

## Caerwys

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### **Introduction**

Caerwys has generally been termed a town in the past, though in modern times it might have been termed a village. It occupies a broad slightly undulating interfluvium which is a southerly extension of the main limestone plateau that lies to the east of the Clwydian Hills and just inland from the Dee Estuary. Steep-sided valleys cut through the limestone to the east and west of the village, heading to a confluence with the valley of the River Wheeler one kilometre to the south. Limestone outcrops in fields to the south of the settlement, but the settlement itself lies on top of drift deposits including sand and boulder clay.

The village is just under 7km from Holywell to the north-east and 10km from Denbigh to the south-west. The B5122 passes through the settlement joining the main Wheeler Valley route, the A541, one kilometre away.

This brief report examines the emergence and development of Caerwys 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. 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](http://www.archwilio.org.uk)).

### **History of development**

Antiquaries, such as Samuel Lewis speculated that Caerwys lay within a Roman fort, but there is no evidence to support such a view. Similarly, the tradition that there was a church here as early as AD 718 cannot be substantiated. Equally difficult to confirm is another tradition, that Caerwys was the location for an early eisteddfod held by Gruffudd ap Cynan around about the year 1100.

The earliest version of the name is *Cairos* in 1086, which linking the elements *caer* and *wys*, meaning a fortified place. *Kayroys* appears in 1242, *Kayrus* in 1254 and *Kaerwys* in 1297. Glanville Jones, many years ago, suggested that the town of Caerwys was planted within the territories of *Cairos* and *Coiwen*, the former being a berewick (or outlying part of a farm or manor) of Rhuddlan at the time of Domesday which could have been some distance from the present village.

The first charter, terming it the 'king's town' and giving the same privileges to the borough as Conway and Ruthin, was granted to Caerwys by Edward I in 1290, but there can be no doubt that a community already existed here. A reference to the 'men of Kayroys' in 1242 and the fact that in 1244 the church was chosen by the Pope for two Welsh abbots to adjudicate on a treaty is evidence enough. Furthermore, the incumbent was named as *Jervase rector capelle de Kerwys* in 1284. Thus it is generally accepted that a small native vill existed here or in the

vicinity, and that it was reorganised and perhaps enlarged in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century, with Welshmen encouraged by the king to settle here. It seems likely that the earlier settlement was centred around the church in the south-western sector of the later planned town.



*Caerwys, photo 08-c-0232, © CPAT, 2012*

Borough status was accompanied by the laying out of a very regular street plan and the town is believed to have spread over about 32 acres in 1300. The market place lay in the centre with the church covering part of the south-west quadrant. In 1292 documentary records indicate that 43 taxpayers, 39 with Welsh names, lived in the town, with a further 37 in the out-township. These references have suggested to one authority that the Welsh settlement around the church was of some importance, confirmed by the Pope's decision to hold a meeting there, and that borough status was subsequently conferred on it by the charter of 1290 when the town was enlarged. This is now viewed as a purely commercial venture, the plantation lacking any defensive capability. Its commercial importance in the 14<sup>th</sup> century was underlined by grants of a weekly market and annual fair, but royal accounts reveal that it yielded considerably less revenue to the royal coffers in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century than Rhuddlan or Flint. The hundred court from Rhuddlan also met here on occasions.

Glyndŵr attacked the town in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century and it may be that its decline commenced after this date.

Assize courts were held in the town until 1672 when they were transferred to Mold. Edward Lhuyd at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century noted that Caerwys had the only corn market in the county, and some 60 houses, making it about half the size of Mold and Holywell. A century later Pennant considered it was mouldering away with age. The fair and market ceased to be held after the early 19<sup>th</sup> century; a town hall and old gaol survived into the second quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the latter now converted into a dwelling.

The gridiron pattern of streets was never fully built up. If an estate map of 1717 is a guide, not only to the early 18<sup>th</sup> century but also perhaps to what was settled a century or more earlier,

then houses spread out along the four streets radiating from the market place, while Drovers Lane and Holywell Road to the north and Chapel Street to the south had far fewer dwellings along them.

Housing in the north-east corner of the settlement area only appeared in the 1970s, and another estate has developed to the west of the church.

