

St Asaph

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Introduction

St Asaph lies towards the north coast of Wales, 7.5km south-west of Rhyl and 8.5 km north of Denbigh. The A525, running north/south through the Vale of Clwyd, passes through the settlement, and the A55 east/west trunk road bypasses its northern perimeter.

The small town, recently elevated to city status lies on a hill spur between the Rivers Clwyd and Elwy. The cathedral is situated at the top of the hill, and the High Street, running westwards, slopes downwards from it to the bridge over the Elwy. The older part of the settlement is situated on the slopes below the cathedral on the east side of the River Elwy. The town expanded greatly during the 19th and 20th centuries from this small core and housing now extends much further north and south along the hillside and also covers the valley floor west of the river.

This brief report examines the emergence and development of St Asaph 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

The settlement derives its Welsh name of Llanelwy from the River Elwy which runs through it. A monastery and mother church (*clas*) and an episcopal see are believed to have been founded here in the later 6th century AD by the exiled holy man, Cyndeyrn (St Kentigern). The monastery grew and is said, almost certainly hyperbolically, to have contained no fewer than 965 brethren, some devoted to religious instruction, and some to labour and secular pursuits. On Kentigern's return to Scotland, St Asaph (Asaff), a native of North Wales, succeeded him as bishop and whose name was adopted for the settlement. The *clas* may well have continued, but the bishopric fell into abeyance until it was re-founded in the Norman reorganisation of the Welsh Church. It was the last of the four episcopal sees to be established.

The first reliable historical reference to St Asaph is in 1143 when the bishopric is recorded as *Lanelvensis Ecclesiae*, while the 1291 taxation of Pope Nicholas provides the first naming of St Asaph, *Ecclesia Cathedralis de Sancto Asaph*. *Llan Elwy alias S. Asaphe* is given in 1536.

Speed's plan of the town in 1610 (all four cathedral settlements in Wales were drawn) shows a small, quite scattered settlement, of less than fifty dwellings. The cathedral, church and the Bishop's Palace are indicated, also a mill and mill race at the bottom of the High Street. The river at this time appears to have flowed closer to the town. The only notable concentration of

houses is shown in the area of Lower Street, with a few more on Gemig Street, High Street and at the bottom of Red Hill. Mount Road/Upper Denbigh Road is present and also a road along the south side of the cathedral running past Esgobty Farm and down to the river. Chester Street did not yet exist. The bridge over the Elwy at this date seems to have been further north than today, somewhere in the area of Lllys y Felin.

Richard Colt Hoare travelling through north Wales in 1801 stated that ‘the epithet *paupercula* [=poor] applied by Giraldus [Cambrensis] to this place in former days may be equally applied at present. The town is small, situated on the declivity of a hill; at the bottom is the parish church, at the top the cathedral whose only merit is its neatness. From the bridge over the Elwy the town, cathedral, parish church etc form a picturesque group of buildings’. A description of the town in 1833 mentions the construction of a 'new road' (which would appear to be Chester Street) with 'several handsome houses and pleasing cottages'. The Tithe map of 1845, although giving no details of the town centre, shows the existence of most of the present day roads.

The heritage to 1750

St Asaph Cathedral (102126) is cruciform in plan with a central tower and an aisled and clerestoried nave. With a length of little more than 55m, it is the smallest of the cathedrals in England and Wales. Building is known to have been in progress by 1239, but much of the cathedral was rebuilt probably between 1284-1381, having been burnt during the Edwardian Conquest in 1282. After its completion with the building of the tower in 1391-2, the cathedral was burned again, by Owain Glyndŵr in 1402. This necessitated re-roofing and other restoration work. There has been further restoration and repair work over the years, with a major one by Sir Gilbert Scott in 1867-75, and another in 1929-32. There are a number of 19th-century buildings associated with the cathedral. These include the Diocesan registry, a canonry (now Kentigern Hall) and Dean Williams Library.



St Asaph, photo 87-C-0189, © CPAT 2014

Esgobty farm (32269) lying to the south-west of the cathedral was an earlier Bishop's Palace. The T-shaped house has 16th/17th-century timber-framed origins, and an early to mid 18th-

century brick casing. A barn and stable range and also a 17th-century dovecote are all associated.

