

New Radnor

SO 212608
16181

Introduction

New Radnor lies about 10km north-west of Kington in Herefordshire and 20km north-east of Builth Wells. It was established on the north side of the Summergil Brook where the stream breaks out of the narrow valley hemmed in by Radnor Forest on the north and Highgate Hill and the Smatcher on the south, to the lower lands of the Walton Basin. A spur projecting into the valley from the southern slopes of Radnor Forest was adapted for the castle earthworks which guarded the approaches to and from one of the more accessible passes into mid Wales. Subsequently the town was laid out on flatter ground below the castle.

This brief report examines New Radnor'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. A detailed topographical survey of the town was prepared as an internal report by the Trust in 1994 and much of that work was subsequently published in 1997 as 'New Radnor: the topography of a medieval planted town in mid-Wales', in N. Edwards (ed) *Landscape and Settlement in Medieval Wales* Oxford: Oxbow Books, 157-64.

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.



New Radnor, photo 88-C-0050, © CPAT, 2011

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).

History of development

New Radnor first appears in the records as *Radenore Nova* in 1277, though the lordship of Radnor as *Radenovere* is earlier. Indeed, *Raddrenove* appears as early as Domesday Book (1086) but is generally accepted to refer to Old Radnor, and it has been postulated that the need to distinguish between the two only became imperative when the borough was founded at New Radnor in the late 12 or early 13th century. A suggestion that a late Saxon *burh* was established here by Harold Godwinson after his campaign against Gruffudd ap Llywelyn has received little support from modern commentators.

The Welsh equivalent of New Radnor is Maesyfed, appearing as *maes hewed* about 991 (though recorded for that date only in a late 13th-century source), when it probably referred to the valley as a whole. *Hyfaidd* is a personal name but nothing is known of him.

The earthwork castle may have been thrown up by Philip de Breos, one of the Marcher barons as early as the last decade of the 11th century, in a prominent location controlling the valley to the south: the size of it would bear comparison with another de Breos motte at Builth Wells. Possibly a settlement began to emerge around it in the decades that followed but not in the form that we see it today.

However, it may be that by 1188 when Baldwin the Archbishop of Canterbury came to Radnor which was his starting point in Wales for preaching the First Crusade, a town was in existence, for it seems unlikely that the small settlement of Old Radnor would have been raced by such a high-profile event. Seven years later the town and castle of Radnor were captured by Rhys ap Gruffydd.

The borough that emerged at the base of the castle was undoubtedly a deliberately created plantation. Initially slow to establish itself, it underwent a rapid population expansion in the 14th century. The 97 burgesses in the returns of 1301 each paying 2s a year rent, had nearly doubled to 189 holding 262 and a half plots, three years later. A return of 13 pounds on rents and tolls in 1360 indicates a prosperous settlement by the standards of the day. No borough charter survives, but until the second half of the 16th century, it was recognised as a borough by prescription. Elizabeth I granted it a charter of incorporation.

A murage grant for constructing town defences was obtained in 1257, and is apparently the first mention of the town in the official records, with further grants in 1280, 1283 and 1290. A weekly market was operating early in the 14th century, and a charter for a yearly fair was obtained in 1306. An *Inquisition Post Mortem* on Edmund Mortimer in 1336 mentions a market and two fairs, the burgages and other rents at this time being worth 10 pounds.

The later Middle Ages also witnessed a decline in the prosperity of the town. Leland (c.1538) noted that the 'towne was defacyd in Henry the Fowthe dayes by Owen Glindowr' and that 'the castle is in ruine'. It was 'metley well wallyd, and in the walle appere the ruines of iiii gates', 'the buildyng of the towne in some parte meatly good, in moste part but rude, many howsys beinge thakyd [thatched]'. Speed's plan of 1611 shows large open areas within the town, surely reflecting a considerable reduction in the number of burgage plots recorded in the early 14th century. Notwithstanding Leland's comments, it has been claimed that the castle

was occupied by the Royalists during the Civil War and was successfully besieged by the Parliamentarians.

It was made the shire town for Radnorshire in 1536, perhaps because it was the only place in the county that preserved the semblance of a castle, and the only one that could be used as a prison. From 1562 it had borough status, signalled by the first extant charter. The Borough covered an area of 28000 acres, had its own Recorder, coroner, receiver and sergeants-at-mace, and was governed by a corporation of 25 'capital burgesses'. It held its own Quarter Sessions and the borough gaol was in New Radnor in Broad Street, where the Eagle Hotel now stands, opposite the Town Hall. And from the 16th century until the 19th century there were four annual fairs. But by 1731 only 7 burgesses were left and the charter was suspended, though seven years later a new charter of incorporation was issued. The parliamentary constituency was dissolved in 1880, the borough in 1886.

