

TALGARTH

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Introduction

Talgarth lies on the east side of the River Llynfi some 14km to the north-east of Brecon. The church sits on a gently sloping spur formed by the small River Ennig, a tributary of the Llynfi, on the west and a smaller tributary to the south. Close to these watercourses the natural slopes become steeper, and in the case of the properties on the south side of the street known as The Bank they occupy the edge of the break of slope. To the north of the church the ground drops away gently but elsewhere the land is fairly level in this direction.

This brief report examines the emergence and development of Talgarth 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 only 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. The HER can be accessed on-line through the Archwilio website (www.archwilio.org.uk).

History of development

The name means 'the end of a ridge or hill', an appropriate toponym for the church though not the village. It appears as *Talgart* in 1121, as *Talgard* after 1130, and in its present form in the years between 1203 and 1208.

That Talgarth was reputedly a major royal residence in Brycheiniog before the Norman Conquest pervades the literature, yet this is probably apocryphal based on a single comment in the 12th-century life of a saint. A rather better case can be made for Talgarth emerging as a mother church during the early medieval era, run probably by a *clas* community.

Talgarth was the centre of a commote of the same name, and subsequently of a hundred, both administrative units and probably indicative of its status before and after the Norman Conquest.

The church (dedicated to a daughter of Brychan who was supposedly martyred at Talgarth) was already well established by the beginning of the 12th century when it was granted to the new priory at Brecon.

At the beginning of the 13th century the new lordship of Blaenllynfi was carved out of the vast lordship of Brecon. Though its *caput* was at Castell Blaenllynfi below Bwlch, Talgarth developed into the premier town in the new lordship, and occasionally it was the lordship of Talgarth that was referred to. A borough at Talgarth was first mentioned in 1286, and it was granted rights in 1291/2 to hold a market and fair. Though there is a general assumption,

backed by further references in the early 14th century, that it was regarded as having borough status, there is no record of its ever having received a charter. In an extent of 1309 there were 73 burgage plots in the town, 60 of which were occupied, and in the same document reference was made to the hamlet of *Niweton* (Newtown) which may have been physically contiguous with the borough.

Of its subsequent development (or lack of it) little is known, though the fact that in 1309 thirteen burgage plots were unoccupied may suggest that the borough was already exhibiting signs of decline. National commentators had little to say about Talgarth in later centuries, though there is evidence that its market was still held. Lewis termed it a ‘decayed borough’, intimating that by the early 19th century only its fairs continued, but there is evidence for a market well into the 20th century.



Talgarth, photo 00-c-0173 © CPAT, 2013

The heritage to 1750

Features of St Gwendoline's church may reveal a cruciform church of the 13th century, a plan-form commonly associated with a mother church foundation of the pre-Conquest era. It now consists of a nave and chancel in one, thought to date to around 1400 though with some earlier fabric surviving, together with a west tower and a porch from the 15th century, a north vestry which may originally have been a transept, and a south aisle added at the time the nave and chancel were constructed. Extensive restoration work was completed in 1873. Remarkably few medieval furnishings and fittings remain. There is a late 13th-century cross-slab and fragments of the rood screen, to which can be added more recent furnishings such as a group of 18th-century wall memorials and a single hatchment.

The churchyard is of irregular shape, curvilinear only on the south where Church Street arcs around it. There is no indication that it evolved from an originally circular plan. However, in this vein the concave western boundary of the churchyard created by the curve of School Street should be noted. From close to Tower Farm it was continued (before the area was built over) by a field boundary that ran to a cottage called Grigws from where a track ran downhill

to the river. With the Bank as a southern edge and the river on the west this creates a large, curvilinear enclosure of around 10 to 11 hectares, a possible precinct to the mother church at Talgarth.

It is generally accepted that parts of Talgarth reflect a planned settlement with three parallel streets – The Bank, Chapel Street (now Back Lane) and Tower Lane – running eastwards downhill from the church, though some doubt exists as to whether Tower Lane is a medieval creation. A market place, now built up and its triangular area edged by irregular and narrow streets, lay immediately outside the west gate of the churchyard. It is logical to assume that this settlement spread downhill from the area around the church forming the historic core of Talgarth, and that the west bank of the Ennig was settled in more recent times. However, excavations to the east of the church in the late 1990s (for which see below) also revealed medieval activity beyond the confines of the planned town – it would be convenient but perhaps simplistic to assume that what was unearthed represented an earlier focus of settlement around the church which continued in use when the plantation was added to the townscape of Talgarth, being supplemented rather than replaced.

The picture of burgage plots running north to south from the south side of The Bank shown on late 19th-century Ordnance Survey maps is belied by earlier tithe and estate maps, but others north of Chapel Street and south of Church Street look to be more likely survivals.

A vernacular building of major significance is the Tower House on the east bank of the River Ennig. This may be of 14th-century origin, and traditionally is seen as fulfilling a defensive role and probably guarding the crossing of the river. It was used subsequently as the borough prison, but by Samuel Lewis' time was part of a farm. One authority, however, sees it more as a status symbol built by a Welsh family on the rise, perhaps Rhys ap Hywel or one of his descendants.

But the tower house (and church) aside, Talgarth has surprisingly few buildings of any great age. The Elms on the northern side of the town is a long house derivative of the late 16th- or early 17th century and appears to be the only dwelling recorded as pre-dating the mid-18th century, Great House by the river was erected in about 1750, while on the road out of town to the south-west the Radnor Arms originated as a late medieval house and later became an inn; its external appearance comes from an early 19th- century remodelling. The bridge beside the Tower House may have been first erected in the late medieval period, though it has been reconstructed since.

The town mill lay at the bottom of The Bank and it is possible that the site has been used for milling since the Middle Ages. However, the mill presently occupying the spot dates from the mid-18th century, and there is no positive evidence that points to a predecessor.

Evaluation in 1991 in the open ground between The Bank and Back Lane near Neuadd Felin revealed traces of a medieval building, a cobbled surface and various pits; pottery suggested a 12th- to 13th-century date. Even more significant were the excavations in 1997-98 in the field behind (to the east of) the churchyard which revealed three phases of occupation between the late 12th and early 15th centuries (based on broadly dated pottery types), though with the emphasis on the earlier part of the period. Crop-processing appears to have occurred on site and metalworking was undertaken close by.

The open fields of Talgarth - Brier Common Field and Lowest Common Field - lay on the west side of the Ennig, while Red Common Field was laid out to the north of the church. Some open field strips or selions survived into the 18th century, appearing on estate maps of the area.



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