The old Bishop's palace (102125), also to the south-west of the cathedral, was built by Bishop Bagot in 1791 and enlarged to the west in 1831. It is thought to be built on the site of an earlier palace dated 1634, itself the successor to Esgobty. The building has now been converted into flats, which involved the demolition of the south wing and the building of a modern brick range. Palace Gardens (32255) was formerly the coach house to the 1791 Bishop's Palace and is probably contemporary with it. There is a curved section of stone wall (106456) near the Old Palace, built of large sandstone and limestone blocks. It survives to a height of around 3m, and has openings in it, now partially blocked; its function is not known, but it may possibly have been agricultural.

Tithe Barn House (32254) is a late 17th/early 18th-century building with possible 16th-century origins. It has later alterations and has been converted to a house.

The Church of St Kentigern and St Asaph (102123), situated at the bottom end of the High Street, was built to serve the parish, but probably represents the site of the pre-Norman Conquest mother church. The double-naved church is mainly Perpendicular in style but has earlier Gothic origins. At the west end of the church there is a visible change in the masonry between the earlier southern part and the Perpendicular northern extension. The nave and north aisle are divided by an arcade of five bays. There were formerly a few early floriated crosses in the church and churchyard.

The churchyard (105825) belonging to the parish church has an irregular, but vaguely circular outline, also indicative of an early origin. The churchyard sundial (32239) is possibly as early as the 6th-century date. It has a square base and a circular stem, and stands 1.4m high. The circular top has holes for a dial plate. Other sundials in St Asaph (32224) include one in the grounds of 'The Bryn', Chester Street, dated to 1588, and another (32246) at Kentigern Hall dated 1696.

A mother church would almost certainly have had a precinct larger than the churchyard that we see now. It has recently been suggested (by one of the writers) that the line of Cemig Street followed this larger and earlier enclosure, but not traceable south of High Street because of the imposition of successive bishop's palaces. That High Street was later than this early circuit is suggested by the slight shift in alignment of the former where the two meet.

Listed buildings are considered below and include the Old China Shop and China House/Kirkside (32258), on Lower Street. This is sub-medieval in origin and is said to date back to 1580 and to have been a convent associated with the Parish Church, though whether there is a factual basis for this is less certain.

The High Street contains a large number of listed buildings dating from the 17th to 20th centuries. The following are amongst the earliest ones: The Kimmel Arms (now named Kentigern Arms) public house (32240) has late 17th-century origins but incorporates later alterations and was formerly a brewery; Beulah House (32252) has 17th-century origins, but Victorian and modern alterations; and towards the bottom of the High Street, No.1 (32241) is a later 17th/early 18th-century structure, with subsequent alterations.

St Asaph almshouses (102122) were founded by Bishop Barrow in 1680 to house eight widows, but were rebuilt in 1795. The present brick-built single-storey structure has a U-plan. The building is presently used as a restaurant.

The Red Lion Public House (32229) on Gemig Street probably dates to the late 16th/early 17th century, but has later alterations. The building is of two storeys with a slate roof.

St Asaph Bridge (102567) was built in 1770, and is a five-arch, stone bridge over the River Elwy to which a modern footpath has been added. It replaced a timber structure in a slightly different location, but the absence of a bridge on John Speed's map suggests that there was only a ford across the river at the beginning of the 17th century; this in turn could have implications for the growth of settlement on the west bank of the river, though the presence of the Old Deanery (for which see below) suggests that access was not a fundamental problem.

Roe Gau (32259) on Mill Street was built in 1778, but is said to have earlier origins. The two-storey brick-built house is now divided into two dwellings.

Further out from the town centre are one or two other listed buildings worthy of note: The Old Deanery (32226), west of St Asaph Bridge, was probably built in the 17th century, though altered later. On Glascoed Road, the Hendre and Plas yn Roe were formerly one property known as Plas yn Roe (40422), an L-plan building of probably 17th-century cross-passage design. April cottage is probably late 17th-early 18th-century. Bronwylfa (105837) on the north-east edge of town was erected in 1660 and enlarged in 1816. The present Bronwylfa was built in 1930s.

