

Builth Wells

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Introduction

Builth Wells is a small town that has grown up on the north side of the Mynydd Epynt range, at the confluence of the Wye and Irfon rivers.

This brief report examines its emergence and development up to 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 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 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).



Builth Wells castle and medieval town, photo 86-C-0138 © CPAT, 2011

History of development

Although not large, Builth Wells is the only true town in western and northern Brecknock. It has a 13th-century charter and exhibits features typical of many small medieval market towns along the Welsh border. As such it is a characteristically English rather than Welsh settlement.

It takes its anglicised name, Builth, from the ancient cantref in which it is located, appearing as *buellt* in c.1100-03 and as *Buelth* soon after 1176, a name simply meaning 'cow pasture'. Ecclesiastical records from 1254 name it as *Lanveyr* and the parish was still officially Llanfair in Builth into the 19th century. The additional name of 'Wells' was incorporated into the name in the same century, acknowledging its mineral wells at Park Wells and Glannau Wells.

Builth Wells does not appear to have an early medieval (pre-Conquest) origin, and is probably a wholly medieval foundation. It is not known exactly when the town was founded, but the surrounding area was conquered by the Normans in the mid-1090s, and work on the first castle here probably began soon after 1100, presumably controlling a crossing point of the river. The settlement may well have started to develop around this time, though the first reference to a town here is from the year 1217 when Welsh forces seized it from Reginald de Braose.

During the medieval period the town was of some significance as the 'caput' of the lordship of Buellt. It received its borough charter in 1277, and while this is generally considered to be confirming existing privileges rather than establishing new ones it may also reflect a late 13th-century surge in the development and growth of the settlement.

The town was largely rebuilt following a serious fire on 27 December 1690 which destroyed nearly every building, and the majority of the present town dates from the 19th century. This reflects too its rise as a minor local 'spa' during this period.

Builth Wells remains a local market and service centre for much of northern Brecknock and as such has retained its historic function.

The heritage to 1750

Builth Castle, a scheduled ancient monument (1603/SAM B31) is a massive earthwork, a motte and bailey castle with later stone rebuilding and additions. The date of its foundation is not known, though it is assumed to have been built around 1100 by Philip de Braose. The choice of siting is strategic (to guard the Wye crossing), and it is possible that it was established on a virgin site where there was no pre-existing settlement.

Much of the original castle was destroyed by Llwllyn ap Gruffudd in 1260, although damage may already have been inflicted on it during the siege of the town in 1217, and the site may not have been fully refortified until 1276. Between 1277 and 1283 extensive rebuilding was undertaken by Edward I in support of his campaigns in Wales; the work possibly being supervised by his master mason, James of St George. A shell keep, a stone curtain wall with six towers, a defended drawbridge and outer wall were added during this period although the works were never completed, and little is visible of them today.

Much of the stone, lead and timberwork was removed, by the Wallcott family, during the mid-16th century to build White House (on the site now occupied by its 18th-century successor). However, a regular earthwork platform appears to be thrown up against the east side of the defences and this could be a Civil War gun emplacement, although there is no record of the castle having been defended or besieged at this time. Suggestions that it is the corner of a Roman fort can probably be dismissed.

St Mary's church (20160) is traditionally ascribed a Norman build although there is no direct evidence for this. While there would certainly have been a church in Builth during the Norman period its exact site is not known, and the religious needs of the early town might well have been met by the castle chapel (2687) which is recorded as being served by monks from Brecon well into the 13th century. A separate church certainly existed by 1283 when it is recorded as being in dispute with the castle chapel over the numbers of services held at each site, but at this time it appears to have been secondary to Llanddewi'r Cwm for in the *Taxatio* of 1291 it appeared as *Ecclesia de Londewycom and Lanveyr*. The oldest part of the present church is the battlemented tower dating from about 1300. The remainder of the church is the

result of an extensive rebuild of 1873-5. This nave and chancel stand, unusually, to the west of the tower as the earlier structure was only demolished once building work was complete, allowing the church to remain in use during the construction period.

The church stands in a large sub-rectangular churchyard (2688) which reveals no signs of an early medieval origin.

