CRICKHOWELL

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Introduction

Crickhowell lies on the north bank of the River Usk, 22km south-east of Brecon. The castle occupies a spur where the Cwmbeth Brook converges on the Usk, the ground dropping quickly to the river just to the south of the bailey. Much of the town is set on a gentle slope beyond the castle, except to the south and west of the church where the houses are set on the steeper slopes above the brook.

This brief report examines the emergence and development of Crickhowell 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 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 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

The Welsh place-name, Crucywel, and thus its better known anglicized form of Crickhowell, is derived from *Crug Hywel* meaning 'the mound of Hywel'. This may be a reference to the prehistoric fort on Table Mountain above the town which now carries the name, though this appears to be a modern appellation for in the early 19th century it was simply 'Beacon'. A more convincing alternative is that it refers to the Norman castle mound, now known as Alisby's Castle, a name for which we have been unable to find an explanation. The town name is first given as *Crickhoel* in 1263, later *Crukehowell* in 1283, and as *Cerrig Howell* in 1584.

There are two elements to take into account in unravelling Crickhowell's development. Lying 1.5km to the north-west of the town is Maescelyn, with its small motte said to have been in existence in 1121 and adjacent to it St Mary's Chapel of which nothing now survives above ground. Some would have it that this is where Crickhowell began, the focus of the sub-lordship being moved closer to the Usk at some later date. This introduces the second element, Crickhowell as it is today, and in particular the period when Alisby's Castle was constructed. It is conceivable that this was a successor to Maescelyn, set in a more strategically useful location, but conceivable too that the two mottes were in use concurrently. Probably only extensive excavations will provide a satisfactory answer.

A new town was planned around Alisby's Castle, with a regular layout of streets. This is not likely to have happened immediately the castle was thrown up, more likely that there was a lapse of decades between the two, although less regulated, piecemeal settlement could have occurred outside the defences, soon after the castle's establishment. It was certainly in

existence by 1281 when the inhabitants received a grant of murage, and in the same year Edward I confirmed its existing markets and fairs, but this provides only a date before which the town was laid out. Two years later, it acquired borough status, although no charter is known.

St Edmund's Church was built at the beginning of the 14th century, and it was at this time or perhaps later that the parish of Crickhowell was carved from the much older parish of Llangattock in order to support it. Its construction perhaps obviated the need of the townspeople to travel to St Mary's Chapel for worship, a belief supported by the fact that Gerald of Wales around the beginning of the 13th century referred to his visit to the *capella Sanctae Mariae de Crucohel*.

The castle and town passed to the Mortimers during the 14th century, but were restored to the Pauncefote family in 1402. Sir John refortified the castle in the face of the Glyndŵr threat, but it failed to hold out and was left in ruins. It can be assumed too that the town is unlikely to have remained unscathed. There is no evidence to suggest any further refurbishment of the defences, and it is known that the keep was uninhabitable in the mid-16th century.

Crickhowell Castle, photo 87-c-0076 © CPAT, 2013

The town declined in the later Middle Ages, Leland referred to it as a 'preati tounlet' in the 1530s, and by 1610 it was no longer listed as a market town. In 1675, it was said to have about one hundred houses and one indifferent inn, The White Lion. Richard Fenton passing by at the beginning of the 19th century applauded it as 'the most cheerful looking town I ever saw', by which time it was beginning to thrive again, witnessing the re-establishment of its market early in the century.

Crickhowell is fortunate in its fine series of estate maps depicting parts of the town. Both the bridge and the castle are shown on maps of 1587, and incomplete plans of the town in *c*.1760 and 1776, supplemented by the large-scale tithe plan of *c*.1844.

The heritage to 1750

The large 15m-high motte, thrown up during the 12th or even 13th century though documented only from the 1280s, supports the remains of a shell keep. Just to the east are the remains of two abutting towers, one circular, the other rectangular which originally were presumably tied in with a curtain wall. South of the motte a single tower marks the position of a gatehouse that had twin D-shaped towers, the second of these now no more than a set of foundations. All these are thought to be of late 13th or early 14th-century date, though a more precise date of 1272 has been offered. The Bucks' engraving of 1741, the accuracy of which cannot be confirmed, shows a curtain wall in addition to the drum-towers on the southern side and it has been suggested that the curtain wall lay just to the north of Castle Road, though this remains to be confirmed by excavation.

