

Holywell

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Introduction

Holywell lies towards the head of the Greenfield stream which cuts a notch into the northern flank of a block of undulating table land extending from Halkyn Mountain. The church and the holy well itself are set close to the base of a steep-sided if shallow valley while the town to the south covers sloping land which then rises steeply up to Holywell Common.

A series of major and minor roads converge on Holywell, and this nodal point is also bypassed by the A55 trunk road no more than one kilometre to the south-west. Mold is 13km to the south-east, and the Vale of Clwyd a similar distance to the west.

This brief report examines the emergence and development of Holywell 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

In the 7th century St Winefrid (or Winifred or in Welsh Gwenfrewi) is reputed to have been martyred and then miraculously restored to life by St Beuno, her uncle: a holy well marks the spot where her head came to rest. A second well associated with St Beuno himself, lay close by.

St Beuno supposedly founded a small church here, and in the early medieval period it has been suggested that Holywell became a daughter church of the mother church at Whitford, though the historic basis for the link is tenuous.

Adeliza, the wife of the Earl of Chester, gave the 'churche of *Haliwel*' – the first record of the place name – to St Werburgh's Abbey in Chester in 1093, and in the early part of the following century this gift seems to have been confirmed by Burel who gave to the abbey 'the churche of Halywelle with the tithes of his mill and all his substance'.

After 1093 the place-name occurs fairly regularly in medieval documents. *Halywelle* is recorded in 1284 and *Holywell* for the first time in 1465. The Welsh equivalent, *Treffynnon*, meaning 'village' or 'settlement of the well' is first documented in 1329.

The first recorded reference to the shrine of Winefrid, as a place of pilgrimage, was in 1115. The well belonged to nearby Basingwerk Abbey from 1240 until the Dissolution, and the development of a settlement, probably in the 13th century, as well as the establishment of a

market, owed much to the commercial acumen of the abbey. There is, however, no evidence that Holywell achieved borough status.

The Middle Ages also saw the expansion of mining, particularly for lead, on the plateau to the south. References occur from 1302 and by the early 14th century there was an established mining community with its own privileges. This presumably assisted the growth of Holywell as a market town.

It has been suggested by Soulsby (1983) that the medieval market town developed around the church and that High Street represents the core of the modern town. Such a view cannot be justified. The position of St James' church and the holy well is topographically very cramped, and it was standard practice in the Middle Ages to create plantations at a distance from existing ecclesiastical centres where the circumstances warranted. Although there is little information on the settlement's development during the medieval period and after, there can be little doubt that the new commercial centre was laid out with High Street as the focus, and with the main thoroughfare running between Hawarden in the east and Rhuddlan out to the west. New Road which runs past the church was just that. It was probably added in the 18th century as the Greenfield Valley became increasingly important as an industrial centre.

Edward Lhuyd claimed in 1699 that there were 120 houses and cottages in the town, yet Thomas Pennant wrote at the end of the 18th century that 'it was very inconsiderable, the houses few and those for the most part thatched, the streets unpaved and the place destitute of a market'. It is difficult to reconcile these two conflicting statements.

Real expansion occurred because of the growth in the textile and metallurgical industries sited close by in the 18th century, and by 1800 Holywell had emerged as a reasonably sized settlement. A weekly market operated during the 1830s as "one of the largest and best supplied in North Wales" [Lewis].

The shrine and chapel have had a chequered history in recent centuries. Damage to the monument occurred from the 18th century and restoration was completed only in 1976. Mining operations on Halkyn cut off the water supply to the spring in 1917 and it was reconnected to another supply, resulting in a lesser flow of water.

The heritage to 1750

St Beuno's well (102410) formerly consisted of a pool of water, partially enclosed by a stone wall. Now there is just a large, irregular hollow with little evidence of water in it.

