

Knighton

SO 28567233
16151

Introduction

Knighton lies in eastern Radnorshire on the south side of the River Teme whose valley constitutes the boundary between England and Wales. Together with its tributary, the Wylcwm Brook which converges from the south-west, the river isolates a spur which drops sharply from the heights of Garth Hill to the west. The spur protrudes into the river valley, which temporarily narrows as a consequence. Knighton castle and the old town occupy a knoll on the spur, the church lying at its tip.

This brief report examines Knighton'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 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 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).



Knighton church, photo 94-C-0179 © CPAT, 2011

History of development

The earliest form of this name appears in Domesday Book as *Chenistetone* in 1086, meaning 'settlement of the followers' or perhaps 'freemen', and *Cnicheton* in 1193. Its Welsh name, 'Tref-y-Clawdd' distinguished as *Treficlaudh* in 1586 and *Trebucllo* fifty years earlier, refers to Offa's Dyke.

In an area conquered early after the Norman Conquest, its appearance in Domesday Book as a waste manor of about five hides does not necessarily indicate an existing settlement, although a pre-Conquest origin for Knighton astride Offa's Dyke has been posited by some writers. Possibly, however, the construction of the motte of Bryn y Castell at an unknown date signals the beginnings of Knighton on a strategic route out of England. This earthwork was supposedly superseded by a new castle started by William de Braose some 500m to the west about 1191-2, although a mention in the Pipe Rolls for 1181 might put it earlier, but it must be stressed that neither castle has been accurately dated by either documents or archaeological finds, and there are alternative views that see the castle in the town being established before 1086 and continuing until 1262 when it was destroyed, and Bryn y Castell being set up as a rival castle in the 13th century.

Possibly people were encouraged to settle in the vicinity of the new castle, though there is no firm evidence for the foundation of the town, nor a charter. A market grant was obtained in 1230, and documents of 1361 and 1383 confirm that it was a borough though no borough charter has survived. By 1292/3 there were 71 taxpayers – more than half were of Welsh descent which would tend to point to organic growth rather than an initial plantation of settlers. That this situation may have altered during the next decade is suggested by the extraordinary growth of the settlement to 126 burgesses holding 162 and a third burgages in 1304, though it has also been attributed to a century earlier, allowing for the re-homing of people dispossessed during the construction of the castle. Geographically this expansion may have been a planned phase, north-eastwards in the direction of the newly constructed church of St Edward. The lower part of the town has a level grid of streets, rather like an Edwardian plantation while the upper part has narrow streets huddled around the motte.

Murage grants of 1260, following the town's destruction by Llywelyn ap Gruffudd in the previous year, and of 1277 suggest that the town had defences or perhaps that they were planned but never constructed (4182). Town and castle were seized by Glyndŵr in 1402, and the latter may have been totally destroyed at this time.

Population estimates of around 400-500 for 1550 and 1670 have been suggested, perhaps not dissimilar to the estimated population in 1304, and therefore suggestive of rather limited growth after the beginning of the 14th century. In later centuries, Knighton functioned as an unexceptional market town, expanding only gradually, and until the late 16th century when Knighton parish was imposed on an existing parochial system, St Edward's church was no more than a chapelry attached to St Michael's in Stow, over the river in Shropshire. Further growth occurred only in the 18th and 19th centuries, in part as a result of the local woollen industry. Today in the old county Knighton is surpassed only by Llandrindod in its size.

The heritage to 1750

Offa's Dyke (10000) runs on a north/south alignment through the western part of the town. Still an impressive feature on both the slope leading down to the river and again across the spur, south of Offa's Road, these parts of its course are scheduled. Elsewhere its earthworks have been removed or disguised in the course of urban development.

St Edward's Church (16058; Grade II listing) has a much restored 14th-century west tower, but the rest of the building was rebuilt in 1752 and again in 1875-7. The regular rectilinear shape of the churchyard (16107) seems to offer confirmatory evidence of its late foundation.

The 4m-high motte of Knighton Castle (1133; SAM Radnor 53), situated at the highest point in the town and surrounded by houses, has been damaged by landscaping and there is no evidence that the castle ever incorporated stone-built defences, though Williams early in the 19th century claimed a stone wall on the inside of the bailey ditch. This putative bailey to the south, perhaps oval in outline and set on a not inconsiderable slope, cannot now be discerned on the ground, although Williams wrote of its western ditch and it is recorded that a section was cut on its line in 1971 producing medieval pottery, though few details are available.



Knighton motte and bailey castle, photo 04-C-0109 © CPAT, 2011

A second motte, Bryn y Castell (1135; SAM Radnor 54), sits on the east edge of the Wylcwm Brook valley facing the town. It is about 4.5m high and in rather better condition than its counterpart in the town. No conclusive evidence has emerged for a bailey.

The core of the medieval town appears to have lain on the north and east sides of Knighton Castle incorporating Market Street, High Street, Plough Road and Broad Street, a network of predominantly narrow lanes, some on the flat, other sloping downhill quite steeply. The market place originally lay to the north of the castle but was later re-sited at the junction of Broad Street and High Street, while Market Street may have been encroached upon at its west end.

