

CPAT Report No 1186

**Historic settlements in
Wrexham County Borough**

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Report for Cadw

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The historic settlements of Wrexham County Borough An introduction

Background

Eighteen years ago the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust compiled assessments of the historic settlements of Delyn Borough and Alyn and Deeside, two of the districts of the then county of Clwyd, on behalf of Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments. These were two of several such assessments for the local authority areas of eastern and north-eastern Wales and ultimately ten reports were completed between 1992 and 1995, embracing the entire region for which CPAT had and retains a remit.

The imperative that underpinned these surveys was committed to paper for the first time when Brecknock Borough was studied in 1993, it being expressed in the following terms:

It has long been recognised that development within town and village alike [might] disturb or obliterate significant information about the past, but a suitable response to a specific building development or other permanent land use change has usually been instigated, if at all, on an ad hoc basis. A more structured approach to the understanding of historic settlements and the preservation and management of this fragile resource is required. This has been given a greater urgency by the publication in 1991 of the Welsh version of the Planning and Policy Guidance Note: Archaeology and Planning (PPG 16 Wales). This emphasises the responsibilities of Local Planning Authorities in the conservation of the archaeological heritage and confirms that archaeological remains are a material consideration when determining planning applications (Martin and Walters 1993, 3).

Three principal objectives of the Brecknock Borough study were defined at that time, and were equally applicable to the later studies:

- i) to produce a general picture of historic settlement in the area,
- ii) to identify, in as far as the evidence allows, those areas within the historic settlements that could be termed archaeologically sensitive, in order to assist in the day-to-day and long-term planning processes initiated by the local authority, and
- iii) to define areas of potential archaeological significance where developers might be required to undertake an archaeological evaluation as part of the planning process.

The individual village histories were never intended for publication, but their contents were absorbed into the Sites and Monuments Record (now the Historic Environment Record) where they could be accessed and recycled, usually without any acknowledgement to their source, in others' reports.

There is no need to stress that in the two decades since those reports on Flintshire's towns and villages was circulated to a relatively small number of interested organisations, there have been changes, and we would hope improvements, to our collective perception of the emergence, development and in some instances collapse of historic settlements in the border counties and more specifically in Flintshire.

Firstly, a series of Cadw-funded site-condition studies have appeared which directly or indirectly have had a bearing on settlement studies. The historic churches survey (1995-99), the early medieval ecclesiastical sites survey (2001-04) and even the deserted medieval rural settlement survey (1996-2001) have all played a part in enhancing our understanding of settlement patterns and development in eastern Wales, as have some rather more specific and detailed ground surveys such as those of village earthworks in Brecknock (1993) and Radnorshire (1996), though none unfortunately for Flintshire.

Secondly, there are the results that have accrued from client-funded works on development sites – whether excavation, evaluation, watching brief or building recording – as a result of local authorities implementing PPG16 and, from 2002, the guidelines contained in Planning Policy Wales.

Thirdly, there are recently published studies which have transformed our thinking on certain topics. Most notable in this context are the place-name studies by Hywel Wyn Owen and Richard Morgan (2007), the first two volumes of the early medieval inscribed stones corpus prepared by Nancy Edwards, Mark Redknap and John Lewis (2007) and Richard Suggett's *Houses and History in the March of Wales. Radnorshire 1400-1800* published by the Welsh Royal Commission in 2005. Neither of these last two is directly pertinent to Flintshire but both illustrate the quality of some of the work that has recently been completed or is in progress in the Principality.

Finally though in some ways the least tangible of the inputs is the ever-improving perception and appreciation of settlement development and the patterns that are fostered in east Wales, as a result of accumulated expertise, and the accessing of research from both other regions of Wales and from England. This doesn't normally manifest itself in publications, although the writer's paper, co-authored with Wyn Evans (2009) on clas churches and their landscapes is an exception.

In 2010 CPAT felt that the time had come to re-examine the pictures of its historic settlements, fifteen to twenty years on from when the initial studies were completed. In a general sense, various questions had been raised. Had developer-funding in advance of the potential destruction or damage to the cultural heritage had much of an effect and if so where? Had our knowledge and appreciation of the historic settlements in the region markedly improved in the last fifteen to twenty years? And in a departure from the practice in the early 1990s when the Internet was little more than an unfulfilled dream, could we successfully disseminate that information authoritatively so that it could be accessed digitally to satisfy the increasing number of people who search our website? There are several hundred historic settlements in eastern Wales and it was not possible to examine them all in a single exercise. The former local authority areas of Brecknock Borough and Radnorshire were selected to initiate the programme in 2010-11 and this was followed with studies of Montgomeryshire and Flintshire in 2011-12 and Wrexham County Borough in 2012-13. We hope to complete the remaining areas of Denbighshire, the Beacons national park (2013), and eastern Conwy during 2013-14.