### ***The heritage to 1750***

St Michael's church (19903) consists of a nave and a later chancel and a north aisle, with a western tower which is thought to date to the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the nave being of similar date. An arched-braced roof is also likely to be medieval. Internal furnishings and fittings include a decorated tomb recess and an earlier (13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> century), though incomplete, female effigy, an interesting range of 14<sup>th</sup> century sepulchral slabs, some medieval stained glass fragments, some 17<sup>th</sup> century wooden furnishings including the pulpit and an altar table, and a font which was installed immediately after the Restoration of Charles II.

The churchyard (19904) is quadrilateral in shape with rounded corners on the south, a modern extension to the east, and only a slight internal rise in height above the general ground level. There is no evidence of an earlier curvilinear *llan*, either from ground evidence or from earlier maps. The lychgate incorporates part of a pre-Reformation oak frame.

East of the town is Erw'r Castell (102518), a name which goes back at least to c.1700. The mound is 30m in diameter and approximately 2.5m high. Views differ as to whether this is a man-made earthwork or a mound of natural origin. The place-name specialists have used it, perhaps a little unwisely, as an explanation for the place-name, but the most recent field visit by an archaeologist (in 1999) branded it natural, and it was completely ignored by Cathcart King, one of the leading castle specialists in his survey of the castles of Flintshire. The same name is found as a field name to the north of the village (102723) but nothing of any antiquity is visible.

A reputedly holy well – Ffynnon Mihangel (102445) – lies in Maesmynan Wood to the west of the town, utilising a large natural basin in the limestone. Edward Lhuyd referred to it at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

There are a few pre-1750 houses in the town. Old Court (40923) is an early 17<sup>th</sup> century, two-storey former court house with mullioned windows at the rear and a 19<sup>th</sup> century porch. It is Grade II\* listed. It has been argued that it may be the site of a court of the Welsh princes. In the early 15<sup>th</sup> century there was rebuilding work by the Mostyn family and their manorial courts were held here, and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was a public house. A nearby property, Pendre, late 17<sup>th</sup> century in date, was demolished in 1981. The Rectory (40921), near the church should be 17<sup>th</sup> century or early 18<sup>th</sup> century on the evidence of its gable end, and was enlarged in 1753. Glasfryn Lodge (40915) is an 18<sup>th</sup> century cottage at the southern end of South Street, while Bell House (98540) on the market-place cross-roads is believed to be a partly timber-framed 17<sup>th</sup> century town house. The Piccadilly Inn at the end of North Street is said to date from 1662, and was certainly on Badeslade's map of 1742.

The medieval street pattern has been referred to above and survives in all its essentials, with a very regular layout. Two north to south streets intersect with three running east to west and an additional one, now Chapel Street, stopping at South Street. The market place lay where the main streets intersect at the heart of the town. Of a market cross (98539), nothing is known, although there is the local tradition of one. A full discussion can be found at [http://ads.ahds.ac.uk/catalogue/specColl/atlas\\_ahrb\\_2005/atlas.cfm?town=caerwys](http://ads.ahds.ac.uk/catalogue/specColl/atlas_ahrb_2005/atlas.cfm?town=caerwys), based on survey work in 2004.

The eastern side of the town was bounded by an area of open common, already being encroached on by housing in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. It is possible, too, that another, smaller area of common lay immediately to the south of the church, though in the 19<sup>th</sup> century this was labelled as glebe land. And the layout of this part of the town may have been modified in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, if the 1717 map can be relied on.

Caerwys had at least two pinfolds, walled enclosures in which straying stock were impounded. That on Drovers Lane is listed and is attributed to the third quart of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (98451), but an earlier pinfold lay in North Street close to the Piccadilly Inn and was depicted on the map of 1742 (120439).

A plot of land fronting on to High Street and immediately north of the churchyard was evaluated in 1993 and subjected to a watching brief in 1995. The back wall of a pre-19<sup>th</sup> century building was encountered, though no evidence of medieval activity was recovered.

A low mound (102511) in the south-west corner of a field immediately to the south of the churchyard (and referred to as glebe land above) is 0.3m high and about 10m in diameter. It has been claimed as a prehistoric barrow, but is not convincing and could be part of a natural ridge.



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