

Denbigh

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Introduction

Both castle and walled town were constructed on what has been termed a ‘dramatically steep outcrop’ of Carboniferous limestone known as Caledfryn Hill which rises from the flat base of the broad Vale of Clwyd. A small tributary valley isolates the hill, though higher ground to the west acts as a backdrop. The later town has spread down into the tributary valley although a small bench breaks the otherwise consistent slope from hill-top to valley floor. In a low-lying part of the town, west of the centre, was the Lenten Pool, now infilled.

The coast of north Wales lies some 16km away, with the cathedral city of St Asaph a little over 8km to the north and the administrative centre of Ruthin nearly 11km to the south-east.

This brief report examines the emergence and development of Denbigh 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 in particular 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 require modification 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. The HER can be accessed on-line through the Archwilio website (www.archwilio.org.uk).

History of development

It is not surprising in view of its status and history that Denbigh was the subject of several major studies in the 19th century, complemented by a string of articles in more recent times on a range of topics. Not all of these were consulted when the original survey was compiled in 1995, because of the amount of research that would have been required, and it has not been possible to rectify this omission during the present reassessment.

The hill-top castle and its accompanying walled town were constructed by Henry de Lacy late in the 13th century, following the creation of the lordship of Denbigh by Edward I in 1282. However, it has long been argued that the hilltop had previously been a stronghold of Dafydd ap Gruffydd, a *llys* which was the centre of the cantref of Rhufoniog; and there are references, too, during the 13th century to the maerdref of Dinbych. D. H. Owen in 1978 noted that ‘the prominence of Dinbych in the pre-conquest [i.e. pre-Edwardian] period explains the selection of this township as the administrative centre of the new lordship established in 1282’.

The name Denbigh is a compound of the Welsh elements *din* and *bych* meaning ‘little fort’. As *Dunbeig* it was first recorded in 1211 and subsequently as *Tynbey* in 1230 and *Dinbych* in 1269. The modern form of Denbigh is first encountered in a document of 1536-9. The predecessor of medieval Denbigh referred to in the place-name is generally taken to equate with the motte and bailey castle at Llŷs, Pont Ystrad, about 1.4km to the south of the town, also known as Llys Gwenllian after a daughter of Llywelyn ap Iorwerth, and also reputedly as Hen Ddinbych.

The town was recaptured – albeit briefly - by the Welsh in 1294, but by the time of de Lacy's death in 1311 the fortifications at Denbigh including its town walls, are assumed to have been largely complete; with Ruthin, it controlled the Vale of Clwyd.

The creation of a borough followed quickly after the construction of the castle, leading to an influx of English families. Forty-seven burgages held by thirty-nine burgesses were listed in 1285 when the first charter was granted, but subsequent to the Welsh attack on the town in 1294, a second charter dating to somewhere between 1295 and 1305 recorded only 45 burgages, but provides the first record of the presence of the town walls.

A demesne manor was also established near to the castle, though its chronology is not recorded in the same level of detail as the stronghold. It included two granges, a byre, a dovecote and two fishponds, extending over 75 acres.



Denbigh castle and town, photo 85-C-0307 © CPAT 2014

As early as the beginning of the 14th century, the town had started to expand beyond the confines of its walls and down the northern slopes of the hill. As Ian Soulsby pointed out in 1983 the site of the walled town was ideal for defence but not for commercial operations. In 1305 there were 183 burgages outside the defences, 52 within, and by 1337 the town had spread over 57 acres. By 1311 an annual fair was being held and in 1334, the 'Survey of Denbigh' refers to 'a borough within the walls' and 'a market town without'. It also mentions the hamlet of 'Neuburgh', part of Lleweni where originally the townspeople had held agricultural land. Neuburgh cannot now be traced and Beresford stated that 'it is not certain whether the survey has recorded an abortive attempt to lay out a small borough beyond the suburbs of Denbigh, or whether it is the remains of a Welsh commercial settlement, older than Denbigh..'. The name would probably argue against the latter.

In 1373 there were 438 burgages, and Denbigh at this time was clearly commercially successful. A detailed rental of 1476 also charts the growth of the town beyond the walls with more than four times as many burgages outside as inside, and this some eight years after the

extra-mural areas had been ravaged by fire, during the Wars of the Roses when the Earl of Pembroke besieged the castle.