Methodology and presentation

The 1994/5 reports. A pattern for each report was established in 1992 comprising a report which covered a minimum of one A4 page of text and in some instances, depending on the size and interest of the settlement involved, three or four pages. The report considered, under four sub-headings, the geographic location of the settlement, the known history of its origins and development, the buildings and archaeology that were integral elements of the settlement, and finally a set of recommendations for further work.

Accompanying each settlement study was an Ordnance Survey map-based depiction of the settlement showing scheduled ancient monuments, listed buildings, known archaeological features and earthworks, areas which it was felt at the time should be preserved in situ, other areas that should be evaluated in advance of development, and a boundary line drawn around the historic settlement as it was then recognised, in other words the perceived historic core of the town or village.

Those early reports also contained as annexes a copy of the descriptive brief for the preparation of the study and another of a draft paper on archaeology and the planning process in Powys

The 2012-14 reports. After various discussions the configuration of both the text layout and the accompanying map have been revised, to take account of changing circumstances and current requirements.

The baseline information – the settlement name, the national grid reference and the primary record number that links the settlement (as well as its individual elements) to the Historic Environment Record – have necessarily remained the same, although the height above sea level and the prefix PRN have been dropped.

The geographic location has been retained, as has the section on history, now renamed ‘history of development’. More change can be seen in the section formerly headed ‘buildings and archaeology’ which has been altered to ‘the heritage to 1750’. This alteration results from two considerations. Firstly, it is becoming increasingly commonplace to refer to the cultural heritage and cultural heritage assets, convenient collective terms that embrace not only below and above-ground archaeology, and buildings, but also historic landscape (and townscape) elements that did not necessarily get the recognition that they warrant in the former terminology. Cultural heritage is seen as a useful shorthand descriptive term for everything that we are concerned with here. Secondly, a decision was taken to end the study at 1750, bringing it into line with Cadw’s terminal date for the concurrent scoping programme of medieval and early post-medieval monument scheduling enhancement. 1750 to 1760 is often seen as a starting date for the Industrial Revolution, even if its full ‘flowering’ did not occur in Wales for another fifty years. Equally importantly, however, it was during the later 18th century and a little beyond that, some settlements saw marked development with a concomitant increase in the number of buildings, and the diminishing significance in the forms of evidence that are significant to the archaeologist. This is not to downplay the significance of the buildings that date from the later 18th and 19th centuries, nor to infer that settlements that contain large numbers of such structures are not historic, rather it is a commentary on the shift in the nature of the evidence that is available to us.

This report has also tried to adopt a more rigorous approach to the presentation of the data, whether it be on archaeological sites, buildings or the townscape. It would be easy to write protracted descriptions of some buildings such as churches or earthwork complexes, or even in some instances the discoveries from development-led evaluations. The regurgitation of much detail, it was felt, would not necessarily be particularly useful to the general reader, and indeed might act as a deterrent. The inclusion of PRN numbers will allow the researcher or enthusiast to follow up individual leads in the regional Historic Environment Record should they wish, but what is offered here is a concise text covering as many issues as are currently known without over-elaboration on any one of them.

Finally, the section of recommendations has been removed. This, it should be admitted, is in part a pragmatic decision based on the realisation that some of the original recommendations covering standard issues such as the importance of consultation with the archaeological curator, the need for watching briefs and evaluations, and the like were compiled at a time when PPG16 was new, consultation practice was yet to be regularised, and the importance of the cultural heritage resource in our towns and villages had in some areas yet to be appreciated by at least some local authority planners. This situation has changed, and the importance of the cultural heritage is now largely accepted at local government level. It is pragmatic, however, for less satisfactory reasons. In an ideal world the recommendation for Halkyn that a survey be conducted to identify the relict earthworks of the former village would have been followed up and completed at some point over the last seventeen years. That these aims have not been achieved is less a comment on the validity of the recommendation, more on the limited resources that are available for surveying and research: it is unrealistic to assume that this is going to change in the foreseeable future.