The town reveals two distinct phases of medieval growth from its present topography. The castle occupies the eastern end of a narrow east-west shelf, on the west bank of the Wye. It is approached from the west by Market Street, which follows the natural contour of the land and is now lined with 19th and 20th-century terraced houses. This, it can be argued, is the line of the original medieval street which ran westwards from the castle and would have the earliest town dwellings along it. A second phase of growth is suggested by High Street, Broad Street and perhaps Castle Street. This runs diagonally across the contours, rising gently to meet Market Street where it terminates. It is relatively straight, though there are faint changes in alignment, usually where another lane runs into it, and most of the property boundaries run off it at right angles. There is a more organised layout in evidence here and it is obvious if only from the street names that this thoroughfare became the chief street in Builth: it was in fact a planned development. The town's charter, granted in 1277, may reflect this recent successful growth.

The triangle of land formed by the converging streets is now built over, though the open space of Bank Square edges it on the east. Mid-19th-century maps reveal a different picture, with a lane running northwards off the square, effectively isolating the triangle of land, and the pattern of property boundaries within it display a different appearance from those running off the main streets in the town. This was the market area, an open space, subsequently encroached on in later centuries, but remembered in the name of the street running into it from the east.

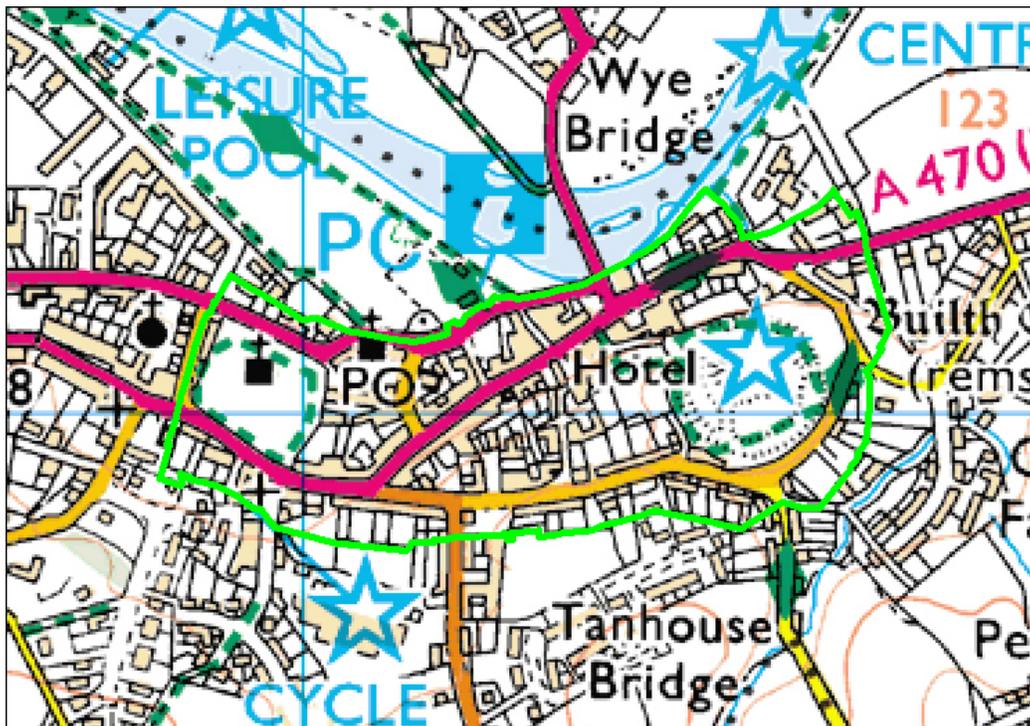
Virtually no medieval or early post medieval building survived the 17th-century fire, and although the town was extensively rebuilt in 1691 most of this historic core was replaced in the 19th century, although many of these Victorian buildings are listed as being of architectural interest. However, the Old Hall on West Street is credited to the 18th century, the Bell Inn on Bank Square is late 18th-century, and it is reputed that only 13-15 High Street survive from before the 1691 fire.

Those areas of the town to the east of the castle and to the west of the church appear to comprise only modern building and are outside the medieval settlement.

The present road bridge across the Wye was constructed in 1779, though Ogilby's *Britannia* from the 1760s indicates an earlier bridge.

Isolated areas of ridge and furrow cultivation (2543) of generally unknown date occur to the south of the town.

In summary, Builth Wells, otherwise known as Llanfair in Builth, originated around the castle above the Wye. Urban growth ran westwards from the castle, but perhaps in the 13th century there was a new and planned phase of development which converged on an open market place. At what point the church was established is not known, but the size of the churchyard implies the settlement was well-established by that time. The historic core of Builth Wells thus comprises the castle to the east, the churchyard to the west and the built-up area between the two.



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