A pair of small, supposedly 14th-century drum-towers in Church Street (known as the Ivy Tower) were formerly considered to be an outer gateway to the castle, and are still authenticated as such in Cadw's listed building description. However, survey work by the RCAHMW in the 1990s indicated a more comp1ex story, the tower being an 18th/19th-century folly, with traces of a 15th or 16th-century house behind.

In addition to the motte and the standing masonry there are earthwork traces of a large bailey on the south incorporated into the Recreation Ground. An oral report indicates that other earthworks were levelled out on the adjacent cricket ground early in the 20th century.

The church of St Edmund, set in its large rectangular churchyard, was built on a cruciform plan prior to 1303 by Lady Sibyl Pauncefote. Aisles were introduced at a later date, perhaps in the 15th century, and the broach spire was added after the Reformation. The 19th century witnessed various phases of rebuilding and restoration, and many of the fittings date to that century. The only medieval survivals are the effigies of Grimbald and Sybil Pauncefote and from the post-Reformation centuries the font (dated 1668) and further memorials.

No traces of the town walls survive, and as far as can be judged no sign of them has emerged during developments around the town. Despite the 1281 murage grant (see above) it is possible that they were never built. However, Lamb Street and its continuation to the west of New Road (which was imposed on the existing street layout in about 1830, though 18th-century maps suggest it had a predecessor following a somewhat different line) may define an original western perimeter of the town, whatever form it took, the line then running north-eastwards with New Road picking up its line near Porth Mawr. Definition of the medieval town boundary on the north and east is not possible, although perhaps on the east and certainly on the south, the castle defences fulfilled that function.

The street pattern is of some interest. It is centred on High Street, widens as it runs northwards, bifurcating around the town hall (as shown on later 18th-century maps) as it reached the road that ran from Brecon to Abergavenny which itself is presumed to be of some considerable antiquity. This widening must signal where the market place was. To either side of High Street were burgage plots, and even modern maps show an almost continuous run down the entire western side of the street, but only some on the east where the castle defences took up much of the street frontage. A surviving boundary line suggests that a back lane may originally have served the burgage plots on the west side of High Street, and a narrow lane, Church Street, provided access to the church, the layout suggesting that the tenements had already been planned when the church was built. A s1ight shift in alignment of High Street as it runs southward suggests that the road swung out to avoid the pre-existing earthworks of the castle. At its southern end High Street divided with Castle Road running eastwards and Bridge Street running west and then south to the crossing of the Usk (significant perhaps is the fact that the southern arm of Bridge Street lines up with the putative back lane lying to the west of High Street). From the 1587 map it can be inferred that in Tudor times dwellings lay down the hill as far as the bridge, although it is curious that not a single pre-19th house is now

to be found along Bridge Street. And by the 18th century houses were spreading from the core area along the roads to Brecon, Abergavenny and along Standard Street which took traffic to Hereford. Tower Street was added in the middle of the 19th century.

Crickhowell has a large number of historic buildings, the vast majority of them 17th-century and later. Thus the Dragon Hotel in High Street is considered to be early Georgian in date, the Bear Hotel is claimed to go back perhaps to the 15th century and certainly the 17th century, the White Hart Inn on the western edge of the town is said to have 15th-century origins though its appearance now is 19th-century. On Standard Street the former Rumsey Place mansion includes the granary to the Malt House which was erected in the 17th century and is now a furniture workshop. The Malt House itself is thought to go back to *c.*1540 and has 17th-century work, the adjacent Little Malt House which was at one time part of a coach house originated in the 17th century and Upper House farmhouse in the same complex is also from the 17th century and has a contemporary barn (now used as a warehouse), a granary and a pigsty, while its gazebo is attributed to the 18th century. Also of 17th-century origin are no 1 Beaufort Street, the sub-medieval house in the form of its vaulted basement which was incorporated into Ivy Tower and is known as the Wardens House, though another part of Ivy Tower dates to 1719, 44 High Street and probably the Bridgend Inn. Nos 24 and 25 High Street, Dan-y-castell on Castle Road are of 18th-century origin, though the last of these may have earlier features.

