

CPAT Report No 1019

Underground Cabling adjacent to Brecon Town Wall

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF



THE CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

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I Grant

December 2009

Report for Western Power Distribution

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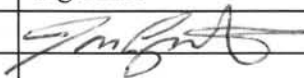
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CPAT Report Record

Report and status

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1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 In October 2009 the Field Services Section of the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust (CPAT) was invited by Mr Mark Turrell of Western Power Distribution to undertake an archaeological watching brief during the installation of an underground electricity cable along the southern edge of the scheduled area for Brecon Town Wall (Fig. 3; SAM Br 150). The watching brief was required by Cadw as a condition of scheduled monument consent, and was detailed in a letter from them to Western Power dated 8th October 2009.
- 1.2 Although part of the groundworks fell outside and adjacent to the scheduled area, the watching brief was maintained throughout all of the excavations in order to determine the extent of any potentially significant archaeological deposits.

2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

- 2.1 No documentary sources exist to establish the date at which the town was encompassed by defences. On the basis of murage grants for other towns in the region, however, it is likely that the walls were in position by the mid-13th century. Possibly they were preceded by earthen defences, for it is difficult to envisage an expanding settlement surviving undefended during this period. The walls were first recorded in 1314, in 1402, and again in 1483 when Richard III made a grant of £60 for their repair, all periods of unrest. The earliest description of the town walls and gates appears in the Itinerary of John Leland, written c.1536-39. The Tudor antiquarian described the town of Brecon as 'well walled' with four gates. John Speed reported them in good repair in 1610, but they were partially destroyed by the citizens of Brecon during the Civil War, and by the end of the century their condition had deteriorated markedly. In 1776 an Act of Parliament was passed allowing the townspeople to take down the Watton, Usk Bridge and Struet Gates and adjacent buildings because they impeded traffic. It must be assumed that the demolition occurred soon afterwards and that perhaps associated sections of the town wall disappeared at the same time. It has been claimed that the town ditch was still visible in the 19th century in the area known as Clawdd y Gaer, north of the town centre.
- 2.2 The defences are reported to have consisted, at least in their final form, of a strong stone wall with ten mural towers, some square (as is possible at Watton Mount) and some semi-circular, and four gates – the Watton Gate in the east, the Strowed (Struet) Gate in the north, the Bridge Gate towards Llanfaes and only a short distance away, the Water Gate presiding over the crossing of the Honddu. A substantial ditch is assumed on the north-east and south-east of the town, apparently filled with water by a stream running down Cerrig Cochion hill.
- 2.3 In 2003 excavations undertaken by Border Archaeology on the western side of Brecon, in an area bounded by Ship Street, the Watergate and Brecon Workmen's Social Club, revealed a semicircular structure interpreted as the lower level of a mural tower relating to the medieval town defences and incorporating what appeared to be an arrow slit on the northwest side. The foundations of the tower incorporated an ovoid, stone-lined pit at its base from which several fragments of wood were found. The wood has since been dated to 900-1180AD and 1116-1221AD respectively, attesting to earlier occupation of the site. Also found were the remains of a 1m thick stone wall running immediately to the north of the 'tower'. The wall appeared to have been substantially strengthened, being widened by over 2m, suggesting that such a substantial wall could only have served a defensive purpose and thus it is likely that this was the old town wall.
- 2.4 The Watton Mount is a high bank surmounted by a wall and tower behind the Government Offices off Free Street. The tower is thought to be early 19th century, perhaps a garden feature contemporary with the house to the south-west, but the wall itself incorporates the beginnings of a change in alignment at its north-eastern end and is certainly medieval. The best evidence for

earthen defences survives here, although the presence of an external ditch can only be surmised owing to the imposition of the Government Offices.

