

Caersws

SO 0309 9190
25003

Introduction

Caersws lies on the A470(T) in central Montgomeryshire, just under 8km to the west of Newtown. The village occupies a low-lying spot beside the Severn, a short distance below its confluence with a tributary, the River Carno. Modern housing development extends over a finger-like spur of slightly higher ground protruding south-westwards from the valley slopes, but this is separated from the earlier village by the Manthrig Brook. This village core, like its predecessor in the Roman period, occupies a gravel terrace just above the flood plain of the river and the presence of a flood defence bank on the west, south and east testifies to the problems inherent in the location.

This brief report examines Caersws's emergence and development up to 1750, and has benefited from most useful discussions with the leading medieval historian, Dr David Stephenson. 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 provides 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).



Caersws, photo 06-c-0028, © CPAT, 2012

History of development

The modern village overlies one of the two important Roman military complexes in Montgomeryshire (SAM Mont 001) and a nodal point for several Roman roads. The degree to which the presence of the former fort and its civilian *vicus* influenced the siting of the medieval and late medieval settlement.

The name reputedly means the 'fort of Swys', an otherwise unknown figure but traditionally a queen, Swys Wen (with *gwen* = 'fair'). How much credence we should attach to the tradition we leave you, the reader, to decide. Possibly, someone made use of the fort defences here in the centuries after the Roman withdrawal. But perhaps it is antiquarian invention based on readings of late medieval Welsh bardic poetry.

The earliest reference to the name comes in 1470-1 as *Kairesosse*, and then over the next one hundred years as *Kaersoy*s (1478) and *Kaer Sws* (between 1545 and 1553). Such late dates for a town or borough do little to encourage a critical acceptance of its existence.

Samuel Lewis in the first half of the 19th century claimed both a castle and a church at Caersws in earlier times, as this was the residence of the lords of Arwystli. No traces of the castle have ever been recognised in the village, nor is there confirmatory evidence of the church. Lewis is not the most reliable of sources, but were the castle reference to be authentic, one of the two motte-and-bailey castles on the further side of the Severn might be a candidate.

That there is no solid evidence for a medieval church at Caersws and that the settlement lay within the ecclesiastical parish of Llanwnog argues against an early origin. This is reinforced by the location adjacent to the parish boundary. It has been assumed by some authorities that a medieval town was established at Caersws, the regular pattern of streets suggesting a planned borough, yet the date of its establishment is unknown and no foundation charter survives. An origin in the late 12th or early 13th century has been postulated but again this seems unlikely given the absence of documentary references.

Nevertheless, there are some relevant references from later centuries. George Owen of Henllys writing at the end of the 16th century claimed that Caersws had been incorporated (as a market centre) by Lord Tiptoft in the second or third quarter of the 15th century. John Leland in the 1530s noted 'yet at poore Cairllews hath bene a Market and Borow privilegid', and a deed of 1596 refers to a burghage in the town. This all suggests a late beginning and a settlement then that was already in decline in the early 16th century, probably because of the proximity of the better established market at Llanidloes. It was, though, still referred to as a borough throughout the 16th century.

Whether the street pattern is a relic of this late medieval market settlement remains to be determined, though it is difficult to identify a later occasion on which it could have been created. By the middle of the 19th century when Caersws was first mapped there was a scatter of houses along Main Street, Severn Street and one or two on Manthrig Lane. It is a layout more akin to the sporadic survival of tenements from a denser pattern, than of a settlement gradually expanding from a small core, and this strengthens the argument for a regularly laid out market centre late in the Middle Ages.

