

Holt

15676
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Introduction

Now bypassed by the road from Wrexham to Nantwich (the A534), the same town of Holt is a nodal point for several roads that converge on one of the few bridging points of the River Dee. It is about 8km north-east of Wrexham and faces the Cheshire village of Farndon across the river. Holt is set out on a flat plateau above the meandering course of the river. A relatively gentle drop into the river valley on the north has been used by dwellings in the vicinity of the bridge, but on the east houses and the church are set on the lip of the valley, abandoning the slopes to meadows.

Modern infilling of the overall layout of the settlement is inevitably beginning to disrupt the historic pattern of Holt. New housing complexes on either side of Church Street, south of the church, and west of Cross Street have masked the medieval burgage plots in the historic core, a trend that will no doubt continue.

This brief report examines the background to Holt up to the years around 1750. For the more recent history of the town, it may be necessary to examine other sources of information and particularly for the origins and nature of some 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). We should also here refer the reader to the work of Dr Keith Lilley and his colleagues on the Edwardian new towns of Wales which can be found at archaeologydataservice.ac.uk, the contribution on Holt being particularly important for its analysis of the street pattern and its burgage plots.

History of development

This location beside the Dee has long been an attractive one. Though not directly relevant to the study, it is worth noting that there was a large Roman works depot producing tiles and pottery primarily for Chester just to the north-west of the later town and this functioned from the 1st to the 3rd century AD. And further back in time Bronze Age burials and, separately, the ditch surrounding a burial mound of similar age, have also been recorded close to the river.

Holt as a name is first documented in 1326 as *Holte*, twenty years later (1347) as *le Holt* and in the 1560s as *yr holt*. This is the old English place-name element *holt* meaning 'wood'. It has a second name, *Lyons*, which appears as *Castrum Leonis* (1316) and *the castle of Lyons lately called the castle of le Holt* (1347) and *Lyons alias Holt* was still in use in 1638. Modern

place-name authorities believe that the Lyons name was transferred from France, either as a place-name or a family name.

Holt is a planted town probably contemporaneous with the castle of John de Warenne, earl of Surrey which was built in the last decades of the 13th century, after he had been granted the lordship of Bromfield and Yale in 1282. Both the borough and the castle are referred to in records – in 1285 and 1311 respectively – before the place-name emerged. It is indisputable, however, that the site will have been selected primarily for strategic purposes, and that the foundation of the town will have been secondary to the castle.

Administratively Holt was a part of Gresford parish, its church initially only a chapel to the mother church at Gresford.

By the time of a survey in 1315 there were 152 burgesses and just over 200 burgages. This was a considerable community, one of the largest in Wales, though with a population that was predominantly English, primarily from Cheshire but also from the south and east of England. According to a document of 16th-century origin a borough charter was first issued in 1285 and was confirmed by a subsequent grant in 1411.

A weekly market was held on a Friday and a yearly fair. Trade and farming will have been of considerable importance to the inhabitants of medieval Holt. But mining too played a part in the economy for in 1412, the burgesses were granted the right to take coal from the wastes of Brymbo and Coedpoeth. The river was navigable up to the town allowing water borne trade.

Decline set in later in the medieval period. Though the market centre at the caput (or centre of the lordship), it was Wrexham, no more than eight kilometres away, that thrived, and during the mid-15th century the population of Holt was estimated at less than three hundred. Hostility between the English and Welsh inhabitants appears to have played a part in the decline. By Leland's time in the 1530s the weekly market seems to have been in abeyance. In 1620 there were only 65 freeholders and burgesses within the town, but during the century there may have been some improvement.

The heritage to 1750

St Chad's Church (101258), originally constructed late in the 13th century, was rebuilt and extended by Sir William Stanley between 1483 and 1495; the tower could also be of this time though it has been suggested, too, that it was built in 1679. Restoration work occurred in the 1730's and in 1871. Apart from the font, also of late 15th-century origin, there are few internal fittings of medieval or even Tudor date. The monument sequence starts in the early 18th century, the brasses a little earlier after the Restoration. A parson's bell has been attributed to the 15th century and there is an undated iron-bound chest. St Chad's churchyard is rectangular, fitting tidily into the design layout of the town, but also displaying an enlargement which occurred in 1881.

