Ruthin

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Introduction

Ruthin lies within the Vale of Clwyd, and is amongst the largest historic settlements in Denbighshire. It is also home to the modern local authority.

The historic core of Ruthin occupies the east bank of the river on a low glaciated ridge running parallel to the river and isolated from a second ridge and the undulating vale to the east by a shallow and largely dry dip in the landscape. The western ridge is utilised by the castle at the southern end and by the church at the northern tip. From this ridge settlement has spread out primarily to the east where modern estates are reaching towards the medieval church of Llanrhydd, and westwards across the Clwyd to link with the medieval village of Llanfwrog.

A nodal point in the road network, Ruthin lies on the A494 trunk road linking the Chester region with the west coast of Wales. Denbigh is 10km to the north-west, Llangollen 18km to the south-east.

This brief report examines the emergence and development of Ruthin 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

Ruthin has been the subject of various detailed studies over the years, not all of which were consulted when the original survey was compiled in 1995, because of the amount of research that would have been required. This situation still obtains and there can be no doubt that the town requires and deserves a comprehensive study.

Prior to the Edwardian Conquest in the second half of the 13th century, Ruthin is believed to have been a 'maerdref', the administrative centre of the commote of Dyffryn Clwyd; and a Welsh settlement of some size could have developed in the area of modern Well Street, formerly 'Welsh Street'. But we should stress that this is speculative rather than substantiated. Claims of a Welsh stronghold of *llys*, 'the Red Fort', beneath or close to the later castle, are not backed by any solid evidence, but nor can it be ruled out.

Maurice Beresford pointed out some years ago that the boundaries of the borough at Ruthin reveal that it had been cut out of the parish of Llanrhydd. This is not to diminish the potential importance of the town's early history, but it does imply that there was no early church here.

Dyffryn Clwyd was disputed by English and Welsh in the mid-13th century, but the area came under Edward I's control in 1277 and the construction of Ruthin Castle commenced immediately. The town was returned to David, brother of Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, almost immediately, but after an abortive Welsh uprising in 1282, Dyffryn Clwyd was bestowed on Reginald de Grey who continued the castle building programme and also commenced laying out a town which probably integrated the existing Welsh *tref'*. Ruthin Castle became the 'caput' of a lordship extending over three commotes.

A charter granted privileges to the newly established borough in 1282 or soon after, and in the words of Professor Ian Jack this 'reflected the prosperity of the town under the Welsh princes and the relatively peaceful transition into a marcher borough, where despite the initial number of English immigrants, a genuinely Anglo-Welsh community was created'.

St Peter's church was founded as a chapel in 1282 or thereabouts, and subsequently rebuilt in 1310 as a collegiate church with seven priests. With the castle and the market place it represented one of the three focal points of the town.

By 1324 there were 70 burgesses controlling 100 burgages, one third of them Welsh and concentrated mainly in the Well Street area. A weekly market and thrice-yearly fairs centred on the market place which was established properly in 1295-6.

Ruthin town and castle, photo 93-C-0179, © CPAT 2014

Ruthin was sacked by Glyndŵr in 1400 and again perhaps in 1402, and it was a result of these attacks that town defences were added, a murage grant being recorded in 1407. This led to the construction of a ditch around the town which is referred to obliquely in at least one 15th-century town record.

The town recovered quickly and became the centre of an important cloth industry leading in the late medieval era (*c.*1447) to the formation of a guild of fullers and weavers. Shoemakers established a second craft-gild, late in the 15th century. The built-up area expanded westwards

across the Clwyd towards Llanfwrog. By 1496 90 burgesses holding 209 burgages were recorded, suggesting to Ian Soulsby the emergence of an urban aristocracy, a non-uncommon situation in developing medieval boroughs.

Henry VII purchased the lordship of Ruthin in 1508 and in the same year he granted a charter to the borough confirming market rights and other privileges. But the 16th century saw the rise of Shrewsbury as a cloth centre and the consequent decline of Ruthin. It was of little interest to John Leland travelling the country in the 1530s, but to William Camden at the end of the century it was 'the greatest market town in all the Vale, full of inhabitants and well replenished with buildings'. During the Civil War it was besieged in 1644 and again in 1646 by Parliamentary forces, and when it finally fell the castle was razed.

