Overton

15687
SJ 3730 4182

Introduction
Overton is a small town approximately 11km to the south of Wrexham and around 3km from the border with England. It straddles a road junction where the A539 intersects the B5069. It occupies level terrain but is perched close to the edge of a steep scarp that drops westwards into the floodplain of the River Dee.

This brief report examines the emergence and development of Overton only up to 1750. For the more recent history of the town, it will be necessary to examine other sources of information and particularly for the origins and nature of many of the buildings within it.

The accompanying map is offered solely 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 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 adopted in the HER to provide researchers with information that is specific to the individual sites and features. These can be accessed on-line through the Archwilio website (www.archwilio.org.uk).

History of development
Contrary to the views of antiquaries, Overton does not figure in Domesday Book, and the earliest record of this place is as *Ouerton* in 1195 (though the actual source is a 14th-century one). In 1201 Overtone appears, but later forms are more distinctive, even idiosyncratic: *Awtun in the 14th century, Wrtun* in the following century and *Ortyn* in 1566. The name is taken to mean 'the settlement on the bank', the bank here perhaps being the valley edge, but alternatively and more specifically a reference to an ox-bow of the Dee which once lay almost immediately below the town. Speculatively, the settlement itself could have had its origins in a landholding that acquired this name from Mercian colonisation during or after the 8th century, in common with other *tun* place-names in Maelor Saesneg, and subsequently developed as a manor. There has been speculation, too, that an earlier *maerdref* might have existed at Overton before the borough was founded.

There was a castle near here soon after 1139, constructed by *Madog ap Maredudd,* one of the Welsh princes of Powys. Whether it acted as a focus for settlement in the earlier 12th century before the foundation of the town is not known, but it was still having work done to it at the beginning of the 14th century.

Overton emerged from obscurity in 1279 when Edward I granted *Robert de Crevequer* the right to hold a weekly market and an annual fair, and seven years later the king granted Overton to his wife, Eleanor. It was created a free borough by royal charter in 1292 when 56 taxpayers dwelled here, a reasonable proportion of them probably of Welsh extraction. Incentives to encourage further burgesses to settle in the town followed. Madog ap Llywelyn's

revolt in 1294 resulted in the destruction of at least part of the town, but while a grant of murage (the right to collect taxes to fund the building of defences around a town) was made in 1300, there is no evidence that the town ever progressed as far as erecting walls.

The town was sacked in 1403/4 by the forces Owain Glyndŵr and never properly recovered. In the 1530s John Leland noted there were "not twenty houses" in the town. However, despite the assumed reduction in population, Overton retained its market through until the 19th century, and from the Middle Ages it was effectively the secular centre of Maelor Saesneg.

For several centuries Overton church was a chapel, subsidiary to Bangor-on-Dee. Its parish, known to Edward Lhuyd as Overton Madoc, was in existence in the 17th century, but the church only became independent of Bangor as late as 1868.

The heritage to 1750

St. Mary's church (100153) is largely 14th and 15th-century Perpendicular in its tower and nave, to which the chancel was added in 1710 and aisles in the 19th century. Fragments of three 14th-century sepulchral slabs survive in the church, but there is a further fragment which may be earlier. A large dug-out chest is claimed to be 15th-century, the pulpit carries a date of 1637 and parts of the late medieval rood screen were incorporated into the more modern screens around the Lady Chapel. The font, a chandelier and a benefaction board all originated around the middle of the 18th century, and there is also a good set of 18th-century marble memorials, though the earliest may have been erected at the end of the previous century, and from the same period two memorial brasses.

The precise position of the castle is not known, although it is supposed to have been on a cliff edge overlooking the Dee. In the 1530s John Leland reported it ruinous and about to fall into the Dee. Several locations have been suggested for its site – the most convincing theory is that it was close to the river in the Asney area, 2km to the north-west of the town.

The churchyard is rectangular and, inside the wall, is fringed by fine yew trees, many of considerable age. There is no evidence that it has ever been enlarged.

Overton is laid out on a distinctively north to south axis, but contrary to what might have been anticipated the streets do not form a regular grid. Furthermore, the earlier Wrexham Road runs through the town, and is forced to make two right-angled turns to the north and to the south of the church. It has been suggested that these anomalies might signal the two different parts to the town, the market town and the borough, established at slightly different times, or as an alternative that the destruction wrought at the end of the 13th century and again at the beginning of the 15th century could have distorted the appearance of the original street layout. Either way the current pattern lacks the coherency of the most obvious planned towns.

Land grants awarded during the early 14th century in Overton refer to *Walle Street/Welle Strete* (1316) and *Le Wallistrete* (1326). A grant of land on Wall Street is also noted in 1553. It is possible that these names are early forms of Willow Street, though this would conflict with a view that Willow Street may have formerly been known as Plough Lane. Further plots were recorded in *le Parsones rowe* in 1361, now unlocated but presumably close to the church.

Burgage plots of medieval origin are recognisable lying between the Wrexham Road and Willow Street, and between High Street and School Lane. The plots on the west side of Salop Road probably also come under this heading, but are perhaps less convincing in the absence of an obvious back lane.

High Street is broader to the north of the church and this was almost certainly the location of the medieval market. The tithe map also displays a broadening of School Lane to the east of the churchyard. This is still apparent on the ground though its purpose is unclear.

Overton, photo 08-c-0166 © CPAT, 2013

Apart from the church Overton has a number of historic buildings. These range from the 17th-century timber-framed dwellings of Church Cottage (105264; though this could be early as the late 16th century), Black and White Cottage and Quinta Cottage (105263) to the early 18th-

century Rectory (105265), now St Mary's House which seems to have been built as part of the same development as the adjacent Bryn-y-Pys estate office. One of three grouped cottages numbered 1 to 3 on the west side of the High Street displays a dated keystone of 1741, and White Cottage (20 High Street) has one of 1739. Gwydwr House, a substantial H-plan building, dates from the late 17th or early 18th century. However the overall tone is of elegant but workaday 18th and 19th-century brick. In general the finer and older survivals are along the High Street with very little of any age on the eastern side of town or on Salop Road to the south.

Two large halls were until recently situated within or close to Overton. Bryn-y-Pys Hall was demolished in 1956, having reputedly been first built in the 16th century and then rebuilt in the 18th century. It lay to the north of the town, but the lodge and the hall's ornamental gates are positioned within the town on Wrexham Road and were erected in the 1870s. Overton Hall, a 16th-century timber-framed building on the south side of Willow Street was demolished to make way for new housing in the 1970s; it has been suggested that this building represented a continuation of a long-standing manorial holding, directly opposite the church.

Outside the town, to the south and east, modern development and farming practice have destroyed much of the settlement's medieval field system, though the records indicate at least three open fields. A quillet survives as field OS no.6489 and traces of others were visible in the school playing field (OS no.5500).

There has been some archaeological work in advance of development in Overton in recent years. Off Willow Street in 2008, evaluation produced evidence of prehistoric activity as well as medieval occupation, though rather more surprising was the absence of any medieval activity in the plot where the new medical centre was built immediately to the south of the churchyard in 2003.