Rhayader

SN 972682
16191

Introduction

The small town of Rhayader is sited on the east bank of River Wye opposite its much smaller but earlier neighbour, Llansantffraid Cwmdeuddwr. For much of its central reaches the river has cut a steep-sided valley, but here where it is joined by the Rhyd-hir Brook and, a little further south, Afon Elan, the ground flattens out, allowing an easier crossing. The town has developed on a spur which deflects the river around the crag surmounted by the medieval castle.

This brief report examines Rhayader'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.

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.

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).

Rhayader town, photo 03-C-0566, © CPAT, 2011

History of development

The original name of the town was *Rayadyr Gwy*, meaning 'the waterfall on the Wye' and was first documented in 1177. *Rayader* appears in 1295. The waterfall was replaced by rapids, apparently in 1780 when the river course was reconfigured during the construction of a new bridge. There is no known earlier medieval predecessor here, and until 1735 Rhayader lay in the ecclesiastical parish of Nantmel.

The castle appears in 'The Chronicles of the Princes' in 1177-8, and was mentioned as being built by Rhys ap Gruffydd in the writings of Giraldus Cambrensis at the end of the century. It was supposedly not rebuilt in the wake of its destruction by Llywelyn the Great in 1231. This at least is the traditional story of its origins and development. Paul Remfrey in 1996 convincingly argued the castle of Rhaeadr-Gwy should be seen as the motte on the west side of the river in Llansantffraed Cwmdeuddwr, and that the castle in Rhaeadr itself was a replacement of that on the west bank, built by the Mortimers around 1200. This has yet to be resolved. Skeletons which were laid out regularly were found during the construction of a new church tower in 1783 and were thought to be the defeated garrison of 1231, though this view should perhaps be treated with caution.

The settlement was first referred to as a 'vill' in 1304, and accounts from 1360-1 and again in 1371 shows that rents were derived from burgages. However, no charter has been identified and it is therefore generally considered to have been a borough by prescription. It lay to the east of the castle with burgages along the two main streets and a market place at their junction. Markets and a fair had also been granted by charter in the 13th century. Earthwork defences (3558) around the town have been inferred from documents and identified by local antiquaries.

The town suffered at the hands of Glyndŵr in the early 15th century. It subsequently developed as a local market centre and for a while was the home of the County Court and the Court of Great Sessions before their transferral to Presteigne, supposedly after the murder of a judge in the town.

A small woollen industry developed here in the 18th century, and there were three mills early in the following century. Jonathan Williams, the county historian at the turn of the 19th century thought it a considerable market-town and place of trade.

The heritage to 1750

Only the site of Rhayader Castle (257; SAM Rd132) is known, a shelf overlooking the Wye where it bends sharply. Reputedly it comprised a low motte with a quadrangular bailey; the foundations of the masonry buildings within the castle earthworks were destroyed before 1858. Much of the ditch around the earthworks has also disappeared, used as a Council rubbish tip, though there is an interesting if somewhat confused description of its layout given by Williams. The site is now an open space, its surface irregular and unintelligible. A quarry divides this part of the natural shelf from that occupied by the church further to the north-east. Opportunities for archaeological investigation of part of this sensitive area were missed prior to modern house building.

St Clement's Church (16049; formerly dedicated to St Cynllo) was built between 1887 and 1897, replacing a building of *c*.1772. Of its earlier, medieval predecessor the only survival is an 11th or 12th-century font. As noted above there is nothing to suggest that this was an early medieval foundation, and the churchyard is rectilinear in form. Williams, perhaps plausibly, suggested that the church may have lain within the outworks of the castle.

A Dominican friary cell (3529) is said to have existed at the west end of Rhayader Bridge until the Dissolution, but its existence has been refuted by more recent writers than antiquaries such as Samuel Lewis and Williams. However, the latter claimed that a map of *c*.1770, no longer traceable, showed a tenement and small field on the east bank of the river which was called 'The Black Friars'.

Close to the river, the holy well of Ffynnon Fair (256) was destroyed by road works in the 19th century. Another holy well, the Black Well (3559) is said to have been situated between the castle and church, and provided the water supply for the former. No traces of this feature now survive.

The street pattern with two roads crossing at right-angles more than 200m east of the castle indicates a sustained degree of urban planning, seemingly confirming this as a plantation. Yet the network of narrow streets beside the castle has the appearance of early growth and the earliest surviving buildings (see below) lie closer to the castle where Church Street joins West Street. While there appears to be no substantive evidence for pushing the crossroads area back into the medieval period, only archaeological excavation can prove this one way or the other. To date signs of medieval activity have been elusive with archaeological work, usually in the form of watching briefs, failing to identify any remains from this era.