From 1536 Ruthin functioned as one of the county towns of Denbighshire. Quarter Sessions and Great Sessions courts were held in the town, and in 1775 the county gaol was built there. We may suspect gradual rather than spectacular growth. Sir Richard Colt Hoare in 1801 found a 'town built on a hill and its declivities, chiefly of brick. The many porticos and penthouses give it an ancient and rather a picturesque appearance.. The new Town Hall, erected in 1785, is a handsome and commodious building…Though there are considerable remains of the castle the ruins are by no means picturesque'.

A number of maps show the town as it was in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, with the market hall known as the Old Hall in the centre of the Market Place. That of 1823 shows the inns in black - 23 in all.

The heritage to 1750

Ruthin Castle (100863) was built in the 13th century. Much of it was demolished in the Civil War in the middle of the 17th century but parts of the curtain wall and its towers survive on the north-west and north-east. The site is now occupied by a hotel which is largely 19th-century in origin, with phases of building in 1826 and 1849-52. A park associated with the castle is now termed Castle Park and could well have medieval origins, but the gardens adjoining the castle appear to have been laid out in the Victorian era.

Nothing remains of the town defences above ground (102891), though Ian Soulsby in 1983 was able to define the probable course of the ditch from surviving property boundaries: continuous boundaries on the north beyond St Peter's church, Wynnstay Road on the east, Dog Street on the south-east as far as the castle and, on the west side of the castle, perhaps a curving route to the west side of Mill Street to the river which would have provided a natural line of defence. Masonry defences were claimed in the vicinity of Clwyd Street in 1829, and it seems improbable that the town was defended by a ditch alone. The Water Gate (Porth-y-dwr) leading to the bridge across the Clwyd was reportedly demolished about 1800, itself a successor to the tower built by the de Greys. Soulsby's analysis has now been re-assessed by D G Evans (2011) who has defined a somewhat different perimeter; this clearly demonstrates the difficulties in trying to define a feature that has been effectively erased from the visible landscape through urban growth.

St Peter's church (100871) lies north of the market square. It is much altered since its construction in 1310-15, for a 'grievous restoration' in 1859 followed from its decay during the previous century. Parts of the early 14th-century walling survive, but the medieval chancel was demolished in 1663, permanently reducing the size of the church, and the south nave, other than its arcade, was completely rebuilt in the 18th and 19th centuries. There is fine range of wall monuments, the earliest from 1601, a couple of mutilated medieval effigies and a little woodwork of late medieval and early post-medieval date, notably an early 17th-century altar table and some interesting bench ends.

The churchyard is of an irregular shape and holds little of interest.

The medieval college buildings were on its north side and reputedly formed a quadrangle. The Old Cloisters on this side were the residence of the college of priests and contain 14th-century work including a 5-bay vaulted undercroft. Almshouses known as Christ's hospital (100872) and still surviving, were built in the precinct in 1590 by the Dean of Westminster who was born in the town. These were reconstructed in 1856 (but 1865 according to another source). North-east of the church, Ruthin school was re-founded in 1574 with an endowment twenty years later. The present buildings (102887) date from 1700 but were refurbished in the 19th century.

A Carmelite priory (or nunnery) founded by Reginald de Grey near St Peter's has been claimed on the site of the modern post office, just to the south-west of the churchyard gates. Its existence, however, has never been confirmed.

The street pattern extending from the square is relatively rectilinear, but the natural topography has clearly imposed a constraint on the town's layout with the result that Ruthin looks less like a planned settlement than comparable towns elsewhere in Wales. Traces of burgage plots are still discernible off Clwyd Street and Castle Street, but were more in evidence on 19th-centiry maps. Dog Lane appears to be a medieval name, although as late as 1826 seems not to have been significant in terms of the small number of houses on it. Record Street and Well Street were previously Castle Lane (though New Hall Street in 1823) and Welsh Street respectively. The name 'Pen Barras' is commonly used for the lower part of Well Street, and more especially for the boundary between the parishes of Ruthin and Llanrhudd. 'Bars', of which Barras is a corruption, is mentioned in a conveyance of 1486. Market Street was created during the mid-19th century. The road from Corwen originally adopted a straighter course, running close to the castle and merging into Castle Street; in the early 19th century, it was diverted further to the east to its present line. Housing almost certainly extended westwards across the River Clwyd: New Street (previously Borthyn) and Mwrog Street were both mentioned in a register of tenants of the local lordship in 1324.