The heritage to 1750

The castle

New Radnor Castle (1075; SAM Rd033) consists of a motte sculpted from a natural hillock, overlooking the town and commanding a major route into Elvel. The hillock is surmounted by an oval enclosure defied by a comparatively low ring bank within which building foundations are still visible. Two massive ditches defend it on the north and west. Some of a stone-built keep was still visible in 1815 and part of the curtain wall supposedly survived into the mid-19th century. Six or seven pointed arches were dug out in 1773, further arches and some weapons were uncovered in 1818 and in 1864 extensive excavations revealed foundation walls, arched doorways and windows, and a well in the castle dungeon. Sometime after 1791 the local squire modified the castle mound to produce a 'wide promenade'.

To the north-west of the mound is the bailey with a complex of earthworks including faint ridge and furrow both within and outside it.



New Radnor castle, photo 92-MB-0016, © CPAT, 2011

The town defences

The 13th-century town defences (1076; SAM Rd050), consisting of bank and ditch perhaps originally with a timber palisade, demarcated a sub-square area some 10.5ha in extent. A substantial bank up to 2.7m high, and ditch up to 1m deep with a low, much spread outer bank survives in places on the south-western side. At several points, a drystone revetment is still visible in a variable state of preservation. There are also remnants of the defences on the south-west and north-east. On the former, the bank and ditch are visible as far north as Church Street. Beyond this building and other works in the vicinity of the Porth have masked the line, but to the north of the house is a stretch of low bank with a stream channel outside and these certainly represent the line of the defences as far as the castle earthworks. On the north-east, a scarp bank is visible for a short distance, although the original bank may have been spread outwards in the school playing field. The only place where an inner drop to the bank is visible is in the field behind Watergate Farm, a width in excess of 20m. The defences return on the north-west, east of Mutton Dingle, but here are at their least obvious. The ditch is represented by a field access track hollowed to a considerable depth and in the field raised above it on the south are traces of the town bank.

There were four gates through the defences: the West Gate - also referred to as the High Gate - at the end of Church Street, the South Gate at the bottom of Water Street, the North Gate leading through the castle fortifications towards Radnor Forest, and the East Gate onto the Presteigne road. The original tracks leading to these can be discerned in places, particularly Newgate Lane running in from the west, but the gates themselves have gone.

The church

The first record of a church here is in 1291. The precise position of the old church (PAR 5240) is not known but at one point Leland recorded that it lay in the churchyard and elsewhere noted that it was not very far from 'the new parochie churche buildyd by one William Bachefeld and Flory his wyfe' in the 14th century. The present church of St Mary (20112) was erected between 1843 and 1845 to replace Bachefeld's church and consists of a west tower over a porch, a nave with small transepts and a curious chancel. Richard Haslam has classed this as 'an extreme case of unsuitable rebuilding', and there can be no doubt that it is the most disappointing element of this most interesting historic settlement.

A circular cross head (5237), almost certainly a part of a medieval grave slab, is built into a barn wall on the north side of High Street.

The street pattern

The modern street pattern within the settlement reflects the medieval grid plan. Three streets ran from south-west to north-east, four others from north-west to south-east. Some of these streets have now partly or wholly disappeared. Hall Lane continued west of what is now termed Rectory Lane. West of Bank Buildings this continuation can be seen as a flat linear depression about 4m wide. Similarly the east to west alignment of Rectory Lane continued through the garden of Ashfield and into OS plot 1570 where it is discernible as a broad hollow nearly 12m wide swinging northwards to link with a fenced-off hollow in OS plot 0675 which then becomes the track passing to the west of Springfield.

Outside the defences, Newgate Lane is a sunken trackway on the outskirts of town, approaching the castle from the west.

The town cross stood at the junction of Broad Street and High Street. Part of it was still extant in 1814 but it had been completely removed by the turn of the 20th century.

Houses and burgages

Earthworks indicating the position of former buildings survive in fields on the south side of the town. In OS plot 1570, a bank up to 2m wide and 0.8m high defines a sub-rectangular area

11m by 8m (SO 2118 6072) beside the former lane. Further west there are the ephemeral traces of a terraced platform at right-angles to the lane (SO 2124 6074). The same field has at least two and perhaps three slight linear banks running on a north-west/south-east axis and perhaps representing old tenement boundaries.

The field to the north - OS plot 1576 - contains, on its southern edge another similar sub-rectangular foundation bank (SO 2116 6073) against the old lane. Much of the field shows faint ridge and furrow.

The unnumbered field surrounding Bank Buildings on the north and west also has earthworks. Most relate to field divisions still in evidence at the beginning of this century, but one running off at right-angles from the south-western arm of the farm buildings could indicate the presence of a former structure. An evaluation here in 2005 demonstrated the excellent survival of medieval building foundations and led to the statutory designation of the site..

The unnumbered plot behind Water Street Farm also contains faint earthworks in the pasture, probably but not certainly relict ridge and furrow. OS plot 0685 on the north side of Church Street contains various earthworks representing house platforms and enclosure boundaries.

A corn-drying kiln, probably of late medieval or Tudor date was excavated in 1988 in advance of the construction of a Community Hall in Hall Street.

