

Montgomery

SO 0223 9652
15740

Introduction

The town of Montgomery is approximately equidistant from two of the major towns of mid-Wales, Newtown and Welshpool, the former lying about 10km to the west-south-west, while the latter is a similar distance to the north. It is positioned on the north-eastern slope of a range of hills, where they meet an area of undulating lowland bounded on its other sides by the Camlad and Caebitra rivers. The valley of the Severn lies to the west with the river itself a little over 2km to the north-east at its nearest.

The local topography is the key to both the origin and form of Montgomery. The castle occupies a pronounced rocky ledge projecting from the hills immediately to the west and commands both the approach to the important crossing of the Severn at Rhyd Chwima (Rhydwhyman) and more generally the low lands that offer access from the valleys eastwards into England to the valley of the Severn. The layout of the town is dictated by the dry valley below the castle ridge and the parallel spur of ground beyond.

This brief report examines Montgomery's 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 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).

History of development

Known in Welsh as Trefaldwyn, both this and its English counterpart were attached to Hen Domen (or Old Montgomery), the motte and bailey closer to the Severn, and then transferred to the present town of Montgomery in 1223. In Domesday Book the motte was called Castrum Muntgumeri after its lord, Roger de Montgomery, Earl of Shrewsbury, whose home on the opposite side of the Channel was Sainte Germain de Montgommeri in Normandy. Gastell baldwin is recorded in c.1170, a reference either to Baldwin de Bollers who was granted possession of Montgomery in the early 12th century, or his grandson, another Baldwin. Trefaldwyn is first recorded in 1440.

Montgomery castle (or perhaps more accurately New Montgomery) was constructed by Henry III as a strategic stronghold on the Welsh border from 1223, its location commended by Mathew Paris, the 13th century monk-cum-chronicler from St Albans, as ideal 'for the erection of an impregnable castle'. The spot was less suitable for the development of a town, however, but the king issued a safe conduct to all who would bring victuals for sale to the castle, promising the liberties enjoyed by the burgesses of Shrewsbury to those who would settle there. Montgomery was thus conceived as a plantation town, created at much the same

time as the castle, and it received its charter in 1227, which included provision for the enclosure of the town with defences (though a murage grant of 1267 with others subsequently up until 1336, suggests that the town may not have been provided with its stone wall until later in the 13th century). By 1224, too, a parish had been carved out of the old Saxon parish of Chirbury to support the new church.

The castle's strategic importance may have declined in the 14th century but it was maintained to a high standard by the Mortimer family, perhaps as a border stronghold. The town, however, thrived and the population of the borough expanded through the 13th and into the 14th century. A weekly market was held in Broad Street and there were four annual fairs. However, its strategic location at a distance from the Severn may have hindered its commercial development. The rise of Newtown and Welshpool, both on the river, created rival market towns in superior locations and in 1279 Welshpool's market and fairs were temporarily removed by royal charter because of the damage they were doing to Montgomery's prosperity.

Not surprisingly, Montgomery went into decline in the late medieval period. The king's antiquary, John Leland, noted the 'great ruines of the [town] waulle' around 1540, remarking that the town had suffered during the Glyndŵr rebellion. Yet the castle retained some significance – in the first half of the 16th century, the President of the Council in Wales and the Marches referred to it as 'the second key of Wales', the first being Ludlow. Large areas of the town, particularly in the northern part, were devoid of buildings in 1610-11 when John Speed published his plan of the town, although it was still ranked as one of the more important settlements in the Principality. This was no doubt partly because the town was accorded the status of county town to the newly created Montgomeryshire in the Act of Union between England and Wales instituted by Henry VIII in 1536. Unlike the other towns of Montgomeryshire it did not develop an industrial base during the post-medieval centuries and as a consequence its growth was stunted.



Montgomery, photo 04-c-0083, © CPAT, 2012

The heritage to 1750

The castle (169; SAM Mont022) was at times a royal castle and as such is particularly well-documented. It consisted of a massive tower, strong gatehouse and a curtain wall. Substantial masonry remains are still in evidence together with the earthworks of two baileys. A fine guide to the castle was produced by Cadw in 2004.

St Nicholas' church (30519; Grade I Listing) was first mentioned in 1227 and may have been started at much the same time as the castle, initially as a chapel dependent on the priory at nearby Chirbury. It is a large, single-chamber edifice with transepts and a tower off the north transept. The nave is the original early 13th century structure, the transepts added later in the same century. The fine roofs, hammerbeam in the nave and wagon in the chancel, are 15th and 16th century. The internal furnishings are amongst the most interesting in Montgomeryshire and include two screens together, a rood loft, choir stalls with their misericords, the font, two piscinae, and effigies of the 15th and 16th centuries. Tradition has it that many of the wooden carvings were brought from Chirbury priory. Restoration took place in 1816 when the tower was replaced, with further works in 1877-8.

