

Chirk

105950
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Introduction

Chirk lies on what was formerly the main A5 trunk road (though the village has now been bypassed) from London to Holyhead, 8km north of Oswestry (Shropshire) and 14km south-south-west of Wrexham. It occupies level ground on the northern lip of the Ceiriog valley, the river being a major tributary of the River Dee. The small castle motte takes full advantage of the steep drop down to the river with the church and village lying a little further back from the edge.

Further away, Chirk Castle is about 2km to the west of the village, while the Jacobean house of Brynkinalt is little more than one kilometre to the east.

This brief report examines the background to Chirk up to the years around 1750. For the more recent history of the town, it may be necessary to examine other sources of information and particularly for the origins and nature of some of the buildings within it.

The accompanying map is offered solely 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 may need to be modified 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. Numbers in brackets are primary record numbers adopted in the HER to provide researchers with information that is specific to the individual sites and features. These can be accessed on-line through the Archwilio website (www.archwilio.org.uk). For a more detailed and illuminating assessment of the medieval borough the reader is referred to Derrick Pratt's 'The medieval borough of Chirk' in the 1997 volume of the *Denbighshire Historical Society Transactions*.

History of development

The appellation Chirk is thought to be an early anglicization of the river name, Ceiriog and is first recorded in the years 1164-5 as *Castelli de Chirc*. Minor variations in spelling the name continued through the Middle Ages and into Tudor times and beyond, so that in 1540 for instance it appeared as *Churk*. There was also a Welsh equivalent containing the Welsh term *waun* for 'moorland', so that in 1291 the church was referred to as *Ewevñ* and in 1368 as *Y Waun*, the name still in use today.

St Mary's church (101108) was according to current wisdom established in the late 12th century, though the possibility of an earlier origin cannot be ruled out. There are hints of a link with the Welsh holy man St Tysilio from which an early medieval (i.e. pre-Conquest era) origin might be inferred, yet even if the association is authentic, it does not mean that an early church occupied the present site.

The main question perhaps is whether Chirk was established as an English settlement or a Welsh one. At first glance with its earthwork castle, church and designed town layout it could

be of English origin, but Derrick Pratt has argued, convincingly, that there was a 12th-century nucleated *maerdref* or nucleated bond settlement run by a bailiff which would have provided for the local Welsh lord who would have had his base at the small motte overlooking the Ceiriog valley. The location of this nucleated settlement is not particularly certain. The house at Llwyn-y-cil half way between Chirk village and Chirk Castle (i.e. to the west of the modern settlement) was according to Pratt once known as *Maerdy*, the bailiff's house, lying within an area that was known as Y Faerdre and this may provide an indicator. But Pratt also implies that Lower Chirk which lay to the north of the modern settlement and in the vicinity of Chirk Green might have fallen within the *maerdref*. What is certain is that wherever the core of the *maerdref* was, nothing tangible from those days now survives or, at least, has yet been identified.

Only from 1282 did Chirk become the caput or central place of an English marcher lordship, following Edward I's invasion of Wales. Chirk was granted borough status in 1324 by the new Fitzalan lord of Chirkland, with 25 burgage plots laid out along the main street; this implies a new and rather modest development. By 1391 there were 32 burgesses, a weekly market, a hall that was about to be converted to shops and a court room and a chapel, this being the lord's chapel and not the parish church. The church at Chirk was early in its history a chapel dependent on the mother church at Llangollen; later, and certainly before 1275, it was appropriated to Valle Crucis Abbey which held it until the Dissolution.

The early 14th century saw the peak of Chirk's fortunes as a borough. After that it went into decline. It was reportedly 'devastated' during the Glyndŵr rebellion at the beginning of the 15th century, and by 1465 the hall was in ruin and the shops had gone. John Leland touring the country in the 1530s was unimpressed by Chirk - a few houses only - but he mentioned the 'mighty large and stronge castel' (i.e. Chirk Castle, not the motte) and two parks, one of which, 'Blake [Black] Park' survived. His view of Chirk appears to be confirmed by a survey of Chirkland in 1569 which recorded that there were 24 burgages in the town in decay. The market was no longer held by Leland's time, or at least that is what he would have to believe, but four annual fairs continued into the 19th century. Yet notwithstanding its dismissal by Leland, it remained one of the contributory boroughs that elected a Denbighshire member of parliament in the later 16th century.

The history of Chirk during the 16th to 18th centuries appears to have been little researched. What might be deduced is that its growth was extremely limited during the post-medieval era. Important in that it pre-dates Telford's A5, an admittedly small-scale manuscript map of the lordship of Chirk from the last quarter of the 18th century depicts the main build up of settlement on both sides of the wide Church Street, with some dwellings along Castle Road and Trevor Road. Confirmed by the earliest Ordnance Survey maps and the broadly contemporary tithe map (all from the first half of the 19th century) the lordship map reveals that Chirk had not expanded far beyond the notional limits of the planned borough; and as an incidental aside the map also confirms that the creation of Telford's road did not materially affect the layout of the village.

Extending from a track running along the east side of the churchyard was Chirk Green, a large area of open ground with cottages on its edges and some encroachments within it. This showed on the late 18th-century map of the manors of Chirk and Chirkland, and as an element of the landscape it almost certainly goes back well into the Middle Ages.

Samuel Lewis in his *Topographical Dictionary of Wales* refers to a fair amount of rebuilding in Chirk in the early 19th century after a new member of the Myddelton family took over the Chirk Castle estate, as well as improvements to the main road on both sides of the village. Also during the 19th century, Brynkinalt Park was extended to take in all the ground immediately to the east of the village. Collectively these points reinforce Derrick Pratt's view

that for several centuries Chirk was an estate village, organised and run by the local gentry, rather than a self-administered town.