St Winefrid's well consists of a well chamber open to the north with a bath in front. The polygonal well chapel (102417) forms an upper storey to the well chamber. It was probably built about 1490 (or c1500-1510 according to another authority) by Margaret Beaufort, the mother of Henry VII and contains fine architectural features with elaborate roof vaulting. 'It is architecturally a nationally important late Perpendicular building and historically is a major place of pilgrimage, the only shrine in Britain to have survived the Reformation' (Cadw).

St James' church (102416) is situated on the side of a spur where it projects as a shelf into the valley near St Winefrid's well, and according to Edward Lhuyd was originally dedicated to St Winefrid. The body of the 14th century church was rebuilt in 1769-70 on the site of an earlier church. The west tower has some Perpendicular details and it is claimed that some possible Norman features have been retained in situ, but it is generally attributed to the 14th or 15th century. The church was restored in 1885, and a semi-circular apse added. There is a late 13th century effigy of a priest, and 17th and 18th century monuments, as well as a curated group of 18th century objects that includes a hand bell and a bassoon.

The churchyard is now an irregularly shaped area without a clearly defined boundary on the east. Records reveal that it was enlarged in 1815, and an earlier plan of 1800 appears to depict a smaller, partially curvilinear enclosure, extending east of the church into an area now covered with dense vegetation. On the other hand the perimeter did not extend so far south as today, and instead there was a broad open space where lanes converged, with a building of unknown function in the centre.

A motte, Bryn y Castell (102418), consisting of a mutilated mound less than 1.8m high is located at the north end of a steep-sided promontory and lies directly above the church. This could be the site of Treffynnon Castle reportedly built by the Earl of Chester in 1210. The adjacent house of the same name was constructed in 1704.

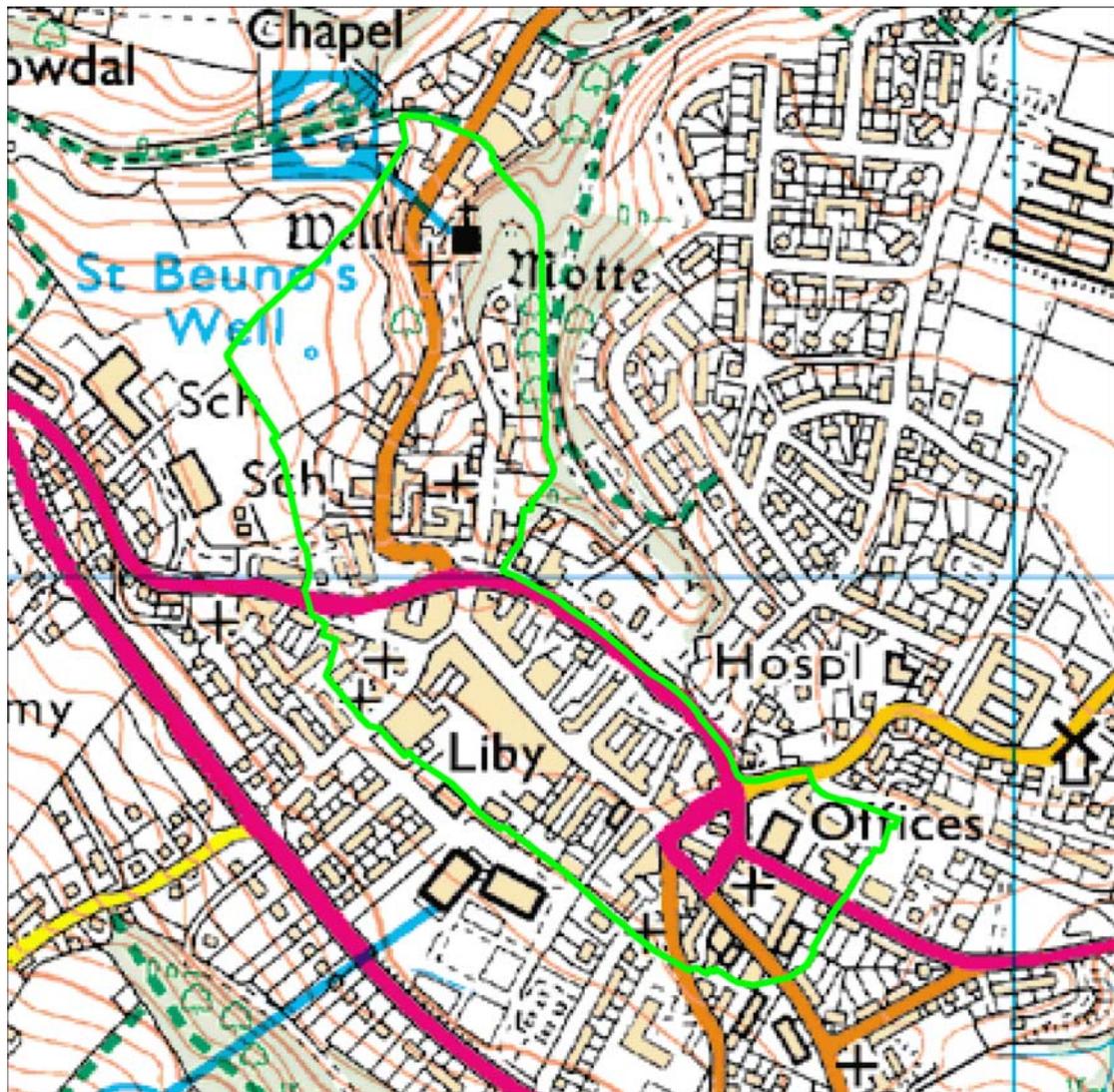
Various mills were owned by Basingwerk Abbey, and it has been argued that its corn-mill in the upper part of the Greenfield Valley was close to Holywell church. It appears to be based on the assumption that the industrial works of the 19th century had a medieval predecessor.