The heritage to 1750

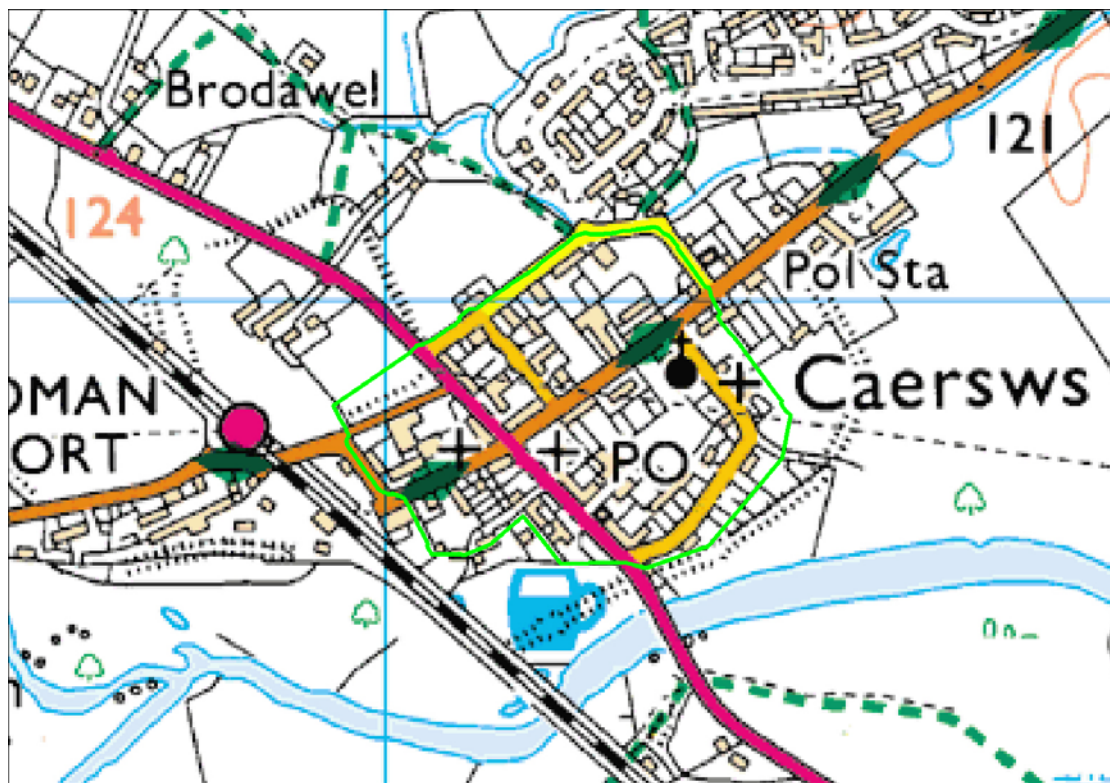
No buildings have been listed within the built up area, but there are two or three half-timbered structures, perhaps of 17th or early 18th century origin, including Bran-Llan (20520), the Buck Hotel and some cottages off Bridge Street. The church of St Mary (7708) was constructed during the 19th century and thus falls outside the remit of this report.

Despite considerable archaeological activity in Caersws over the last twenty years very little information on the medieval settlement has been recovered and artefacts relevant to the period have been almost non-existent. One possible explanation, that there is little correlation between those areas targeted for examination, primarily because of their Roman potential, and the most likely areas of medieval activity along existing street frontages, is not wholly convincing.

The absence of any buildings earlier than the 17th century and the lack of any datable material from excavations that could be attributed to the Middle Ages are sufficient grounds to question whether there was a medieval town here. However, the grid pattern of streets, a feature primarily associated with medieval town planning, cannot be readily explained.

The flood alleviation banks (7709) are generally assumed to be post-medieval though there is no direct evidence that this is the case. The possibility of a medieval precursor is remote but cannot be wholly ruled out.

Traces of possible ridge and furrow cultivation have been noted in a field to the north of Meini-Cochion on the northern periphery of the settlement. Even if the traces are authentic, they may be very difficult to attribute a date to.



Reproduced by permission of Ordnance Survey® on behalf of HMSO. © Crown copyright and database right 2009. All rights reserved. Welsh Assembly Government. Licence number 100017916.