The churchyard is large and rectangular with an interesting range of memorials.

The town defences (170; SAM Mont023) which were in place by the 1250s survive intermittently as earthworks, either as a ditch or scarp on the north, east and south, and more completely on the west as a considerable bank and ditch linked in with the castle defences. An in-depth study was published in 1940, confirming the former existence of a stone wall, although it has been argued that initially there was a wooden palisade which was replaced by the wall in 1279. Buried and overgrown stone foundations remain in a few places, and over 20m was exposed in 1995-7 near Arthur Gate. Towers were constructed at various points along the perimeter and the positions of four gates are known with varying degrees of precision, amongst them Arthur[']s Gate on the north side which was still standing in the early 17th century when Speed surveyed the town, the name a corruption of the area name, Gorddwr. It is generally considered that these defences had reached their final form by the end of the 13th century. Limited excavations in the grounds of Crogbren have revealed the line of the town ditch in the south-west corner of the town.

The grid pattern of streets which is one of the defining characteristics of the planted town is recognisable only at the southern end of Montgomery in the vicinity of the church and market. Further north the natural landform necessitates a less regular layout. The location also meant that all traffic was filtered into the town from the north or the south. The focus was a wide open area at the centre of the town that formed the market area. Now Broad Street, it extended uphill behind the town hall and beyond the well which, from the prominence given to it on Speed's map of 1606/7, was probably the main water supply in the town. A market hall appears to have lain lengthways along the centre of Broad Street in the early 17th century with, perhaps, a market cross adjacent, but this was perhaps replaced by the town hall in a more imposing position and on a different alignment in 1748. A second open area, larger than what might be considered normal within a town lies in the northern half of the town where the four main through roads meet. Did this have some special function, perhaps as a green where livestock could be corralled, or is it little more than an indication that there was less pressure on space than in the southern half of the town where all the historic maps that are available imply a higher density of population.

The nature of the medieval buildings and their accompanying grounds is poorly understood. Typical of planned towns, long narrow burgage plots are still distinguishable in some parts of the town, notably off Princes Street and Broad Street. And of the range of trades and industries that might have occurred in the town we currently know very little, but there appears to have been a flourishing local pottery industry.

However, excavations on a plot beside Pool Road (5412) in 1984 and 1987 revealed the superimposed plans of two timber houses with a yard behind. Occupation began in the 13th century and seems to have ceased early in the 15th century after which the plot remained empty. Work in Bunner's Yard off Arthur Street in 1991 uncovered a possible building platform, but also a line of stakes which may have formed a division between plots or subdivided a single plot. An archaeological examination of a plot on Back Lane in 1996 uncovered a yard surface, gullies, a wall and at least two pits, one of which may have been medieval in date. There was however, no convincing evidence of a building. Platforms on a large plot west of Greenfields on the Chirbury Road have been shown to support the foundations of medieval buildings and has been statutorily designated. Several other watching briefs and evaluations throughout the town have produced evidence of medieval and Tudor activity, and are all adding to the emerging picture of Montgomery.

Extra-mural settlement immediately to the south of the walled town has recently been identified, though its date is uncertain. It comprises what appears to be a substantial platform enclosure (7728) and several house platforms (7729) set beside a well-defined holloway. This last-mentioned feature runs above a small valley and there are reasons for believing it may have been the medieval approach to the town from the south, the main gate known as the Ceri Gate being further east than earlier research implied. It is more difficult to determine whether there was any settlement outside the walls elsewhere in the medieval and Tudor periods: Speed, though never the most reliable commentator in this respect, would appear to imply that extra-mural settlement was absent on the northern side of the town.

Montgomery boasts a large number of Grade II listed buildings such as White Croft which date from the 17th and 18th centuries, too many to list individually here. There are however, some buildings from the previous century, though none as yet have been recognised as survivals from the 15th century. The list of 16th century buildings includes public houses such as The Chequers in Broad Street (30501) and the Dragon Hotel (30544) by the town hall, and also a number of private dwellings including nos 9 and 11 Arthur Street, a hall house of 16th century origin (30486; 30487), and Clawdd-y-dre (30536) and a few such as 3-5 Arthur Street (the Old Bell Museum), Bowling Green Cottage (30523) and White House (30494) which are of late 16th or 17th century origin. All in all, the town perhaps has the richest urban heritage in Montgomeryshire.

Other, later buildings of note include the brick-built Town Hall of 1748 (30541) and the County Gaol of c.1830-32 (20597).



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.