

Newtown

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Introduction

Newtown, the largest urban centre in Montgomeryshire, lies in the Severn Valley where the A489 meets the A483 trunk road. With its designation as a 'new town' in the 1960s, the rapid expansion of housing and industrial estates associated with the growing population has had, whether directly or indirectly, an inevitable detrimental effect on Newtown's historic heritage.

Above Welshpool the valley of the Severn narrows to around 500-700m in width, the river meandering from one side of its valley to the other. The historic centre of Newtown developed on level ground in one of the more pronounced loops, and a shallow valley running into the river on the south-east side of the town effectively creates a promontory location though one prone to flooding until the construction of embankments in 1973. As the town developed it spread along the southern side of the valley in both directions and onto the lower slopes of the hills overlooking the river. The need for workers' housing in the 19th century encouraged development of the steep northern slopes on the far side of the river, an area known as Penyloddfa.

This brief report examines the emergence and development of Newtown 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 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 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 used in the HER to provide information that is specific to individual sites and features. These can be accessed on-line through the Archwilio website (www.archwilio.org.uk).

History of development

There are no convincing indications in the layout of Newtown that there was already an existing settlement and/or a church when the borough was founded, yet various writers have assumed that there was an earlier settlement here. The riverside location apart, neither the dedication nor the shape of the churchyard point to an early medieval origin. On the other hand the earliest reference to the church (see below) comes more than a century before the presumed plantation and the skewed alignment of Old Church Street could conceivably point to a pre-existing approach to the church when the street plan was designed.

Llanweyr appeared first in 1254, referring to the chapel of St Mary, and continued in use intermittently into the 16th century. With the foundation of the borough, an alternative was introduced, *Drenewyth* alias *Llanvayr* in *Kedewen* being employed in 1395. The latin equivalent *Nova Villa* was recorded in 1295 and *the Newtown* in 1350.

The strategic significance of this location astride a major riverine route into the Welsh hills is suggested by two motte and bailey castles. Gro Tump lies a little more than a kilometre downstream, and its positioning could have been influenced by the existence of an early church site on the opposite bank of the river (*q.v.* Llanllwrchaiarn). The mound in the grounds of Newtown Hall, just to the west of the borough town, has been claimed as both a very late construction contemporary with the new town and a much earlier castle site established (presumably) soon after the Conquest. There is no supporting evidence either way.

In 1280, Roger Mortimer, one of the great lords in 13th century Wales, was granted the right to hold a weekly market and an annual fair on his newly acquired manor within Cedewain. It seems likely that the borough was established during the next ten years: by 1291 St Mary's had become independent of the more ancient church at Llanllwrchaiarn. However, no charter is known and there are no documented references to the town until the second quarter of the 14th century.

The growth of the medieval town is likely to have been steady rather than dramatic. Leland's comments in the 1530s do not herald a town in decline, a contrast to other towns in the central borderlands of Wales. In 1545 there were 55 taxpayers.

It was only in the early 19th century that Newtown really expanded as it developed into the centre of the flannel manufacturing industry in mid-Wales, with at least fifty factories established, having a considerable impact on the spread of settlement in Penygloddfa to the north of the river. Fulling mills, bleaching grounds, a foundry, tanneries and potteries all followed and in 1819 the Montgomeryshire canal was extended to Newtown.



Newtown, photo 03-c-0303, © CPAT, 2012

The heritage to 1750

The medieval parish church of St Mary's (1037) lies beside the river and away from the centre of the town. It was abandoned in the 1840s because of flooding, and it is now that rarity in Montgomeryshire, a medieval church ruin. Its remains consist of a west tower, perhaps 13th century with 15th century windows, and the skeleton of the nave, the stonework of which may

be in part 14th century. It contains the monument to Robert Owen, the humanitarian manufacturer, who died here in 1858. It was succeeded as the parish church by St David's (31011), a building of the 1840s on New Road, and some furnishings were transferred there from the old church, including the remarkable medieval screen. St David's itself has recently been declared redundant.

Newtown Hall motte (1034) is much mutilated, half the mound having been removed and the bailey (which it is claimed ran almost to the river) landscaped almost completely beyond recognition. It remains to be confirmed that this was a remarkably late example of an earthwork fortification type long superseded elsewhere which was designed to protect the new borough at the end of the 13th century. An attempt was made to refortify it by the Parliamentarians in 1642.

Gro Tump (1035), the motte to the east of Newtown, is in a stronger natural location and in a considerably better state of preservation. It is likely that it was built early during the Anglo-Norman expansion into Wales, perhaps in the late 11th century.

