Flint

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Introduction

The site for Flint Castle beside the tidal estuary of the River Dee was selected because a sandstone outcrop rises about the coastal levels which provided a firm foundation and in addition benefited from access to the sea. Though a headland, there was room behind the castle for the town to be laid out. Modern Flint sprawls beside the A548 coast road. Chester is about 19km to the east, Mold 9km to the south.

This brief report examines the emergence and development of Flint 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).

History of development

Flint is first recorded as *Le Flynt* in 1277 and retained the prefix in one form or another until the 17th century. Recent place-name authorities point out that in Middle English 'flint' meant 'hard rock'.

Flint Castle was the first of Edward I's castles in Wales. Castle and town were commenced during his Welsh campaign, in a location designed to be supplied by land or sea and at a point where the fortification could control a crossing of the Dee Estuary. Construction work commenced in 1277 and a Welsh attack was beaten off in 1282, building work continuing intermittently until the end of the century.

The town was planned and laid out on a grid pattern, and was already in existence in 1278, a good example of a new town where there was no pre-existing settlement and no real constraints on design. Indeed, it has been argued that the medieval town was the most symmetrical of the new towns of medieval Britain. From the start, the town was provided with defences.

A weekly market and annual fair was established at Flint in 1278, and its borough charter was granted in 1284.

It was built on land belonging to the manor of Coleshill Fechan and this is reflected in the name *Colsul Chapel* originally given to the chapel in Flint. In the 1291 Taxation this was a dependent chapelry of Northop, referred to as *Ecclesia de Llanewrgan cum capella sua de Flynd*.

Flint , photo 08-c-0189, © CPAT, 2012

Flint was badly affected during the Welsh War of 1294-95, being deliberately set on fire by the constable of the castle. The damage amounted to around £300.

The borough charter was confirmed by Edward, Prince of Wales in 1360 and this defined the boundaries which were those still recognised for the municipal borough at the beginning of the 20th century.

Seventy to eighty householders were settled in the town in the 1290s and it has been assumed that the medieval population of Flint reached a peak early in the 14th century. Revenue to the crown of around £36 per year at this time suggests a flourishing community. But by the second half of the 14th century the town was in decline and early in the 15th century, considerable damage was inflicted on it during the Glyndŵr rebellion. Recovery was only partial.

Flintshire as a shire had emerged in 1284 through the Statute of Rhuddlan. In the 16th century Flint became the centre of the county, replacing Rhuddlan as the administrative focus. Nevertheless, it was another Welsh community in decline. John Speed's plan of 1610 depicts a relatively sparsely populated town with large areas within the defences free of houses, and only a few properties outside the defences. In all, only 65 buildings other than the church and castle were depicted, though his working drawing from 1607 has 104 and is potentially a more reliable source of information. In 1653, J. Taylor (quoted in Carter 1965) 'recorded that the castle was buried beneath its ruins and the town was almost empty, "they have no saddler, tailor, weaver, brewer, baker, butcher, or butter-maker, there was not so much as the sign of an ale house" '.

Edward Lhuyd in the late 17th century recorded 66 houses in Flint, curiously similar to the figure computed from Speed.

18th-century maps reveal a similar picture to that of Speed. One of 1740 is particularly useful, but others of 1770/71 and 1799 are also informative, especially the latter which shows the gaol and a smelting works. Growth really began only in the late 18th century with coal exporting and the development of industries such as lead smelting. Flint became a port for the export of coal and an industrial district emerged on the northern edge of the medieval town. A drawing of 1800 by Parkes still shows the church surrounded by open ground and gardens.

In 1812 the Reverend J. Evans recorded that the walls and ramparts of the town had been obliterated, and he also claimed that 'though originally laid out, [the streets] are so broken by dilapidated walls or removed houses as to give the idea of an irregularly built place'.

The construction of the Holyhead to Chester Railway by 1849 disrupted the medieval street pattern and resulted in the creation of Corporation Street. Already some infilling had occurred, for the market place had disappeared by the time of the Tithe survey.

Vessels could still reach the castle into the 19th century.

The heritage to 1750
Flint Castle (100325) was completed in the mid-1280s, with further work in the early 14th century. The inner ward had a curtain wall with circular towers attached at all corners apart from the south-east where a free-standing great tower or donjon was built externally, to command the entrance to the inner ward. The outer ward of the castle was formerly protected by a moat, and a small fragment of the outer gatehouse survives. The castle was dismantled after being surrendered to Parliament in 1646. The County Gaol was erected in the outer ward in 1784/85 and demolished in 1969.

The town was surrounded by earthen defences (100330): a ditch up to 13.7m wide and 2.7m deep, and double banks (shown clearly on Speed's plan) purportedly surmounted by palisades. Gateways into the town were constructed on each of the four sides, but the form that these took has not been established.