Porth Mawr on the north side of the town occupies the site of Cwrt-y-Carw, the late-medieval home of the Herbert family which was demolished after a fire in 1810. Porth Mawr Gatehouse is of 15th-century build, a relatively rare Welsh example of a late-medieval secular gateway. The adjacent boundary walls should be contemporary, though the consensus is that they have been reconstructed, probably in the early 19th century.

A bridge across the Usk was supposedly mentioned in 1558 and the present structure with its 13 arches is of 16th/17th-century type, although it was rebuilt in 1706, widened in 1810 and has also seen other repairs over the years.
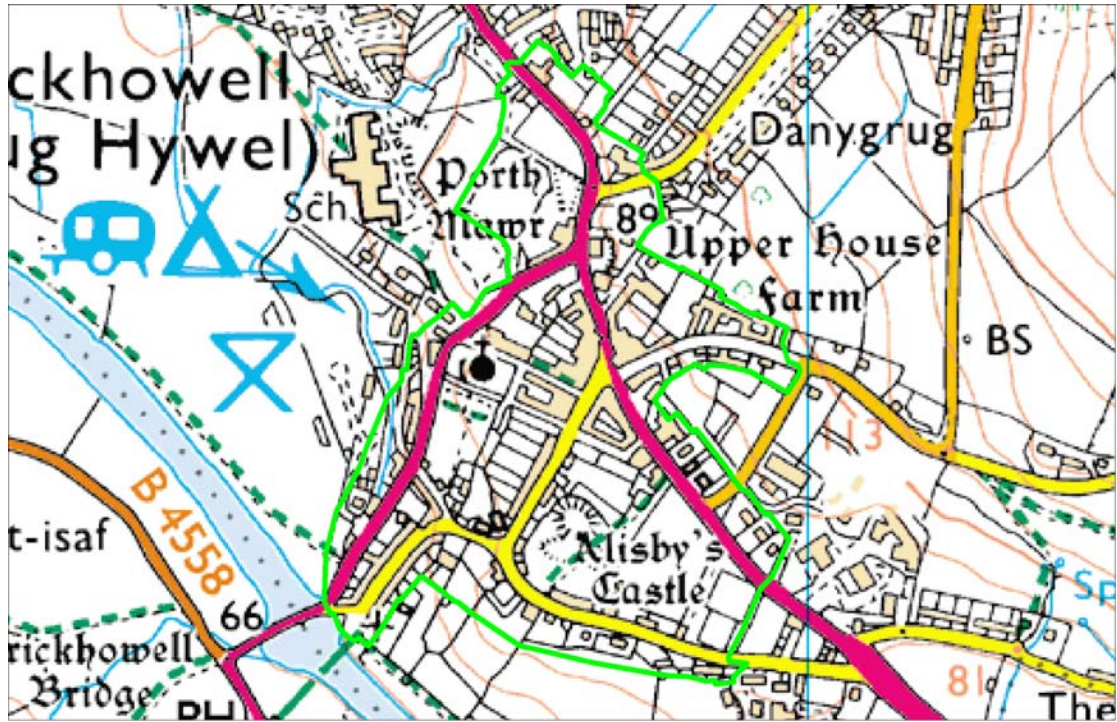
A mill is shown on a late 18th-century map of Crickhowell, and was undoubtedly established at a much earlier date. It lay to the west of the planned town and the Cwmbeth brook flowed past it down to the river. Its precise position is unknown, but large-scale Ordnance Survey maps from the late 19th century appear to show a mill pond with leats feeding in and out of it.

Medieval open fields to the north and west of the town survived into the 19th century, depicted on contemporary maps as narrow strips opposite Porth Mawr and to the west of Mill Street.

Aerial photography together with modern Ordnance Survey maps indicate that significant garden features may survive behind Porth Mawr. The date of these and their relation to the 19th-century Porth Mawr or the earlier Cwrt-y-Carw remain to be established, but it is likely that they relate to the 19th-century house.

Further away, the motte at Maescelyn has traces of a square tower on its crest and it is reported that there are also the remains of a small bailey to the east of the mound. It is generally assumed that the motte was thrown up by the Turbervilles early in the 12th century.

St Mary's Chapel at Maescelyn, first documented in 1303, was described as being in ruins on an estate map of 1776, and is believed to have been demolished early in the 19th century. Nothing of the building is now visible. It is tempting to see this as a baronial chapel lying within the bailey of the nearby castle, but the possibility that it was in existence before the castle was built cannot be entirely dismissed.