The heritage to 1750

With its west tower and intricate fenestration, Chirk has the appearance of a Perpendicular church (101108), yet the southern wall of the nave and chancel could be earlier, and a small round-headed window may indicate a 12th-century date. Internally there are 17th-century wooden furnishings, a font which also dates from immediately after the Restoration (1662), part of a heart shrine, and some fine monuments memorialising the Myddeltons of Chirk Castle.

The churchyard (19770) is rectilinear with no convincing indications that it had a curvilinear predecessor.

Castell y Waun motte (101109) on the lip of the Ceiriog valley consists of a mound now used as an ornamental garden. Nothing survives of the surrounding ditch or of a contiguous bailey. The first documentary record to the castle is in 1165/6.

Another mound is reported to have existed on the opposite side of the road to Castell y Waun (Lewis, probably quoting Thomas Pennant). Nothing obviously artificial can now be detected there, and its origin and purpose, perhaps even its authenticity, are debateable.



Chirk, photo 03-c-0531 © CPAT, 2013

The plan of the village is suggestive of a planted settlement but hardly conclusive, and unlike Denbigh, Holt and Ruthin, Chirk is not listed in the standard text on planned towns. The earthwork castle and adjacent church at the south end and the street adopting a straight alignment northwards with subsidiary lanes running off at right angles are positive indicators, but the layout of plots in the town – the first large-scale map is from 1873 by the Ordnance Survey – offers a fragmented and unsatisfactory picture. The late 18th-century manorial map displays houses on either side of Church Street as far north as Station Avenue and further

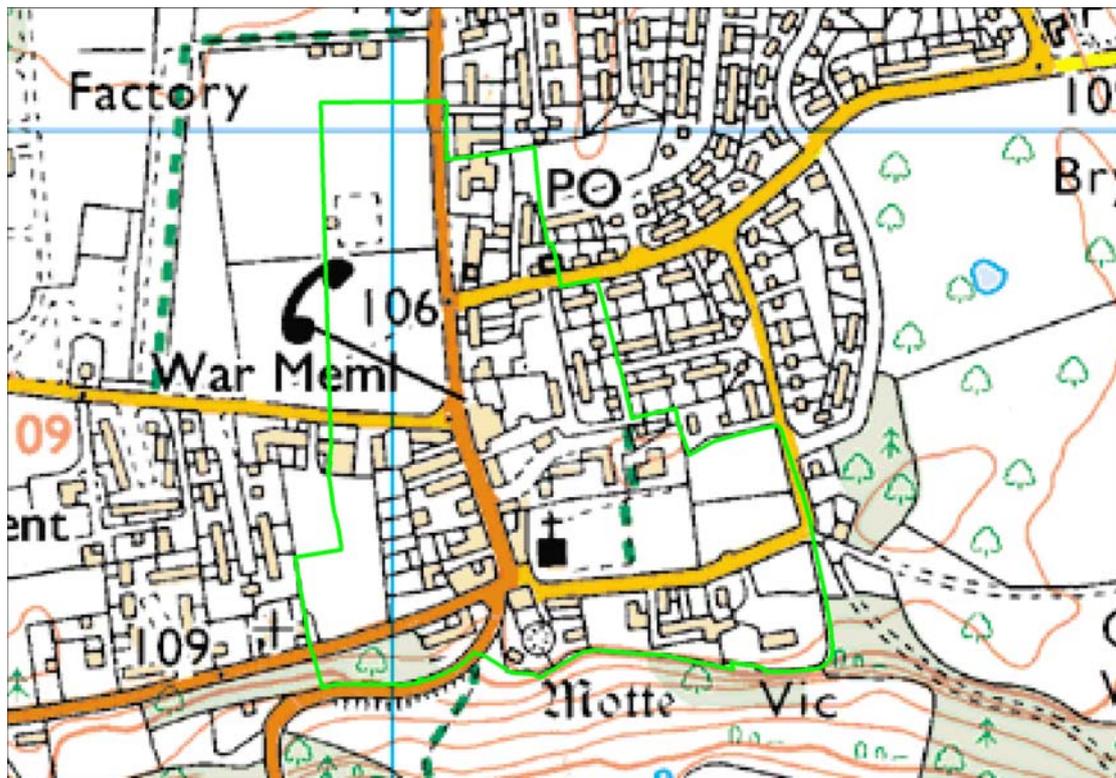
housing along Castle Road, but virtually no settlement build up down Trevor Road. Church Street was wider than today, the houses that front it on its east side today, having been built over the former market place. While the map is small-scale and its precision may be open to query, it is the best guide that we have to layout of Chirk in earlier centuries.

The vernacular buildings in the village go back to the 17th century, though not obviously earlier. Parts of Trevor House on Trevor Road are of the 17th century, the row of cottages facing the church probably go back to the 17th century though their construction is disguised by re-fronting in brick, The Hand Hotel was built as a hostelry in the mid-18th century, while the building immediately to the south of it and probably its precursor could be earlier, perhaps late 17th or early 18th-century; and The Mount, the house that fronts the motte at Chirk carries a date of 1753.

The recreation ground on the west side of Church Street and north of Station Avenue is covered by low ridge and furrow (19771).

Beyond the eastern edge of the settlement was possibly a monastic grange belonging to Valle Crucis Abbey. The field name, Maes y Mynach (102617), is assumed to refer to the association.

Chirk Castle lies around 2km to the west of the settlement. Whilst an association between castle and town is only to be expected, a consideration of the castle is not relevant to this report. Similarly, Brynkinalt, which according to tradition was the home of the Trevor family from the 10th century, is not discussed here.



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