There have also been some modifications to the plans that accompany the texts. The depiction of designated archaeological sites (scheduling) and buildings (listing) has been left out, for we are conscious of the fact that it is entirely the prerogative of Cadw and/or the local authority to define

these sites in cartographic form, and that the reader requiring information on the extent of a designation should approach the appropriate authority for that information. Furthermore, the number and extent of designated sites within any given settlement will change through time, and assuming that these maps have a currency measured in years, there is the potential for misleading a reader because the situation could have changed.

The definition of the historic core has also been modified, taking more account of existing boundaries in order to lessen any potential contention over whether a particular spot lies inside or outside the historic core as we perceive it. We would stress that the core boundary as defined is not an immutable perimeter, but is simply an estimate and a guide based on an assessment of the existing evidence by the writer as to where earlier settlement may once have existed.

Dropped too is the zonation of areas for evaluation in advance of development. In 1992, defining such areas was a useful guide to planners as to where archaeological intervention was most needed, but there is a potential conflict between the depiction of one or two such areas on a map on the one hand and the definition of the historic core on the other. If for whatever reason, an area within an historic core envelope is not highlighted for evaluation, this could be taken as an indication that the area would not require further assessment in the event of a proposed development. Rather we must work on the assumption that any development within an historic core could be a candidate for an evaluation, depending of course on the nature of the development itself, but that it should be the development control officer at CPAT who makes that decision, based on his own professional judgment.

More contentious perhaps is the decision to omit the identification of blocks of land defined as 'areas for preservation in situ', another facet of the 1992 survey. Where such areas are already statutorily designated within an historic settlement, their preservation is a given and no problem arises. However, in some cases in the past a decision that an area ought to be preserved has been taken on the basis of a rather superficial assessment of its worth, rather than on a detailed analysis of what is there. If, then, at a planning level a field containing earthworks is going to be preserved it needs to be based on rigorously defined evidence that will stand up to objective scrutiny, and this requires a detailed record that is rarely accessible through a report of this nature.

One final aspect to clarify is that the historic core envelope now defines only those areas within which there is the likelihood of settlement, by which we mean dwellings and their curtilages. The setting of any settlement will have been the surrounding landscape that was farmed and utilised from it, and potentially could spread over several square kilometres. Defining its fields, its pastures and its woodlands will be a considerable task, and its success cannot be guaranteed. Vital though it is to an understanding of that settlement, the inclusion of the setting within the historic core cannot be advocated. It requires a different level of zoning.

The original study of the two districts within Clwyd listed 35 settlements. The current survey covers 20. Omitted are settlements such as Bagillt, Greenfield, Llanfynydd and Oakenholt that reflect only post-1750 developments, and places such as Higher Shotton and Picton which though having a long history going back well into the Middle Ages, the latter even appearing in Domesday Book, were, as far as we can tell, manors centred on a single farm rather than nucleated settlements.

Wrexham County Borough – a settlement overview

Introduction

Wrexham is arguably the least coherent of the regions that are dealt with in these studies of historic settlements in north-east and central-east Wales. Montgomeryshire (2012), Radnorshire (2011), Flintshire (2012), and Denbighshire (to be done in 2013/14) have some coherency as counties with an historic past, even if their bounds have on occasion migrated to meet changing administrative requirements. Brecknock has been dealt with in two tranches to accommodate the Beacons national park (2013), and even eastern Conwy (to be done in 2013/14) has a geographical coherency, though in the past it would have been unrecognisable to a government official, whether central or regional. But Wrexham seems nothing other than an entirely artificial construct conjured up purely for administrative convenience. A block of lowland east of the Dee – Wrexham Maelor – which protrudes into England and might have been, had historical circumstances been different, a portion of Cheshire, is tied to the gradually rising ground to the west centred on Wrexham and cut by the River Clyweddog and further north the River Alyn. Nor is this the end of it, for since our regional report on Wrexham Maelor in 1992, the area has been reconfigured to take in a sliver of historic Denbighshire along the River Ceiriog.

