

## Wrexham

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### *Introduction*

Wrexham has grown up on gently sloping land that forms the river terrace north of the Gwenfro, a river that has now been largely culverted. But to the south-west of the centre, the ground level also slopes away, marking a former river terrace. The town has long been important as a market and transport centre for the region and this can be seen in the numerous roads that converge on it, although it is now bypassed by the modern A483 north to south axial route that links Chester to Oswestry and beyond.

This brief report examines the background to Wrexham 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](http://www.archwilio.org.uk)).

### *History of development*

Wrexham was referred to as *Wristlesha* in 1161 and appeared in its present form 25 years later, though subsequently a variety of other spellings were committed to record including *Wrightlesham* in 1316. The first element is a personal name *Wryhtel* and this is linked to Old English *hamm*. Modern authorities have chosen to interpret this suffix as ‘water meadows’, referencing the low-lying ground by the Gwenfro and Clywedog, but river meadows might be more accurate, and *hamm* can also refer more generally to a piece of enclosed land without any watery connotation.

Will the origin of Wrexham ever be established? There has been speculation, based primarily on the earliest place-name, that the settlement was a Saxon foundation, that a Welsh lord had his court (*llys*) here in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and that there would have been a bond settlement (*maerdref*) nearby, and that the church originated as a private chapel on the lord’s estate. Each of these is plausible, none has yet been supported by incontrovertible evidence, although a good case has been made recently for the presence of an earlier (and perhaps pre-Conquest) chapel to the north of Brook Street around 250m to the north-west of the present parish church. It is believed that at some time prior to 1161 the castle 'de Wristlesham' was built. This Norman castle appearing in the records is usually equated with the earthwork motte at Erddig (101235) just over a kilometre to the south of Wrexham.

The medieval town was founded sometime before 1220, the date at which St Giles' church was known to have been constructed, and Derrick Pratt has termed it 'a rare bird – an organic "home grown" Welsh urban institution' (2007). By the early 14<sup>th</sup> century there was a thriving community at Wrexham, the records revealing 52 tenements held by 44 tenants. Several markets are documented which attest to its early importance as a trading centre, and it was during this century that it was referred to as a *villa mercatoria* which can be seen with hindsight as an indicator of its important economic role at the centre of the lordship of Bromfield and Yale. Fitzalan, its lord granted the town quasi-burghal privileges in 1380 (though the town was not granted the official status of a chartered borough until 1857). The population in the 14<sup>th</sup> century was predominantly Welsh in origin. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, if not earlier, its economy was boosted by the development of iron and coal mining in the immediate vicinity of the town. A tanning industry is also thought to have existed at this time.

During the medieval period the settlement centre developed its core area close to the church in a northerly direction as far as Lambpit Street. The medieval market place was in High Street where the width of the street is still noticeably wider than elsewhere, and John Leland in the 1530s singled out Wrexham as the only market town in Welsh Maelor. In 1562 a town hall is mentioned at the corner of Hope Street and High Street, opposite which was set the market cross. East of the churchyard was an open area, known by the time the workhouse had been built on it in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century as Wrexham Green. Dwellings lined the streets leading from the High Street, but little settlement seems to spread beyond the Gwenfro.

Wrexham's prosperity continued through the Tudor era and a free grammar school was established in 1603. But in 1643 a quarter of the town around the market area was destroyed by fire. It was quickly rebuilt and as far as can be determined is basically that which was depicted on John Wood's map of 1833. Edward Lhuyd's *Parochialia* compiled at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century is often a useful guide to the size of a settlement, but on Wrexham it is silent. By the early 19<sup>th</sup> century the brewing, tanning and ironworking industries were well established.

The emerging wealth of the town in the post-medieval period was reflected too in the construction of a number of large residences for the emerging industrial magnates on the outskirts of the town centre. Many of these large houses known as *plasau* were destroyed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One such was timber-framed Brynyffynnon on Hope Street, an early 17<sup>th</sup>-century house built for Sir Watkin Williams Wynn.

### ***The heritage to 1750***

Sadly, very few buildings of architectural and historic value have survived within the historic core of Wrexham. This was one of residual effects of the redevelopment of the town centre in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when the railway was driven through the heart of the town. Town centre development in the 1960s, however, also contributed greatly to the demolition of late medieval and post-medieval buildings. The section below indicates the main surviving buildings of importance within the town centre.

St. Giles Church (130200) was founded in c.1220, but of the earliest church little remains, the growing wealth of the town being reflected in the glorious building of today whose fabric and architecture are primarily of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. The west tower is the most impressive feature of the church and was completed sometime after 1520. The iron gates and adjacent railings in the churchyard are scheduled.

With its rectilinear layout, Wrexham appears to have a deliberately designed street plan of medieval date which has largely survived to the present, though as with Chirk its presence was overlooked by Maurice Beresford in his classic study on *New Towns in the Middle Ages* (1988). High Street as the market area is virtually on an east to west axis and terminates at

one end with the south to north Yorke Street and Chester Street, while at the other continues for another 400m beyond Hope Street, the other main street coming in from the north. The rectangular block thus formed is closed off by Lampit Street on the north, its alignment a little different from that of High Street. Between the two are lanes – Kenrick Street and Henblas Street which may have been medieval sub-divisions. Other streets – Holt Street and Charles Street - run into Chester Street pretty well at right angles, and York Street runs up from the south. It is not such a classic planned layout as say Holt but town design is clear to see. Beyond this we can only speculate. The slight changes in alignment of both Chester Street and Queen Street might indicate phased growth with the streets being extended as the population grew, while Hope Street has the appearance of a pre-existing routeway integrated into the new town.



*Wrexham, photo 08-c-0117 © CPAT, 2013*

For a wealthy market town with a long history, Wrexham has disappointingly few older buildings and in many cases those that have survived have been heavily modified. 7-10 Church Street (130115) are timber-framed buildings dated to 1681, though all may once have formed parts of a single 15<sup>th</sup>-century hall-house; 5 and 7 Town Hill are two 16<sup>th</sup>-century houses (130135), the latter certainly a cruck-framed hall, with what is probably a later front wing; the Horse and Jockey on Hope Street is a much remodelled 16<sup>th</sup>-century hall-house; the Golden Lion Public House, No.13 High Street appears to be 16<sup>th</sup> century in origin, whilst exhibiting considerable later rebuilding (130119); the Old Swan Public House at 6 Abbot Street is a timber-framed structure that originated in the 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century (130100); 1-2 High Street is timber framed from the 17<sup>th</sup> century; 4 Church Street though rebuilt has a 17<sup>th</sup>-century core (130114); the gatehouse at Brynyffynnon which survives, unlike the house itself, is 17<sup>th</sup> century; 23 Chester Street is a three-storied house of c.1750 with 19<sup>th</sup>-century remodelling (130106); and the Wynnstay Arms on Yorke Steet is also mid-18<sup>th</sup> century.

Limited archaeological work has taken place within Wrexham over the last twenty years, and a cursory assessment seems to suggest that many opportunities have been missed. Limited excavations on the Guildhall site in 1990 failed to locate Pwll Mawr, an open pool supposedly in front of the old Grammar School, which may have existed in the Middle Ages. More fruitful was a site between Vicarage Hill and Town Hill which between 1998 and 2000 revealed building foundations, cobbled surfaces, medieval finds and in places deep stratigraphy.



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