Soulsby (1983) argues that the perimeter is represented now by Earl Street on the north-west, Coleshill and Chapel Streets on the south-west and Duke Street on the south-east. These, however, should be seen as intramural roads with the defences immediately outside them. Lengths of the ditch could apparently still be traced in 1912, and a section through the town ditch was cut at the south-west end of Duke Street in the early 1970s. The only discernible sign now is a slight drop in some plots on the north-west side of Earl Street, although other surface indications appear to have been recorded in the recent past. The defences on the north-east side of the town are shown as a curving perimeter only on Speed's plan and may represent artistic licence. These are not fossilised in the modern landscape but must underlie the housing estate north of the railway line.
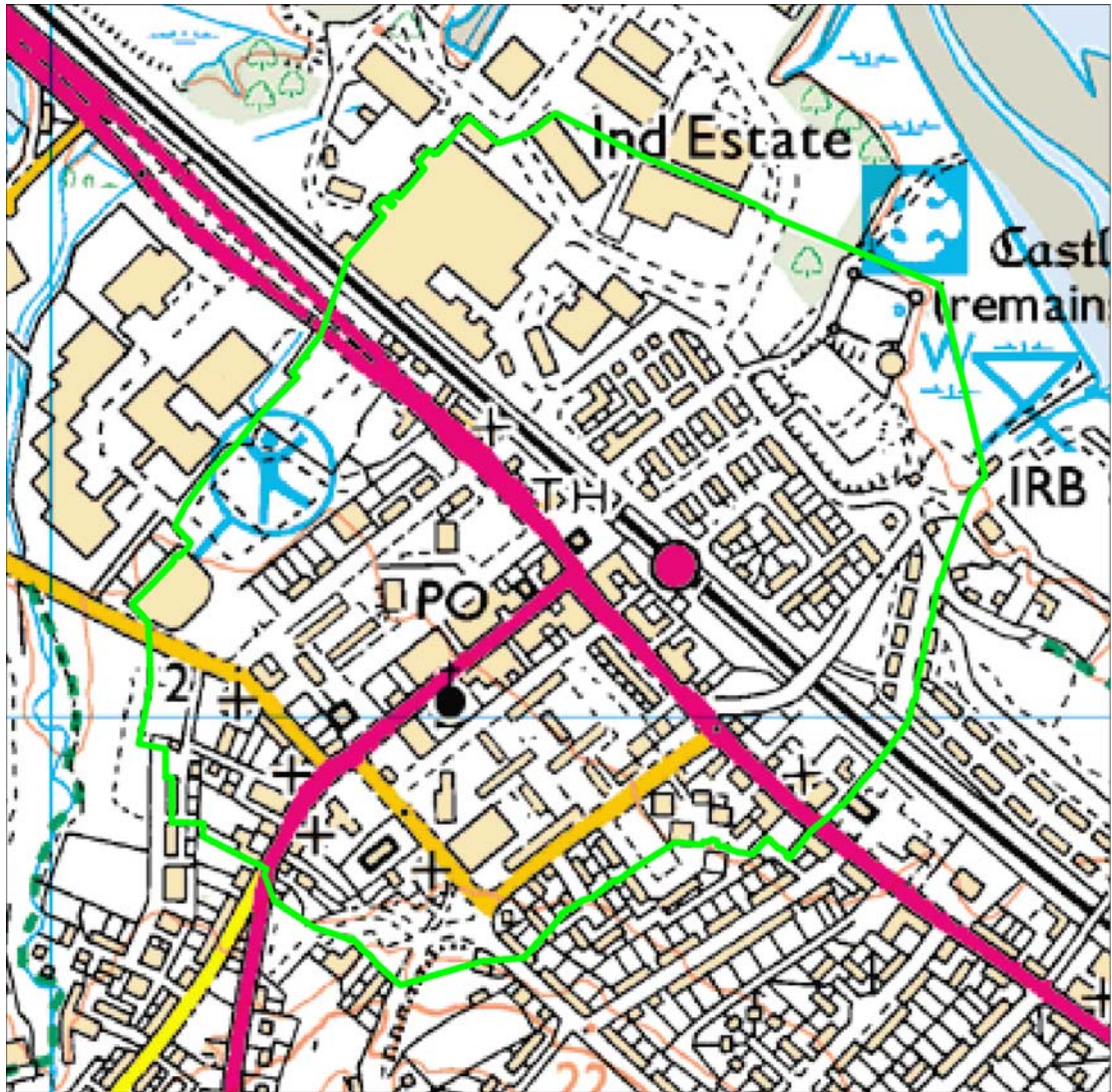
There were six parallel streets running north-east/south-west and one cross-route. The present Church Street was the principal thoroughfare, running south-west from the castle and edging the market place. The latter lay at the intersection with the other main street, that from Chester to Holywell and beyond. Notwithstanding this, the pattern was not entirely regular. Early maps (1610; 1740; 1770/1) reveal not only the market place, which on the earliest map was occupied by a tree and the town stocks, and a building presumably a market hall immediately to the south-east, but open areas to the north-west and south-east as well. The Tithe map of 1839 implies that these open spaces had been swept away prior to the construction of the railway.

A further castle - a motte (100323) - was formerly claimed on Chester Street but has now been built over. Identified by Ellis Davies as a castle mound with a ditch, the Ordnance Survey recorded it as a building platform or natural feature, and Cathcart King considered it 'only a moated site'. It is difficult to envisage how either a motte or a moat might fit within the likely sequence of development of the townscape at Flint.

A field named 'Cae Mount' noted by RCHAMW (102708) was said to have been largely destroyed by the railway; a contradictory report, however, in 1940 states that it was still intact as a plot of ground reserved for building, just to the south of the main Chester road, some 500 yards slightly west or south from the castle and within 100 yards of the town defences. It was considered a castle mound of unusual type and was thought to be a temporary castle. Nothing remains today, as far as can be ascertained.

St Mary's church (100329) occupies the site of its medieval predecessor, but the building itself is entirely Victorian and later structure, erected in 1846-8, altered in 1923-4 and extended in 1931-5. It is large with a north-west tower and an octagonal spire. All the internal features are of the 19th century, except for an altar table of 1660 and a single architectural fragment from the earlier church which has been preserved. Because of the conventional east to west alignment of churches, St Mary's lies at an angle to the main axis of the town. A drawing of the medieval church, executed in 1800, is reproduced in the Royal Commission's *Inventory* of 1912.

A cross (100327) stood in the churchyard until 1847. The shaft and pedestal were destroyed but the crosshead survived, displaying a mutilated crucifixion scene. It is supposed to have been built into the end wall of a catholic chapel in the town. The base was rediscovered during evaluation work between 1992 and 1994.