For the late 15th and 16th centuries there are details of craftsmen practicing within the town: a draper, glovers, shoe-makers, mercers and weavers. From the 15th century, too, come references to some of the thoroughfares in the town: High Street, Beacon's Hill, Pepper Lane and Sowter Lane. And from the early 16th century a survey records suburbs for three quarters of a mile to the north of the castle. The picture is confirmed by Leland's remarks in the 1530s. *'There hath beene diverse rows of streates withyn the wald towne, of the which the most part be now doone in maner, and at this tyme there be scant 80. howsolders'. He continued: "But the towne of Denbigh now occupied and yoining neere to the old toun hath beene totally made of later tyme, and set much more to commodite of cariage and water by maany welles in it. And the encrease of this was the decay of the other'.*

In 1536, following the Act of Union, Denbigh was established as one of four administrative capitals in Wales, an indication of its stature at that period, and a spur to further development. John Speed's map published in 1611 reflects the general abandonment of the walled town with relatively little housing within its confines, though there was St Hilary's chapel and the incomplete church begun by the Earl of Leicester in the 1580s. But it is noticeable, too, that the market place and town hall lay outside the walled town – the commercial and urban heart of Denbigh had shifted from the constraints imposed by the walled hilltop.

The decline within the walls continued in later centuries: a drawing of 1750 shows few houses, even though the population of the town at the time was nearly 2000. Instead the focus of the town was High Street with three roads - Love Lane, Henllan Street and Lower Street - leading off it. Lower Street (now Vale Street) had three minor streets running parallel to it. Ogilby in his road atlas of 1675, *Britannia*, stated the town to be 'esteemed the best in North Wales'.

During the Civil War in the mid-17th century, Denbigh temporarily became important for military reasons. There was a battle here in 1645 and the castle was besieged, surrendering to the Parliamentarians in the following year.

Some expansion occurred between the early 17th and the mid-19th century. Edward Lhuyd noted a total of 330 buildings in the town at the end of the 17th century. Redevelopment occurred later in the 19th century. The railway along the Vale of Clwyd was built in 1860, and communications were further improved by the major road from Ruthin to Rhyl.

The heritage to 1750

The castle (101960) and the town walls (101961) are contemporary constructions. The castle has a fine gatehouse with three towers, leading into a ward of irregular polygonal shape defined by a curtain wall; the south and west sides of this form part of the town walls. Angle towers project from the curtain.

The town walls display a largely complete circuit, enclosing an area of some 9.5 acres. Drum towers project at several points around the circuit, the course of which was dictated by the terrain. The main entrance to the town, the Burgess Gate, survives from the later 13th/14th century, but a second entrance, the Exchequer Gate is believed to have been built during the first phase of construction of the castle, and was demolished sometime after the 16th century. It was excavated in 1982/83. The Goblin Tower on the north-eastern side of the town is thought to have been built to protect 'The Bloody Well', the towns main water supply and was the scene of a Civil War Siege in 1646.

The siegeworks relating to this episode (102598) consist of a crescent-shaped bank around the Goblin Tower. An adjacent mound (102591), still discernible early in the 20th century, may

have been a prehistoric barrow but more probably part of the Civil War earthworks. Another earthwork comprising a broad low linear bank running gently downhill (19784) lies between the castle and the hospital. Its function is uncertain. Ken Brassil has suggested that it may also be a Civil War feature, although other interpretations are possible. Metal detector finds including a piece of bar shot, a musket ball, a pistol ball and fragments of impacted lead shot were recovered in the area around the Goblin Tower during an archaeological excavation in 2001. Though the excavations did not reveal any archaeological features that could be specifically related to the Civil War siege, the metal detector finds should be relevant.

It has been suggested that an old wall (101570) behind the Crown Hotel is a remnant of a pre-Edwardian stone castle, a view that has yet to be authenticated. Archaeological monitoring during alterations to the Crown Hotel in 2003 also revealed a vaulted cellar below the north side of the Hotel, which did not correspond to the current hotel ground plan. However this was considered to be of 16th century date if not later.

St Hilary's Chapel (102017) was mentioned in an extent of 1334, and as a garrison chapel was presumably constructed early in the development of the town. Its tower and west wall survive but the nave and chancel were demolished in 1923. During the medieval period the nearest parish church was at Llanfarchell, a mile to the east of the town.

St Anne's or Flemings' Chapel (102749) was probably a guild chapel that had fallen into disuse by the early 16th century, when it was mentioned by John Leland. An undercroft below nos 15 and 17 Bridge Street is all that survives. Archdeacon Thomas noted that an almshouse associated with the chapel stood nearby.

The Earl of Leicester's church (102018) was begun by Robert Dudley in 1578 (on the basis of a foundation stone), but was abandoned soon after his death in 1588. Though later used as a stone quarry, substantial parts remain, and it is considered a unique example of major church building in the Elizabethan era.