Standing buildings

Many of New Radnor's houses are of 18th-19th-century date. There are however a few from earlier centuries. No 8 Church Street (Swan House; 16068; Grade II listing) is 15th-century in origin, the truncated remains of a high quality, late medieval, cruck-built house, re-faced in stone in the 19th century. Nos 1 and 2 High Street (16069; Grade II listing) were formerly part of 'The Cross Inn', built in the 17th century but altered and divided in the 19th century. No 11 High Street (16070; Grade II listing) was originally timber-framed of 16th or 17th-century origin, partly rebuilt and refaced in stone, and no 10 adjacent to it was in the past linked to it, but is 18th-century in date. Brookside Farm (16071; Grade II listing) with its U-shaped plan is also 16th/17th century in origin, its timber-framing re-fronted in stone in the 19th century, and some of its outbuildings are mid-18th-century. The south wing is mainly timber-framed and shows evidence of the re-use of earlier timbers.

No.9 Broad Street (Station House) and No.10 (Yew Tree Cottage) are earlier 18th-century in origin.

A town hall (or Guild Hall) stood at the junction of Hall Lane and Broad Street and in the 1562 charter was described as 'The Buthall'. It was demolished in the 19th century.

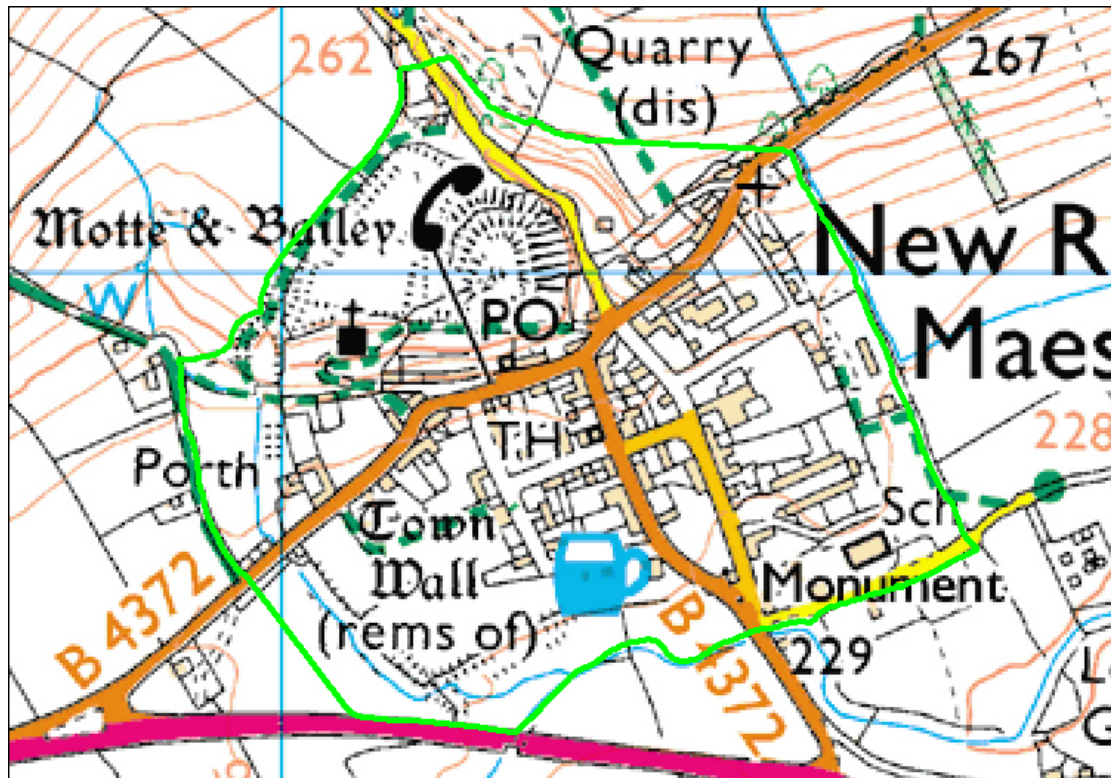
The mill

There was a mill called 'Heynesmyll' in the charter of 1562, which as depicted by Speed lay beside the Dingle Brook which ran through the town having flowed down from the north. The 'Old Mill Pond' has now been infilled and partly built over, although an encircling embankment is still visible. The mill leat which fed in from the north has also been largely obscured, but its eastern edge can still be recognised where it diverges from the stream.

The fields

A gradually diminishing number of hedged strip fields survive to the west, south and south-east of the town. They certainly reflect the medieval pattern of arable farming fossilising the open-field strips. No traces of ridge and furrow can now be seen.

New Radnor is of particular rarity and rarity in Powys. It is the best example of a shrunken medieval planted in the county, and one of the best in the whole of Wales.



Reproduced by permission of Ordnance Survey® on behalf of HMSO. © Crown copyright and database right 2009.
All rights reserved. Welsh Assembly Government. Licence number 100017916.