The centre of the medieval town was St Peter's Square which represented the regular market place from 1295. A timber-framed court house (102550; now the NatWest Bank) was erected in the centre of the square. A felling date of 1421 was obtained from timbers in the building in 2004/5, a slightly later date than the date of 1401 traditionally ascribed to it. The Royal Commission have suggested that the courthouse symbolises the recovery of the lordship after Owain Glyndŵr's revolt. The building was restored in 1926. The beam of the former gibbet project from one wall, while a few original prison cells survive below ground.

A rough, flat block of limestone, Maen Huail (100868), is set on the west side of the market square. Local legend has it that it was the site where Huail, brother of Gildas, was beheaded by King Arthur, and is recorded in the middle of the street in Edward Lhuyd's *Parochialia* at the end of the 17th century.

Nantclwyd House (102552) is a large two storey, timber-framed building of several phases though developed considerably in the 17th century. The earliest house was constructed with timbers felled in the winter of 1434-5. The inner garden immediately behind the house defines a former double burgage plot and is surrounded by a high stone wall which probably dates from the late 15th century and incorporates a late 17th or early 18th-century gazebo. Walls defining the outer garden are thought to be 15th century or possibly earlier, 13th century in date and contemporary with Ruthin Castle, having originally formed the kitchen garden to the castle until it was rented to the owner of Nantclwyd House in 1572.

Nantclwyd House, photo CS03-041-0018, © **CPAT 2014**

The castle mill (100869) is thought to date from the late 13th century and is a rare medieval survival in Wales, even though it is much modified; built of grey stone, but with red sandstone used for the quoins and some window dressings, it also houses a cross in the east gable. No. 65 Clwyd Street (102888) is said to have been associated with the mill, before being converted to domestic use in 1586 (Cadw) and has at its core a 15th-century structure. It was added to and extended at several points in later centuries; the interior of No 67 (Grade II listing) was originally part of No.65, and contains a medieval arched doorway that was probably connected to storage rooms.

The mill leat also remains, running below the castle fed from a mill pond (now gone) situated in the castle precinct. A mill dam was named on the map of 1826 and a mill pond is depicted in 1874.

Gorphwysfa (19707) is a medieval hall with a near intact northern cross-wing.