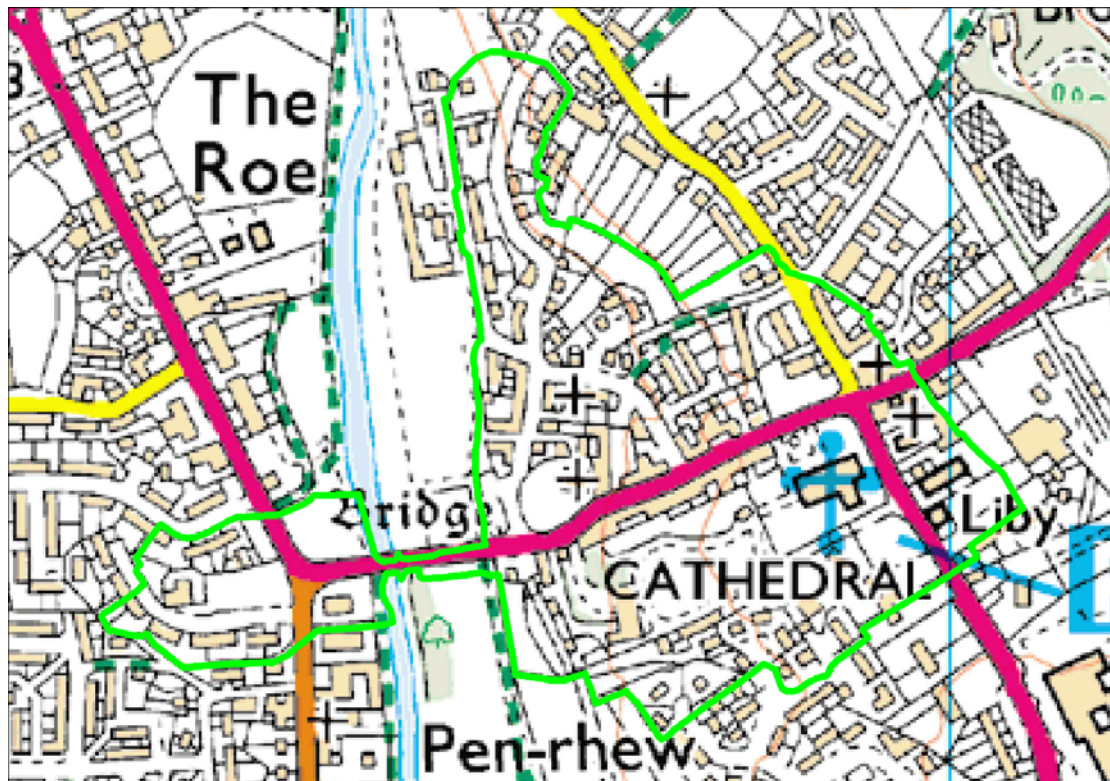
St Asaph Corn Mill (103097), a water-powered corn mill, formerly existed probably in the vicinity of the garage at the bottom of the High Street. The line of the millrace is still discernible to the south, now appearing as a shallow dry ditch. A deed of 1353 refers to a water corn mill in St Asaph close to the Bishop's Palace, and later, Speed's map of 1610 shows a mill hereabouts.

A faint rectangular earthwork of 3 acres (102120), lying south west of the cathedral, was excavated in 1952 in the anticipation of discovering the lost Roman centre of *Varis*, but their work revealed only banks of medieval or later date. At Kentigern Hall, an area of 30 square metres was excavated (102926) in 1981 in order to find some evidence of the fort; only post-medieval building remains were revealed. It has been speculated that the fort may have been located near the H.M. Stanley Hospital or Bryn Polyn where pottery and tile fragments have been found.

There have been relatively few new archaeological discoveries in St Asaph since the first report on Denbighshire settlements was compiled in the 1990s. Those few discoveries that have been made, however, are significant in their findings.

During work in 2003 and again in 2007, collections of architectural fragments were found in amongst material of relatively modern date adjacent to the Cathedral boundary wall. It is possible that some of these pieces originated from the Cathedral, particularly fragments of window tracery, thought to be late medieval in date. Archaeological monitoring of land between Church House and the Cathedral uncovered a few fragments of medieval floor tile in 2004.

An archaeological evaluation on land to the south-west of the cathedral in the Deanery Gardens in 2005 identified a number of gullies and medieval rubbish pits. A significant quantity of medieval pottery was also recovered, all of a high status and firmly dated to the 13th-14th centuries. A significant number of pottery sherds from the 15th-17th centuries were also found, along with fragments of medieval stained window glass and ridge tile. Activity at the Deanery Gardens is clearly significant and implies there may have been an associated high status medieval building close by.



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