

Worthenbury

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Introduction

Worthenbury lies amongst the back lanes that cross the muted landscape of Wrexham Maelor between the A525 and the River Dee which converge three kilometres to the west at Bangor. It is some 10km south-east of Wrexham and no more than a kilometre from the English border.

The village covers level ground on the eastern edge of the Dee floodplain. The Emral Brook joining with the Wych Brook runs towards the river a short distance to the south and creates a low spur, a location that is utilised by the church and the village that now surrounds it. The village has grown up along a main street that runs north-west to south-east with a focus around the T-junction where the Bangor road (B5069) comes in from the south-west. Worthenbury is something of a rarity in Wrexham Maelor, a small nucleated village with a documented if sparse early history.

This brief report examines the emergence and development of Worthenbury up to 1750. For the more recent history of the settlement, it will be necessary to examine other sources of information and particularly for the origins and nature 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).

History of development

Worthenbury is certainly of Anglo-Saxon origin. The place is recorded in Domesday Book in 1086 as *Hurdingberie* at which time there were "five hides which pay geld" and land for ten ploughs. Later in 1300 it was termed *Worthinbury* and other variations such as *Wrдынbur* appeared at other times during the 14th century. The first record of the present form name came in 1527. The final element, *burh*, has a number of related meanings, the most common of which is a 'defended enclosure'. However, the most recent authoritative publication (2007) prefers as an alternative, a 'manor-house' or 'estate' protected by a fence which signalled the *wordign* or 'enclosure'.

Nearly twenty years ago the writer speculated that Worthenbury might be the missing *Weardbyrig*, an Anglo-Saxon *burh* or defended settlement thrown up by Aethelflaed, the female ruler of Mercia, in 915. *Weardbyrig* lay between two other *burhs*, at Runcorn on the Mersey and Chirbury near the Severn. This remains no more than a speculation: there are no unequivocally early remains to support the contention, but equally it has not been disproved.

The manor at the time of Domesday had a surprisingly long list of settlers attached to it: in addition to a knight there was a serf, three villeins, three Frenchmen, a radman (translated as a rider) and a mill which presumably had a miller. In themselves these do not prove the existence of a nucleated settlement but they do strengthen the possibility.

There is generally little information on the development of the settlement during the Middle Ages. Perhaps it may have been one of the few nucleated settlements in the area, yet there is little reliable physical evidence, and of associated open fields which are an indicator of the scale of cultivation, only one is recorded. There is even a sparsity of information on the church or churches that preceded the present edifice, though a chapel is mentioned here in 1388. Administratively, it remained a chapelry of Bangor in the 17th century, but a parish for Worthenbury was carved out of Bangor in 1689.



Worthenbury, photo 04-c-0049 © CPAT, 2013

By early in the 19th century when the first maps become available for the area, dwellings grouped around the T-junction and spread along the lane past the church running north-westwards and parallel to the Worthenbury Brook, while the Rectory and a farm lay to the south-east. This lane was evidently more important than that coming in from the north-east which may have become significant only when the turnpike commissioners became involved with it in the 1760s. The pattern of settlement, then, was much the same as it is today.

The heritage to 1750

The Domesday entry for Worthenbury records a mill, and this is reputed to have stood on the stream at the rear of the Old Rectory. There is no definite evidence of this though there is a suggestion of a platform (105352) in a bend of the stream in OS no.0095.

Potentially supporting evidence for the Anglo-Saxon *burh* is provided by a substantial boundary bank (105351) edging fields on the north side of the settlement (OS nos 9824 and 0022), with a scarp well over one metre high. To the east of the modern settlement there is a slight possibility that a further part of the circuit is represented by a ditch running inside the eastern boundary of field OS no.1414. As noted above this is largely speculative.

The church of St. Deniol (105348) is a fine Georgian edifice built in 1736-9, generally acclaimed one of the best of its date in Wales. No evidence survives of an earlier building(s). The churchyard, polygonal in design, has a modern extension to the west. For the age of the settlement and size of the parish the graveyard is surprisingly small, but a document drawn up at the time of the consecration of the new church in 1739 hints at the possibility that the churchyard was also newly laid out at that time.

Worthenbury seems to have enjoyed a phase of growth in the 18th century. In addition to the church it has other listed buildings from the end of the century. The only building which to date has been specifically attributed to an earlier era is the Old Rectory (41842) which is said to have been erected in 1657 and possibly to incorporate some early elements in its more modern framework. However, near Dawson Farm on Church Lane is a cottage that is claimed to be of 17th-century origin. Over Worthenbury Bridge from the village is The Manor, a house of no great age in itself but said to be on the site of an earlier manor. The writer has not been able to find any information that would verify this claim, but were it to be the case, the layout of the earlier settlement would need to be reassessed.

Outside the settlement, particularly in the fields to east, there are the remnants of extensive medieval fields with some well preserved ridge and furrow (105353).

Field OS no.1938 on the north side of the village has a strong local tradition of being a burial ground, though nothing has been observed there during past field surveys.



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