The Old Grammar School (26018) was opened in 1598, and the current stone building may be of this date. Portions of the Castle Hotel (17998) have been claimed as a mid-16th century timber-framed structure added to in the 18th century, but a recent reassessment points to all of this being of 19th-century origin. No. 3 Upper Clwyd Street (19705) may have a late medieval origin; nos 4a and 6 Well Street are perhaps late 15th-century in origin (19709), while No 2 Well Street, despite having a history traceable from 1401, in its present form and fabric suggests a date of the 16th to 17th century (19710). Other buildings with 16th-century work include nos 20 Castle Street (19711), 8 Well Street (26045), 33, 35 and 37 Clwyd Street (19713), and the Wynnstay Arms (19720)
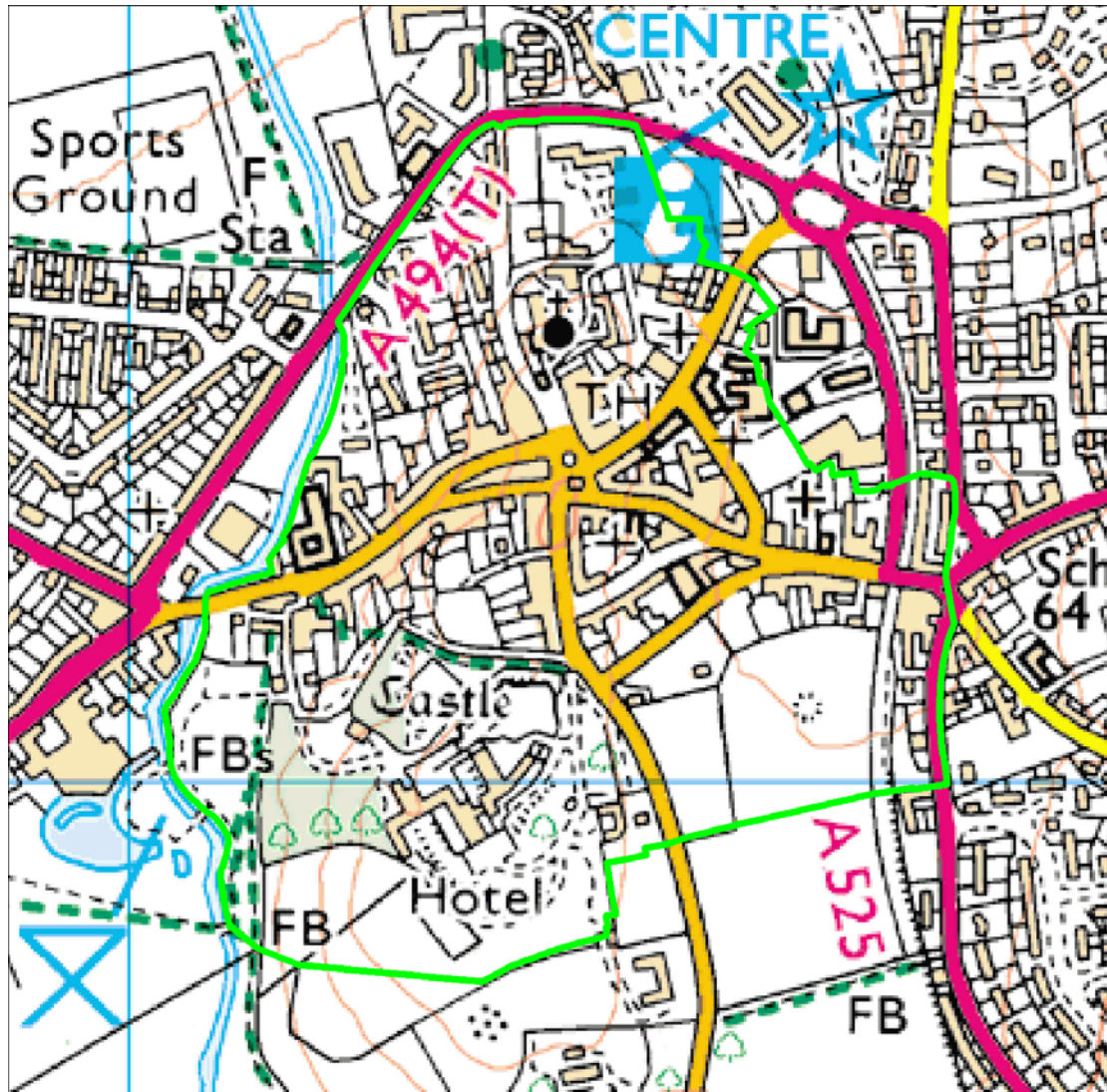
Seventeenth-century buildings: include nos 11 and 11a St Peter's Square (19706); 12 St Peter's Square (26024); no.7 Castle Street (19708); nos 39 and 41 Clwyd Street (19714); nos 47 and 49 Clwyd Street (19715); no. 51 Clwyd Street, though it may be earlier (19716); no. 53 Clwyd Street (19717); nos 32 and 34 Clwyd Street with a 16th/17th-century frame (19718); the Waterloo Club on Upper Clwyd Street (19719) in which a fine carved oak overmantle with the date 1611 has been recorded. Parallels can be made between the cruck details of 15

Rhos Street, (26016) and the Ship Inn on Rhos Street, which had 5 great cruck frames, but was demolished in 1950; no. 11 Well Street (26035); and nos 24 and 26 Well Street (19721), a large early 17th-century town-house, unusual for its stone construction in this area and built for the constable of the castle. On the west side of the river nos 5-7 Mwrog Street are also perhaps 17th century, and there are undoubtedly other equally early buildings in the town whose external appearance is later in date. Recent discoveries (2012) at 73 Clwyd Street revealed the gable end of a timber-framed building thought to date to around 1600; it has been suggested that this building may be related to the former mill complex.

A small sub-square mound (PRN 100867) lies 200m to the east of the castle, its date and function unknown, though a medieval or later date has been assumed. Other, uncharacterised earthworks survive in the same field, some though not all probably of natural origin.

Archaeological watching briefs have revealed evidence of both medieval and post-medieval activity close to the heart of the town at Ruthin. In Record Street, evidence of smithying associated with 14th-15th century pottery came to light during an archaeological evaluation in 2005. In Clwyd Street, to the rear of the main street frontage, two separate watching briefs carried out in 2004 revealed evidence of possible medieval buildings and around the Town Hall, 15th or 16th-century pottery and residues from a possible tanning workshop.

Further away from the historic core of the town an assemblage of medieval pottery was recovered in the grounds of Ysgol Brynhyfryd in 2002, and a medieval buckle plate was unearthed in 2006, confirming medieval occupation nearby. Also in 2006, excavations also revealed the remnants of a possible timber building. Although this was sealed by post-medieval deposits, it has not been firmly dated. The remains of a possible field system were also uncovered, noted to be of a different alignment to the modern boundaries.