The layout of the earlier market town has been complicated by the construction of new roads, notably the inner bypass north and east of High Street, Halkyn Street, Fron Park Road to the south-west, and the regular layout of lanes between the latter and High Street. Nevertheless, the underlying pattern is quite evident and is clearly depicted on John Wood's map of Holywell (1833) and on the tithe survey. High Street is shown as a broad thoroughfare and perhaps may have been used as a market place in past centuries. Two lanes converged at its south-east end. At the opposite end, two lanes, Well Street and New Road, led down to the Greenfield valley, the latter on the basis of its name being a late addition to the townscape, and others led off to Whitford and to Holywell Common. It might be noted too that the early 19th century maps show a number of buildings in their own plots beyond the eastern perimeter of the churchyard. These have the appearance of squatters' dwellings.

High Street displays frequent Georgian building fronts, many of them listed, but earlier structures appear to be largely absent. On or close to the High Street, no 2 is attributed to the late 17th or early 18th century (31346), no 6 is dated to 1702, 3 Cross Street could be late 17th century, while at the other end of High Street, Vron Chambers is early 18th century. On Well Street which links the town to the church, 1 Well Street (31369) is reportedly a Georgian enlargement of a 17th century building, No 3 Well Street may be a much altered 17th century house, and No 8 Well Street (31373) was probably built in the later 16th century, but was remodelled in the 19th century. The vicarage on Well Street (31372), though built in 1760, was erected on the site of an earlier structure, and the Presbytery at the Roman Catholic Church on Well Street was originally a public house, Ye Olde Star, and retains some late 17th century features.

Traces of earlier field systems have been noted at several places around the town. Lynchets of slight form (102406) and now built over lay on the west side of the town. Strip fields on the east side of the Greenfield valley (102408) were levelled during World War II and the area has now been covered by housing, and other strips off to the south-east of the town have largely been amalgamated into larger fields.

Metal detector finds at Holywell (17591) include medieval coins, a gold ring, copper alloy buckles and belt fittings, lead spindle whorls and also some medieval ridge tiles.



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