The development of the street leading to the church and river has been variously attributed to the late 13th/early 14th century or to 19th-century expansion. The regular pattern of streets in this area might indeed highlight a plantation, but can only be confirmed by excavation. The absence of pre-19th-century buildings (other than the Horse and Jockey for which see below) favours a post-medieval expansion, as do the negative results from the very small number of evaluations in the area, though this late origin would not explain the remote location of the church. Some authorities would also see medieval expansion across the Wylcwm Brook up

Bridge Street, possibly as far as Bowling Green Lane, but the existing evidence favours a rather later development.

No traces of the town's putative medieval defences survive, although as already noted the town acquired a murage grant in 1260. It has been pointed out that the river on the north, the Wylcwm Brook on the south-east and Offa's Dyke on the west would have facilitated the defence of the town, and earth and timber rather than stone defences might have been erected. This could be true, but the line of Russell Street is suggestive, possibly tracing the course of a defensive enceinte around the castle and market place.

An Elizabethan market cross (4186) stood near the junction of High Street and Market Street. Known as the Butter House, it was destroyed prior to 1851.



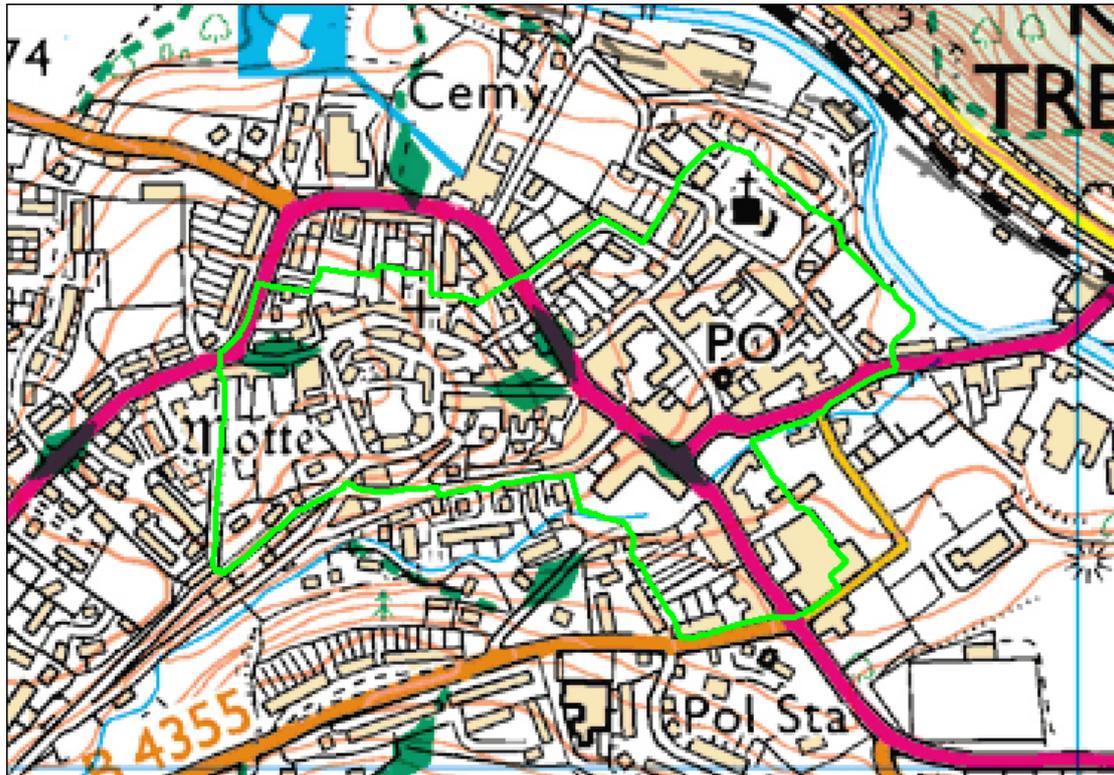
A 17th century house in Knighton, photo 2486-0008 © CPAT, 2011

The Horse and Jockey (30095) in Wylcwm Street is basically a late medieval stone house and it has been pointed out that its relationship to the present town plan suggests that it belongs to an earlier layout. The only other medieval structure is Old House (30055) in High Street which originated as a 15th-century hall house but was extended in the 17th century.

There is little if anything of 16th-century date in Knighton, but properties of the following century are common, along High Street and Broad Street. The George and Dragon (30027) in Broad Street dates to 1637; the Swan Hotel (30023) has a 17th-century, timber-framed cross-wing; the Old Mansion House (30024) in Bridge Street has an early 17th-century timber-framed house as its core; 17th-century structures are disguised behind later frontages at Nos

22-25 Broad Street (30032 & 30033), perhaps No 6 High Street (30047), Nos 19-22 High Street (30053) and Nos 1 and 2 Russell Street (30087). All these buildings are Grade II listed. Other buildings where a 17th-century date has been adduced include 23 High Street, 17 and 21 Broad Street, 20 Bridge Street and 3 Church Street.

Several Grade II listed houses in Market Street – Nos 34 and 35 (30079) and No 45 (30082) – are of 17th or 18th-century date. No 22 Station Road appears to have 17th- or early 18th-century detail internally, as do the cottages along Bowling Green Lane suggesting some expansion of the town towards the end of the 18th century.



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