Denbigh Friary, photo 3025-0020, © CPAT 2014

A Carmelite Friary (102020), founded in about 1289 by Sir John Sunimore, lay in the northern suburbs of the town at the end of Vale Street. After the Dissolution in the 1530s, it was used for various purposes but part at least was destroyed by fire in 1898. The remains now consist of the choir, a portion of the nave, and the wall of a barn. The foundations of other monastic buildings may lie beneath the field to the east. Abbey Cottage adjacent occupies the site of the south cloister range and incorporates two 13th-century doorways. A possible ossuary associated with the friary was cut by a trench in 1985 (101836), and an exploratory evaluation also took place at a later date in advance of a school extension. An evaluation in 2004 confirmed the location of the friary cemetery as well as uncovering cobbled floor surfaces and evidence of demolished buildings which were probably a part of the friary complex.

A late 13th-century cross-head (100591) from the friary was moved to the grounds of Dolhyfryd, a kilometre or so to the south-west of the town, in the 19th century. The four sides are relief-carved with the scenes described by Owen in 1886, namely the Crucifixion, the Virgin and Child, an ecclesiastic in the act of devotion, and a figure thought to represent St John.

Denbigh was classed as ‘one of the most complete townscapes in North Wales..’ by the Royal Commission in the early 20th century. It is evident that the expansion beyond the town walls was the result of careful planning with a market place at the top of the town and a long and very straight road – Vale Street – leading downhill to the north-east. A back lane was laid out to the east of this and another for at least part of the distance to the west; but west of High Street and the market place the pattern of lanes is less regular, and we may speculate that the creation of new thoroughfares and burgages outside the town walls in this rapidly growing urban centre in the 14th century was not as regulated initially as was to be the case in later years. The modern street pattern clearly reflects that mapped by John Speed in the early 17th century which in turn reveals the medieval layout. Some of the names, however, have changed. In the 17th century Vale Street was Lower Street, and Bridge Street was Chapel Lane the former name probably taken from Pont Garreg, a small footbridge crossing part of the Lenten Pool.

A number of listed medieval and sub-medieval vernacular buildings survive in the town. Friesland Hall House, otherwise known as Bryn Awelon (102593), is a cruck-framed house and has a 14th-century doorway in its southern side. The Plough in Bridge Street (99806), originated as an L-shaped timber-framed building with a medieval rock cut cellar below. A stone range extends to the rear in which the roof purlins have been dated to between 1546-82.

Plas Clough House (101473), with its three gables on the front, was erected by Sir Richard Clough in 1567. To the rear of No 19 High Street, (26063) is an end-jetty house of three storeys which has been dated to 1566-1602 and forms an island block. Shown on John Speed's depiction of Denbigh, it represents an early encroachment into the market place.

Grove House (PRN 25768), once one of the grandest town houses in Vale Street may retain features of a house built by Hugh Clough in 1574. It was constructed from building materials imported from Antwerp and was amongst the first brick houses to be built in Wales. Land opposite Grove House, now occupied by 52-54 Vale Street is known to have been in use as an open ‘grove’ between the early 17th and 19th centuries. That the site remained an open space for centuries, whilst elsewhere on Vale Street post-Georgian architectural expansion replaced practically all of the earlier buildings, suggests this plot may have been retained by Grove House throughout this period to provide an open vista from the house, eastwards across the Vale, emphasising the importance of setting in considering urban layouts.

Galch Hill House (102592) was in existence in the later 16th century, as was 24 Bridge Street (26066), which although remodelled in the late 18th century, contains many of the original features including fireplaces and a garderobe. Bryn-y-parc (Nos 3-5, Park Street) contains

internal features of late 16th/17th-century date, perhaps reused. Nos 27-31 Vale Street is essentially a medieval hall house with later additions (19785). The Eagle Hotel is thought to be 16th- or very early 17th- century but has seen considerable rebuilding; the Golden Lion is 18th-century but with a later 15th-century timber frame. No.2 Love Lane is dated to around 1500. No 33 High Street (25731) has been dated by dendrochronology to 1533 and it is likely that 32 and 34 High Street are contemporary. No. 22 High Street is a late 16th-century building, however the walls incorporate dressed sandstone characteristic of that employed in the late 13th-early 14th century works of the castle and therefore possibly reused.