With such an artificially contrived appearance, it is perhaps no surprise that the settlements are such a heterogeneous collection, ranging in size from Wrexham, one of the largest towns in north Wales to Whitewell and Redbrook which some would probably hesitate to term settlements until the twentieth century, and in age from Bangor Is-y-coed, surely one of the earliest places documented in Wales to Bronington, one of the most recent. Indeed, a reassessment of those settlements that were included in the 1992 report in the light of the revised ceiling of 1750 for considering historic settlements (for which see the introductory section to each individual settlement report) has led to the exclusion of a sizeable number of places during the current study. Lightwood Green, Horseman's Green, Tallarn Green and Crabtree Green are linked by their affixes which signal the presence of a piece of common land around which houses gradually emerged. But in the absence of any pre-1750 mapping, it would be a less cautious commentator or perhaps one who had considerably more time to spend in the archives who would argue that these nucleations went back into the medieval or Tudor era. Further to the north-west and south-west of Wrexham the rash of settlements such as Johnstown, Coedpoeth and Brymbo are a function of the inexorable industrialisation of the region, a trend of the late eighteenth century, though not exclusively so. Llay was included in 1992 because of the medieval moated enclosure at Llay Hall farm, but there is no substantive evidence that this ever developed into the focus of a nucleated settlement, and indeed it is considerably more likely that this remained as an isolated farm, albeit as a higher status establishment than its neighbours.

We are left with a rump of twenty settlements, a contrast to the forty-nine that were assessed in 1992, and even some of the twenty might be considered borderline in any consideration of nucleation, assessed here as much to display the difficulties in establishing origins and growth as well as the vagaries of toponymy.

There is one town and three larger villages that aspire to some of the attributes of a town. Wrexham is in a league of its own, a settlement that once it started to grow seems to have continued without pause, regardless of rebellion and conflagration. But Wrexham's commercial and industrial success has resulted in the sacrifice of its heritage. Its magnificent church apart it has little to show of its earlier history, and the scale of the archaeological examination of its historic core is not in keeping with its size and importance. Holt, Chirk and Overton are smaller, and the first two are historically more interesting. But all four share the rectangular layout of the medieval planned town. Holt and perhaps Overton are the most revealing because of their purity of form, Wrexham arguably the more interesting because it has yet to be fully

understood. Chirk is the slightest, yet is not in doubt. Wrexham appears to be Welsh foundation, Holt is an English establishment contemporary with the creation of its major castle, and Overton too is English, both well-studied in recent years through the University of Belfast's analysis of the Edwardian towns of Wales. The precise origins of Chirk's new layout are obscure. Put this the other way round and it is evident that all of the larger historic settlements in Wrexham display a high degree of planning and layout at their cores. And this is a characteristic which spreads throughout many of the towns of east Wales.

Wrexham boasts a number of places where it seems plausible to suggest that dwellings began to group around a focus, usually a church, in the medieval era, thereby creating a nucleated settlement or village. Plausibility, however, is not the same as confirmation, and in virtually no instance can a nucleated settlement be justified on present evidence. In the absence of standing buildings (other than a church) that date from prior to the reformation, archaeological research would appear to be the only solution but as yet developer-funded projects have yet to make an impact. Hanmer and perhaps Gresford seem likely, Bangor, Ruabon and Worthenbury are all possibles, while Marford remains an anomaly, if only because it is difficult to pinpoint when the pattern of housing that is visible today came into existence.

Church settlements of the sort that are peculiarly prevalent in the hills of Wales and which have featured strongly in most of the previous county reports are rare in Wrexham. Glyn Ceiriog, previously Llansantffraid Glyn Ceiriog, and Llanarmon Dyffryn Ceiriog are the most likely and it is perhaps not surprising that both of them are to be found in the Ceiriog valley well out to the west in that part of Wrexham tacked on from Denbighshire at the time of its creation in 1996. Erbistock could fall under this heading, and perhaps too Marchwiel, though given its proximity to Wrexham it might be wondered whether there is more to the latter than is currently apparent.

Then there is a group of settlements that have emerged not because there is an apparent medieval focus, but more that there has been a gradual concentration of houses which creates to a greater or lesser degree a simulacrum of a nucleated settlement. Bettisfield, Bronington, Isycoed, Redbrook, Whitwell and possibly Penley all display the pattern of growth which develops from dispersed housing to become a more focussed community, in some cases in very times.

Finally, we can depart from tradition to celebrate the work of Derrick Pratt who has been turning out articles on Denbighshire and Flintshire with a strong Maelor flavour since the early 1960s. It is probably true to say that Derrick has almost single-handedly re-written major elements of the history of Maelor over the last forty years and more. In this respect there are probably few comparable areas of Wales that have benefited in such a sustained fashion. This report owes much to his researches.