Claims have been made that the line of the town defences can be detected in the limits of property boundaries at Rhayader, and late 19th-century Ordnance Survey maps certainly appear to portray a rather distinctive outline which is less obvious today because of modern changes to the townscape. The area so defined, however, is a very small one, little more than 4.5 hectares. On the north side this would mean the church stood outside the enclosed area. Williams late in the 18th century claimed that it was possible to trace the lines of the original earthwork that surrounded the town, but for reasons which can only be guessed at, determined that they were pre-Roman in date. As yet the presence of town defences at Rhayader cannot be confirmed.

Amongst the oldest buildings in the town are the Royal Oak with a 17th-century stone house incoprrated ito the rear of the propoerty, the Cwmdeuddwr Arms (16050) of 17th-century type, and the Old Swan (16051) is a humble timber-framed building dating to 1683, an inn that later became the tourist information office for a while. Opposite this the Corner Shop on the south side of East Street also has early to mid-17th-century origins. The Lamb and Flag Inn is probably of 18th-century build but incorporates a timber-framed roof truss of before c.1700, and there is another house in East Street of 18th-century date, though the Royal Commission do not specific its number. The Black Lion in North Street has a datestone of 1748 but this appears to be re-set in an essentially 19th-century building. The majority of older buildings in the town are of later origin.
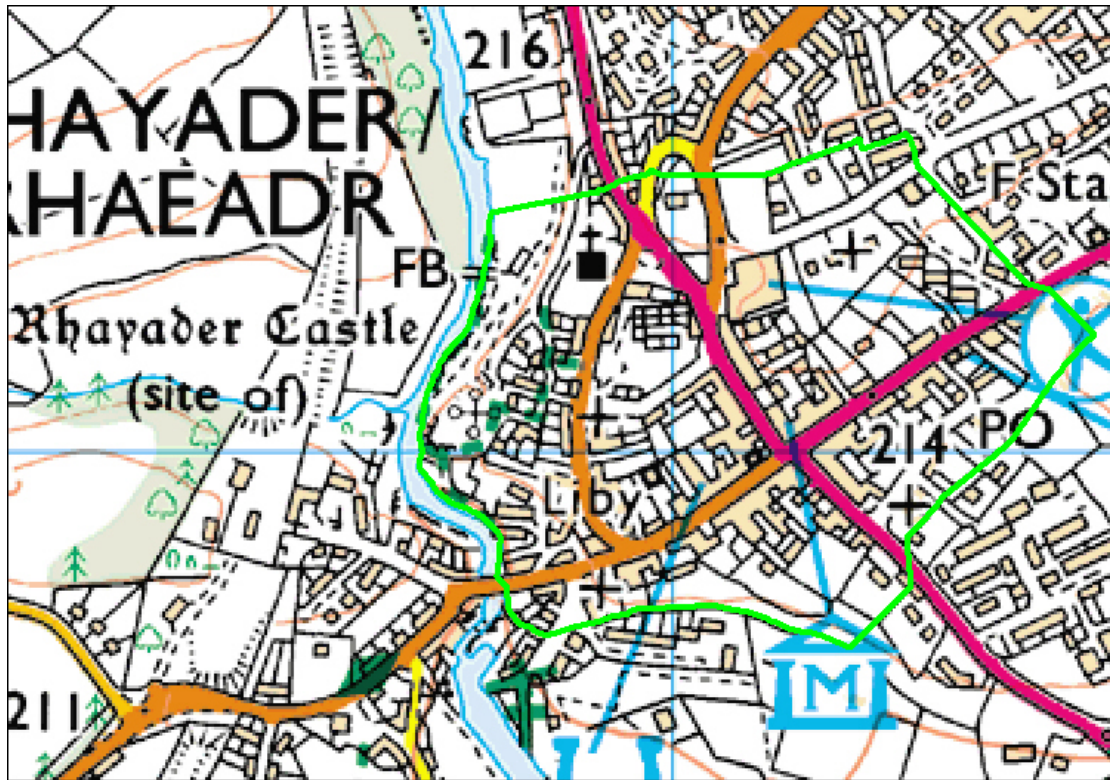
The town hall, a stone and timber edifice, lay at the junction of the two main streets but was built as late as 1762. It was demolished in 1922.

The town mill stood below the castle on the east side of the river.

The bridge over the Wye was erected in 1780, replacing an earlier structure in timber, a little higher upstream, which in turn succeeded the ford, the site of which can be detected beyond the weirs where Water Lane runs down to the river.

A curious structure consisting of a small chamber formed by boulders (3743) lay to the north-east of Rhayader Bridge and has been variously interpreted as an ice-house, cist burial or drain. It is included here because of these various views but it is perhaps much more likely to

have functioned as a root-store or something similar. It was under threat in 1979 and has now probably been destroyed.

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