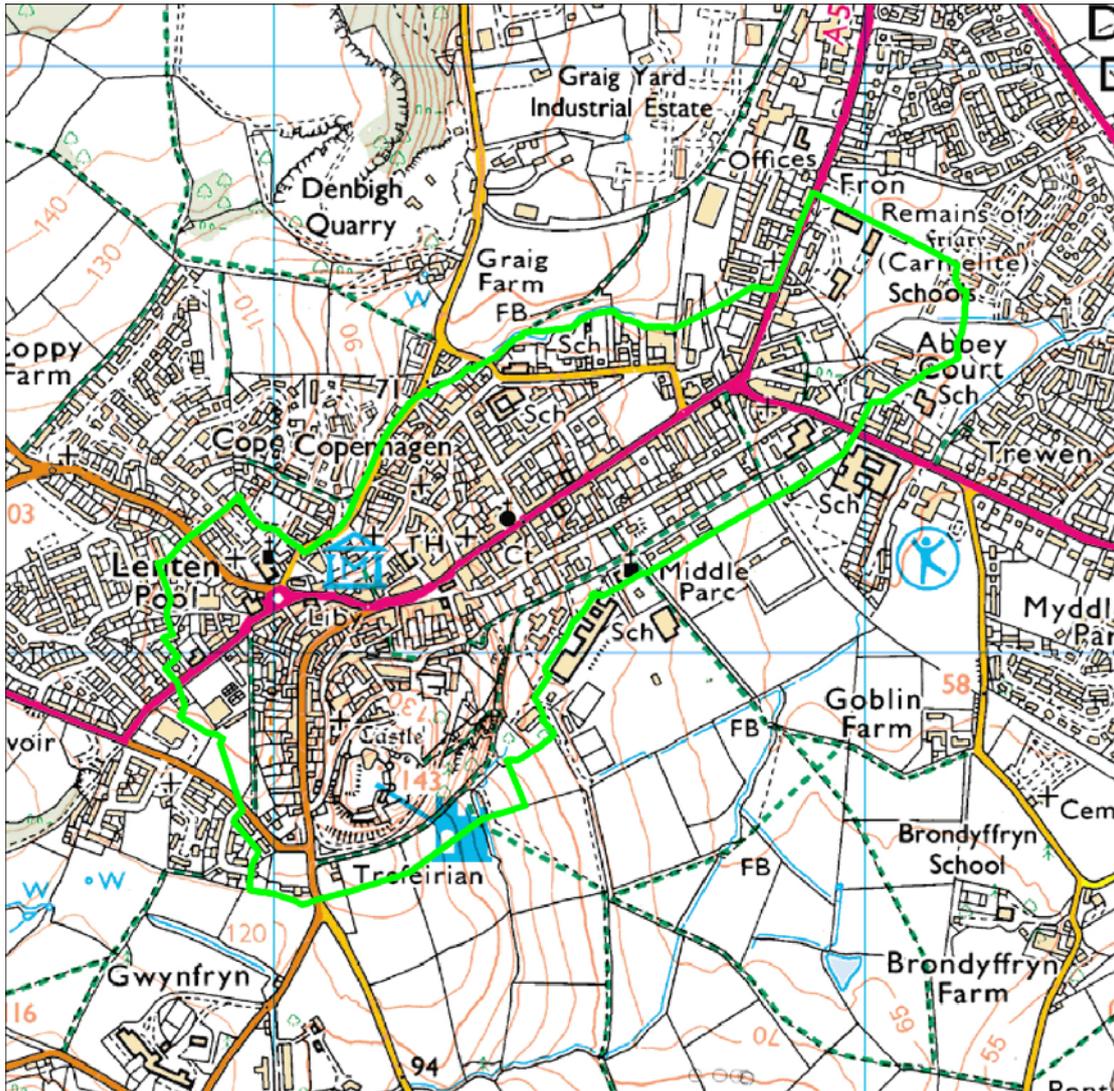
Other buildings have 17th-century features, but no thorough survey of the stock of early buildings in Denbigh is presently available, and the number of such survivals has probably been underestimated.

Of the public buildings and features, the two-storied town hall (102597) was built of stone in 1572 and restored in 1780. The market cross (102019) a medieval cross, much modified in 1760 was later removed to the bowling green near the castle, but has now been returned to the edge of the market place. Denbigh boasted a circular thatched cock-pit possibly of the 17th century which was removed to St Fagans Museum in 1964.

A tile kiln (102021) of 14th/15th-century date was uncovered during construction of the welfare centre in 1938. Irregular and poorly defined platforms (101813), perhaps associated with a holloway, to the north-east of the historic core of the town, could just be the remains of earlier settlement. The site of a well, Fynnon Farcel (102022), was noted by Edward Lhuyd's correspondent in 1698. No trace remains.

Relatively few archaeological interventions have taken place within Denbigh over the course of the past 15 years as a result of local development. Work carried out at 52-54 Vale Street between 2012 and 2014 revealed evidence for medieval occupation in the form of 15th-century pottery and potential beam slots for a contemporary timber framed building. An intact cobbled surface was also uncovered at some depth below the present street frontage, attesting previously unknown medieval activity in this part of the town. The depth of the imported material overlying the cobbled surface demonstrated a considerable degree of groundwork in the 17th and 18th centuries that subsequently changed both the view and nature of the street frontage for a purpose, presently, unknown.

Denbigh Green, an area of unenclosed common, lay to the north of the town. Its extent is depicted on an estate map of c.1809. Strip fields lay on the edge of town, south of the modern quarry. Some at least have now been built over.



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