to the middle of the 13th century. And in the modern layout of the town it is difficult to detect clear signs of town planning, although this might have been expected; possibly from the relatively straightness of Market Street leading down to the bridging of the Gele some linear planning might be

inferred, with Water Street edging around a pre-existing large ecclesiastical precinct that lay north of Market Street. But this is all speculative and it is noticeable that Soulsby in his *Towns of Medieval Wales* (1983) unusually makes no attempt to define the extent of medieval Abergele.



Abergele, photo 95-C-0224 © CPAT 2014

In 1344 a description of the town refers to the church, a market place, a prison, a bake house, the stocks, a pigeon house and the Pil [the Mount], all close together. But as Soulsby points out there are generally few references to the town in documents from the later Middle Ages, and there is a sense from this of a town which was at best static and at worse in decline.

But renewed growth occurred late in the Tudor period, encouraged perhaps by the development of the local limestone industry and about the year 1699 Edward Lhuyd's correspondent reported that Abergele contained about forty houses, a reference probably to the town rather than to the parish as a whole. In 1808 Richard Fenton labelled it 'a small mean town' which 'of late years [has] become a bathing place, in consequence of the general mania prevailing all over the Kingdom, for quitting home and every comfort for three months every summer to experience all the miseries of contracted apartments and every species of imposition'.

A Gwrych Estate map of 1828 shows the church and Bee Inn, and buildings along the street frontages of Market Street and Bridge Street, but no buildings indicated on Chapel Street and High Street. The Tithe survey of 1839 gives a similar picture of a fairly small settlement, with buildings on both sides of Market Street and on the north side of Bridge Street. Chapel Street had buildings along its east side. There were buildings in the vicinity of the church and a few to the north of it. Now, in the modern era, the basic street plan remains, but housing now extends further along each road and further back from the street frontages.

The heritage to 1750

St Michael's church (100483) is a large Perpendicular double-naved church with a west tower that may be of later date, and as noted above was the site of a clas or mother church (100489). In addition a blocked south doorway formerly gave access to an ancillary chamber or room of

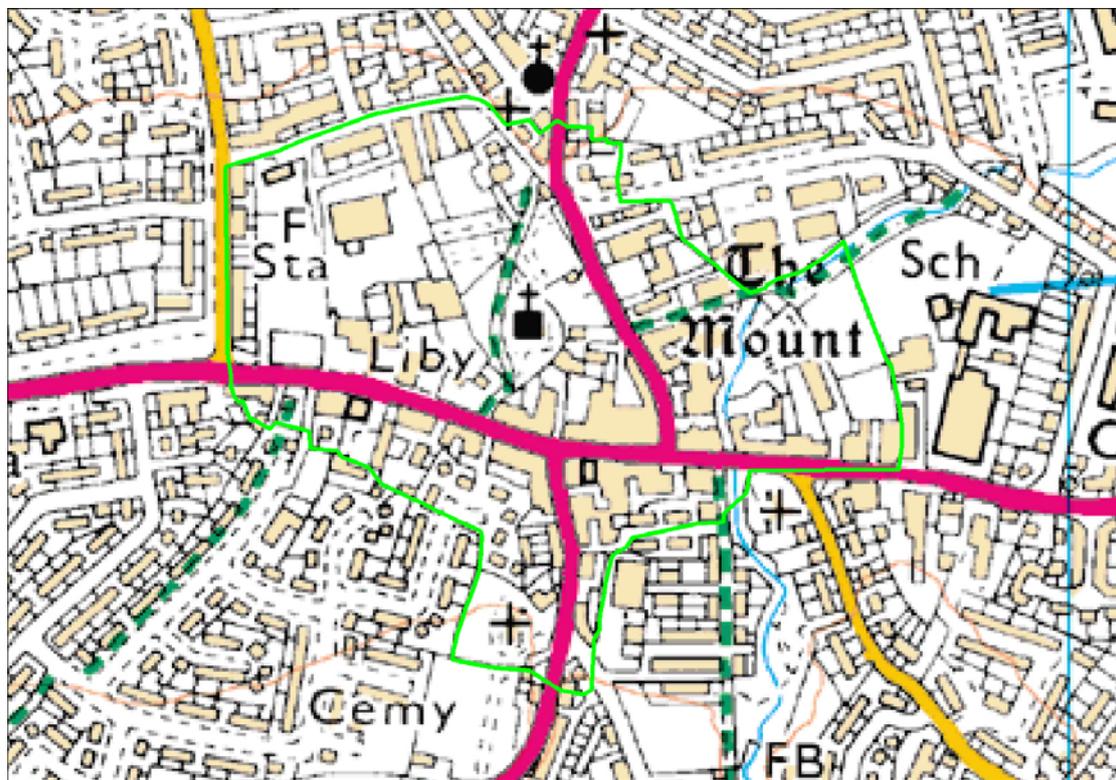
an uncertain nature. There was some restoration in 1858, and 1861 when the tower was raised and new windows inserted. Internally the church retains its medieval roofs, and there are a number of 14th-century sepulchral slab fragments, a few fragments of medieval glass depicting heads, the lower parts of the rood screen and a font stem that is Perpendicular (the bowl is dated 1663). Later features include the 17th-century pulpit, an iron-bound chest, and a large range of wall monuments, the earliest from the 1670s.

The churchyard is of medium size and basically rectangular in shape, with obvious extensions over the last century and a half. A larger area, presumably the precinct of the early medieval mother church can be detected in the boundaries of other properties that lie at a distance, the road layout, and the presence of a field-name, *fynwent*.

With the exception of the church, there appears remarkably to be no surviving building earlier than the 19th century in the centre of Abergele, a phenomenon that has yet to be explained. Outside the town, to the south, south-east and south-west, are a number of farms of greater antiquity, one of them dating to the 16th century.

The Mount (100487), also known as the Peel or Pil, consists of the slight remains of a small square enclosure, now just a flat earthen platform 30m across and c. 1.2m high. A geophysical survey in 2008 proved fruitless. It is first mentioned in 1334. Its function is unknown, as is its date, and though almost certainly fitting in the Middle Ages, the suggestion that it belongs to the period of the Danish intrusions in the 9th or 10th centuries should be treated with considerable scepticism.

Ffynnon Elwoc takes us to the east of both the town and the River Gele. Classed as an ancient well, now silted up, it was mentioned in Edward Lhuyd's *Parochialia* in about 1698, and appears to refer to that same ecclesiastic who was associated with Abergele in the 8th century.



Reproduced by permission of Ordnance Survey® on behalf of HMSO. © Crown copyright and database right 2014. All rights reserved. Welsh Assembly Government. Licence number 100017916.