The rectilinear layout of the town (1808) is typical of medieval planned settlements. Broad Street was the main axis with a wooden bridge (replaced in stone in 1827) across the Severn at the northern end, and a series of lanes running off at right angles. A court-house lay in the middle of Broad Street, opposite Turner's Lane, and was replaced by a brick town hall around 1570 which was itself demolished in 1852. The extent to which the side lanes were utilised by tenements can only be ascertained through excavation. Together, the Glansevern Map (1798) and the Tithe Map (1843) reveal significant alterations to the street plan of Newtown: the disappearance of a lane curving from east to west, south of Market Street; the extension of Back Lane north of Wesley Street; the construction of New Road; perhaps the infilling of a wide eastwards extension to High Street; and the creation of Severn Street and Parker's Lane.

There has been speculation about defences around the town in the form of a wall or bank, but there is nothing to substantiate their former existence, and no helpful documentary references. It can be noted, however, that the most recent study of medieval town defences in England and Wales (published in 2005) does class Newtown as a possible location.

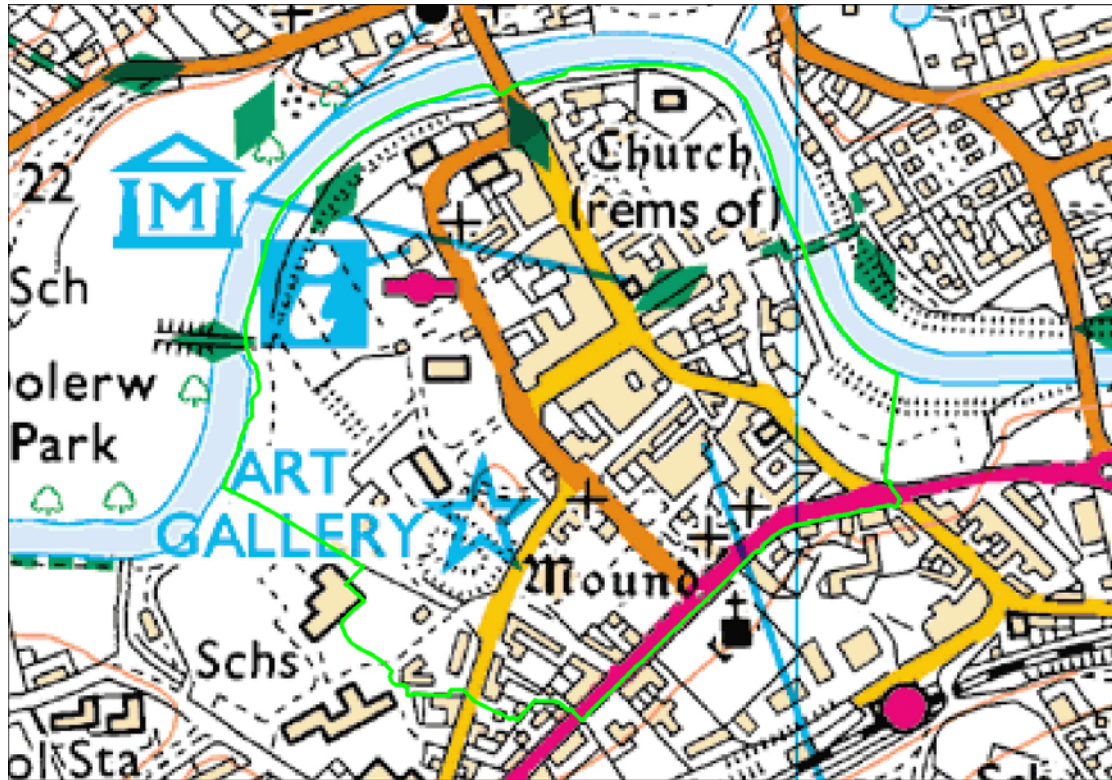
That there are ostensibly so few buildings that pre-date the 18th century is testament to the post-medieval development of Newtown. Those that do survive all appear to be 17th century and are Grade II listed: the formerly timber-farmed Black Boy Hotel (30943), Bank Place (30987) and the Bank Antiques (30988) both in Gas Street, The Buck in High Street (30990), the Silver Birch Restaurant in Parker's Lane (31018), and the much altered No.8 Severn Square (31030) and Transport House (31031) in the same square which is described by Haslam as the one pre-industrial pocket in the town.

Various pieces of developer-led archaeology have been conducted in Newtown over the last twenty years, including both excavation and recording. Notable was the discovery of a medieval corn-drying kiln in a plot off Wesley Street.

Though late in date, attention should be drawn to Penygloddfa where the regular layout of streets began in the 1790s to accommodate the workers from the adjacent factories.

Immediately to the south-west of the borough was an elongated tract of common land, known as The Green or Newtown Green, mapped in 1806 at about the time of its enclosure. Its northern boundary lay immediately south of the Newtown Hall motte and Market Street, its southern boundary a small stream around 100m away. By 1843 the former green was dense with housing. Here was the Lady Well (1801), which provided fresh water until the beginning of the 20th century and has given its name to buildings in the vicinity.

Along the road towards Welshpool was St Giles which no longer survives. This presumably was a chapel, but the Glansevern map of c.1800 suggests a circular enclosure - perhaps a churchyard? - to the east.



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