

TRETOWER

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Introduction

Tretower is situated beside the A479 trunk road, 4km north-west of Crickhowell, just before it meets the highway between Abergavenny and Brecon that runs along the Usk Valley. Influenced by the positioning of a Norman lord's castle, it has grown up close to the valley floor of the Rhiangoll with the settlement on gently sloping ground pressing back against the steeply rising hillside that ascends eastwards to the Black Mountains.

This brief report examines the emergence and development of Tretower 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

Translated Tretower (or Tretŵr) is the 'settlement by the tower'. The earliest mention is as *Trevetour* in 1463 and as *Tretour* in 1479. These are late forms and it seems likely that Tretower, as the centre of the sub-lordship of Ystrad Yw, was referred to by that name in earlier times.

Tretower emerged at the end of the 11th century when Picard one of the followers of Bernard de Neufmarché involved in the Norman expansion into south Wales was granted land in the valley of the Rhiangoll, throwing up a motte and bailey earthwork castle to control the area. No parochial centre was established here, however, and Tretower continued within the ecclesiastical parish of Llanfihangel Cwmdu.

Medieval settlements associated with the more important castles in lordships frequently exhibit a regular layout of streets, evidence of early town planning. Deliberate planning at Tretower is evident in the several streets that are aligned north-east to south-west and which are more obvious on the estate map of 1587 than on today's Ordnance Survey counterparts.

Perhaps as early as the beginning of the 14th century the Bluets (the successors to the Picard family) abandoned the cramped stronghold on the motte and moved to the late medieval defended house known as the Court.

A chapel may have been here in the Middle Ages but if so it served the castle and its settlement and was not parochial, being dependant on the parish church of Cwmdu a couple of miles up the valley.

The village presumably developed only gradually after the Reformation, Leland at that time calling it ‘a smaulle village standing on a little brooke’. It did not become a town in the way that Crickhowell or Talgarth did. Instead it remained small and compact, with little to attract the passing observer whose attention (if Richard Fenton at the beginning of the 19th century is a reliable guide) was drawn to the castle and the court. There are probably now fewer houses here than in the time of the first Queen Elizabeth.



Tretower, photo 87-c-0083 © CPAT, 2013

The heritage to 1750

Tretower Castle began as a motte and bailey earthwork set on a slight natural ridge that ran out onto the marshy valley floor. Generally considered to have been constructed in the years around 1100, it has also been suggested as a pre-Norman (i.e. Welsh) stronghold though this cannot be substantiated. A stone shell keep was constructed on the motte top in the middle of the 12th century, and a tower (keep) and stone-walled bailey were added around 1230 following the castle’s destruction in a civil war. Superseded as a residence by the Court, it was still garrisoned in times of emergency, the last documented occurrence being in 1403 during Glyndŵr’s rebellion. The remains included the ruins of the tower on the motte, some of the bailey wall and the bailey ditch.

Tretower Court, an important fortified manor house designed around a courtyard and adjacent to the castle, is said to have come into existence at the beginning of the 14th century, but it was in the middle of the 15th century that the north and west ranges were constructed (on the evidence of dendrochronology). A gatehouse and a barn on the opposite side of the road were added around 1480.

Rebuilt in 1776 and again in 1876-7 and dedicated to St John the Evangelist, the church may originally have been the chapel that served Tretower Castle and was initially dedicated to St Michael. The latter – as *Sancti Johannis de Straddwy* – was mentioned in a document of 1234, though there can be no certainty that it was on the spot occupied by its Victorian

successor. It thus functioned for centuries as a chapel-of-ease, servient to Cwmdu. No pre-Victorian furnishings and fittings remain, though a medieval stoup lies in the churchyard.