The castle (101260), unusual in its form of a regular pentagon with large corner towers, was first recorded in 1304. With its inner keep set on a boss of rock left by the removal of surrounding material, this was not a naturally strong fortification and is said to have been abandoned at an early date, though Leland in the earlier 16th century termed it a 'goodly castel', and it changed hands several times during the Civil War in the 17th century. Little now survives but the moat was apparently 10m deep and connected to the river. The castle's bailey or outer ward has never been precisely defined, but Lilley *et al* have made a convincing case for its perimeter being fossilised by the south-eastern side of the market place (see below) and then by the curving section of Chapel Street and its continuation, Smithfield Street. On this reading, the straight line of Castle Street becomes a later feature of the townscape, introduced after the castle had fallen out of use, perhaps in the late medieval period.

Although a grant of murage (a necessary precursor to the construction of town defences) was given early in the town's development, there is no evidence that this was ever taken up, although there was clearly an intent to erect town walls as a document of 1391 states. But the castle apart, the only defence seems to have been the tower guarding the bridge which has now disappeared (see above para 3.3).

The design of the town is extremely regular, and an earlier authority pointed out that in its street plan it bears a resemblance to the true *bastide* (planted town) of south-western France, with the river bridge at one end of the developed area and the castle and market place at the other.



Holt, photo 84-c-0068 © CPAT, 2013

The triangular market place by The Cross is still clearly discernible as a focus for all the roads in the town, but it remains uncertain as to whether this was the successor to an earlier market place opposite the church (see below). The shaft of the medieval market cross survives, as does the octagonal base, having been moved to its present position in 1896.

Two main streets, Cross Street and Church Street, ran north to south, with a third lane, now lost, apparently lying parallel to and east of Church Street and passing just in front of the church. Church Green between Cross Street and Church Street was a green or patch of common within the town in the 19th century and probably long before. It still survives as an open space today, termed Church Green, and may conceivably even have been the original market place. Smithfield Street fed in to the town from the countryside to the south, Frog Lane from the west. There are surface indications confirmed by the tithe map that the former was originally rather wider than at present, but it appears from Norden's survey in the early 17th century that Frog Lane was the more important as a focus of housing.

Of the settlements in Wrexham Borough, Holt has witnessed more developer-funded archaeological work than any other over the last twenty years. Several developments have revealed archaeological remains, and possibly the most interesting in this context is work

undertaken on land near Rose Cottage in Church Street which yielded evidence of road metalling, a possible boundary ditch, and structural remains in the form of a clay floor and hearth, together with medieval and post-medieval material.