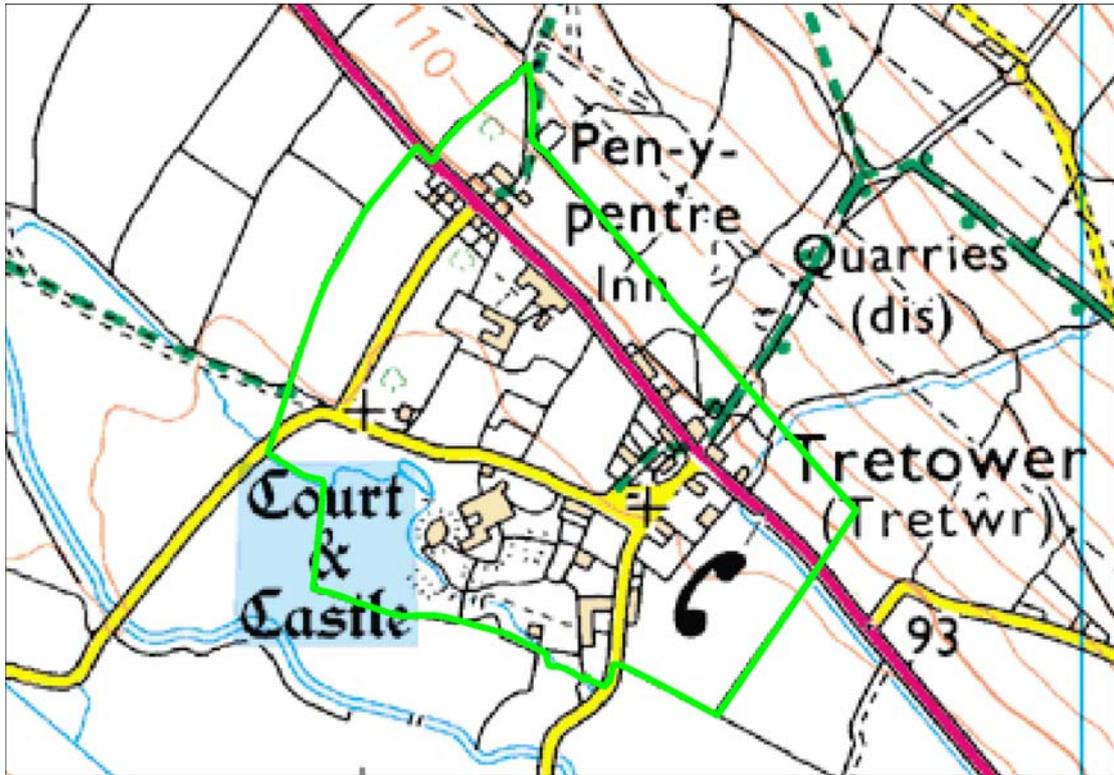
The houses in the modern settlement are quite widely dispersed, but a rather denser grouping of over thirty is portrayed on an estate map of 1587. The pattern is of small irregularly shaped closes, rather than long narrow tenement plots. On the basis of the map, together with slight earthworks in the pasture fields to the north of the castle, it is evident that Tretower was a well established settlement in the late medieval and Tudor eras.

Tretower Court Inn on the main road seems to have originated as a house in the early 17th century with another house added at right-angles in the middle of the century. Wall paints surviving on a chimney breast are probably of this period. It became an inn only in the 19th century. A nearby barn (behind Cross Keys) is considered to date from the late 17th or early 18th century. Tretower House to the south is an 18th-century rebuild of an earlier house, but is absent from the 1587 estate plan. Vine Tree Cottages, also on the main road, formed a single house in the early 17th century, while Penisafpentre on the opposite side of the road is also recorded as having early features though details are sparse. Castle Cottage immediately to the north of the castle could incorporate elements of the dwelling that is shown here in 1587.

It is believed that a mill lay immediately to the south of Tretower Court and was served by a leat, still in existence) that ran past the castle and may have fed the castle moat. The date of this mill is not known and is not shown on any known plan of the village (including that of 1587).

There have been some archaeological works in Tretower in recent years. A probable medieval smithy was located in a field in front of Tyllys Farm in 1997, and more recently an evaluation near St John's Close revealed traces of post-holes and pits perhaps relating to a medieval timber-farmed building.

Ridge and furrow has been detected in several places around the village, notably on the lower slopes of the hillside north-east of the main road, but there can be no certainty that this was formed during the medieval period and it may well be more recent in date. More convincing in the search for medieval cultivation are the strip fields surviving to the north-west and south-east of the village.



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