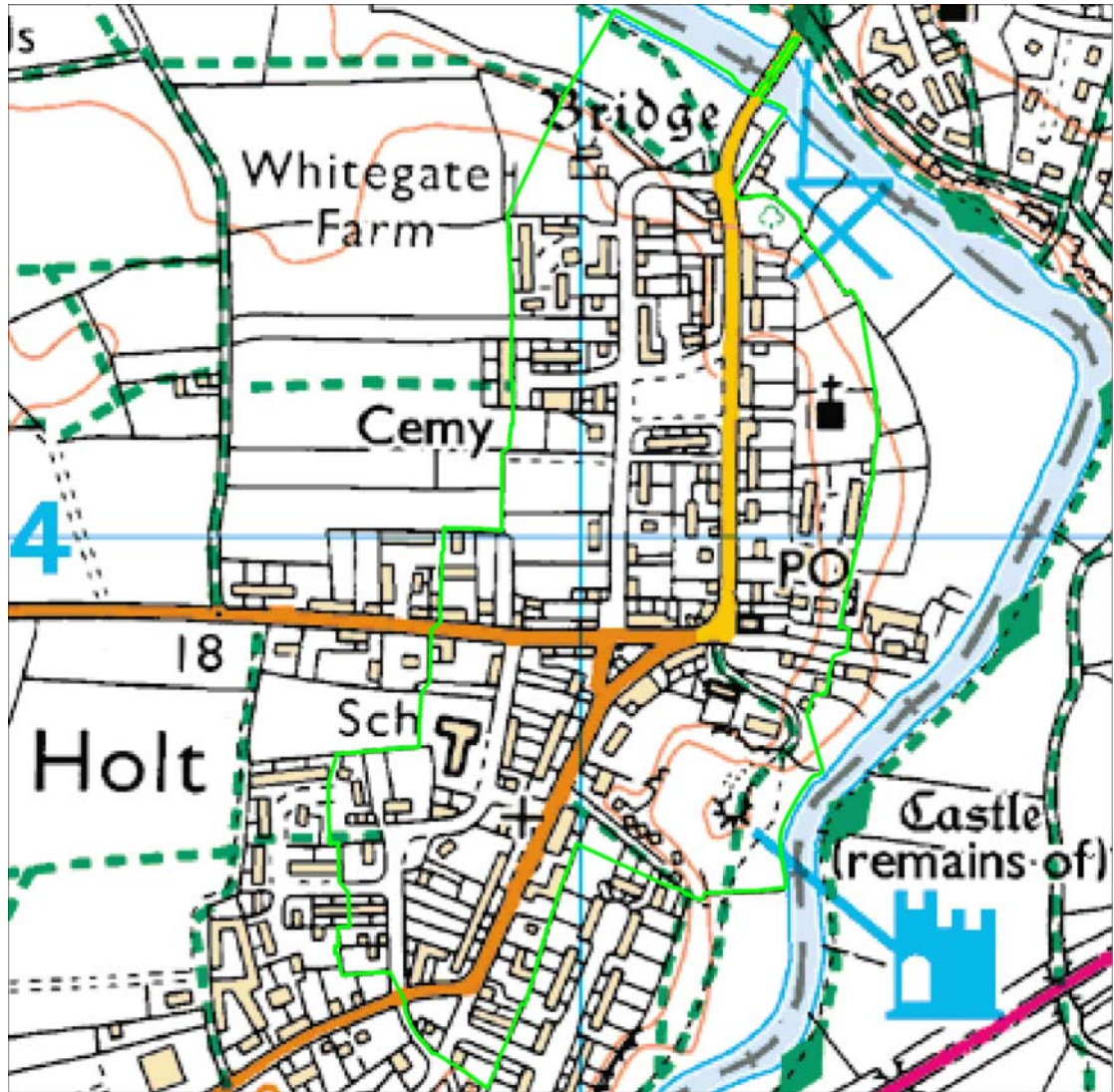
The bridge (101261) linking Holt and Farndon, and by extension England and Wales was controlled from Holt and was first built in 1338, replacing a ferry. The present structure is considered to be 15th or early 16th century in date. It has eight segmental arches, cutwaters and the third arch (on the Welsh side) had a defensive tower with a drawbridge still in place in 1767 and even now distinguished by later masonry in the bridge structure. It was the subject of a thorough survey in 1992, but this remains unpublished.

A quay (105284) existed on the riverside just to the west of the bridge, a facility for trade with Chester, but no traces of this now survive.

The town is short on older houses. Holt Hill (105282) off Green Street near the bridge is a listed building of the 17th century, remodelled in the 18th century, and Smithfield House (105283) at the southern end of an interesting row of cottages on Castle Street was originally a farmhouse of 17th-century origin. Holt Hall, also on Castle Street, was built in the early 18th century, Walnut Cottage on Frog Lane in the late 17th century, and Deeside Farm may also have originated in the 17th century though it has been re-fronted and extended. Lost buildings include a town hall (105281) known to have been in existence in 1545 and perhaps there from soon after the incorporation of the borough in 1411, stood on the south-east side of the market place until its demolition in 1897, and there was also a 'Welsh' court-house in the castle precinct.

Extensive traces of open strips survived in fossilised form into the 19th century west and south-west of the town. Some remain today.

South of Frog Lane and six hundred metres west of the market square are the earthworks of Esp Hill fishponds (101267; SAM Denbigh 224), probably of medieval date. These presumably served the castle. And a further feature of the lordship castle will have been a park, probably now revealed only by field names on the south side of Holt.



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