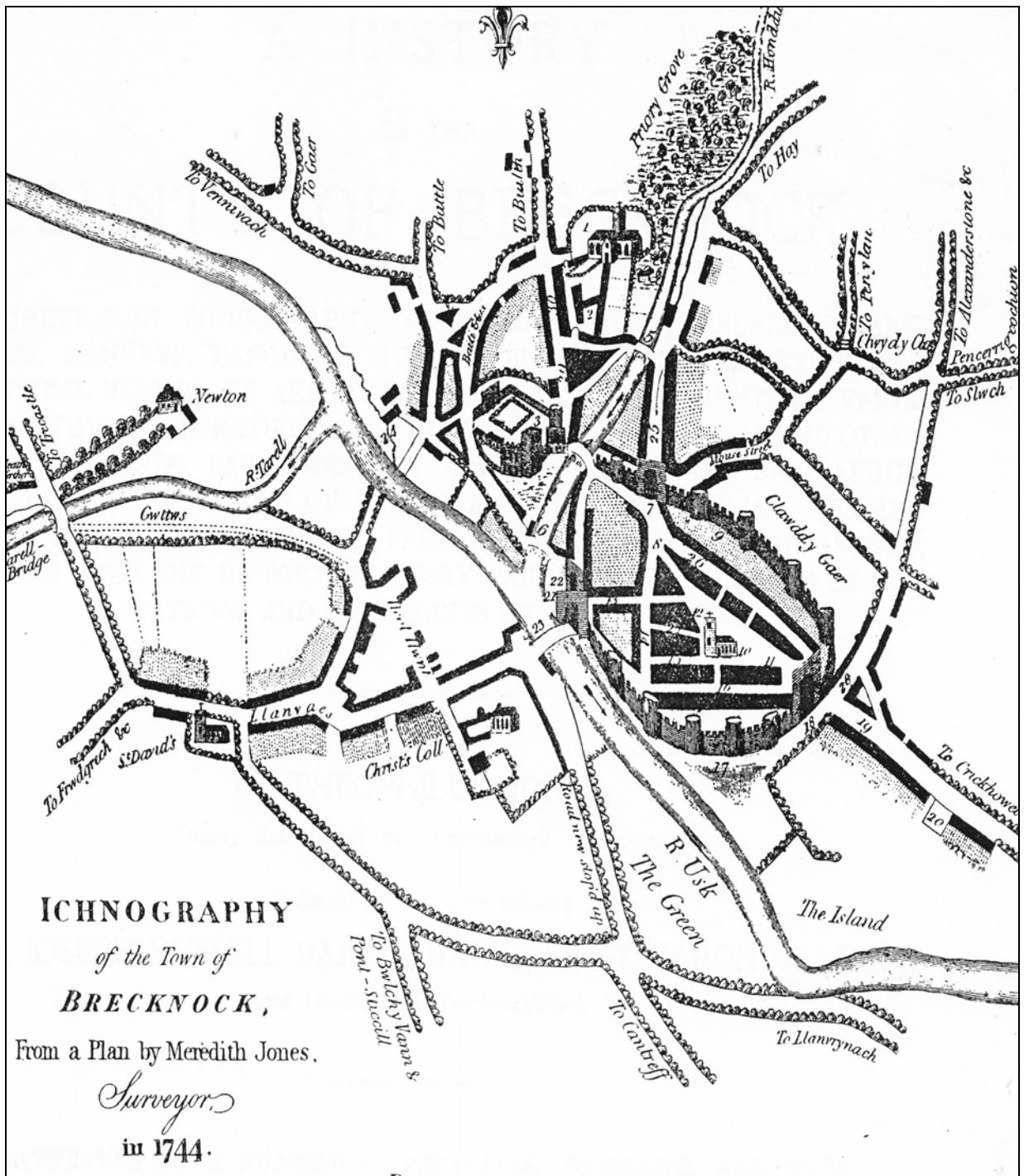


Fig 1. Plan of Brecon, Meredith Jones 1744.

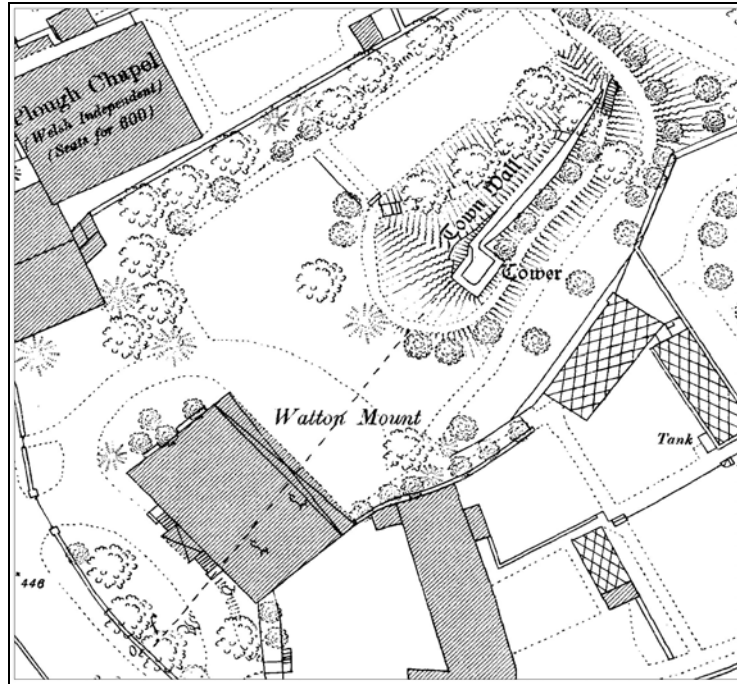


Fig 2. 1888 Ordnance Survey 1st edition 1:500 map of Brecon

3 LOCATION

3.1 The section of postulated town wall embankment observed during the watching brief lies immediately below and to the south-west of 'Watton Mount'. Watton Mount (probably rebuilt in the 19th century) comprises the ruined 13th-century north-east tower (possibly shown on Meredith Jones' map of 1744 (see Fig 1) but not on Speed of 1610). Here, the section of the medieval town wall runs parallel to Free Street and to the north-east of the County Education Offices (Fig 3; NGR SO 04679 28486).

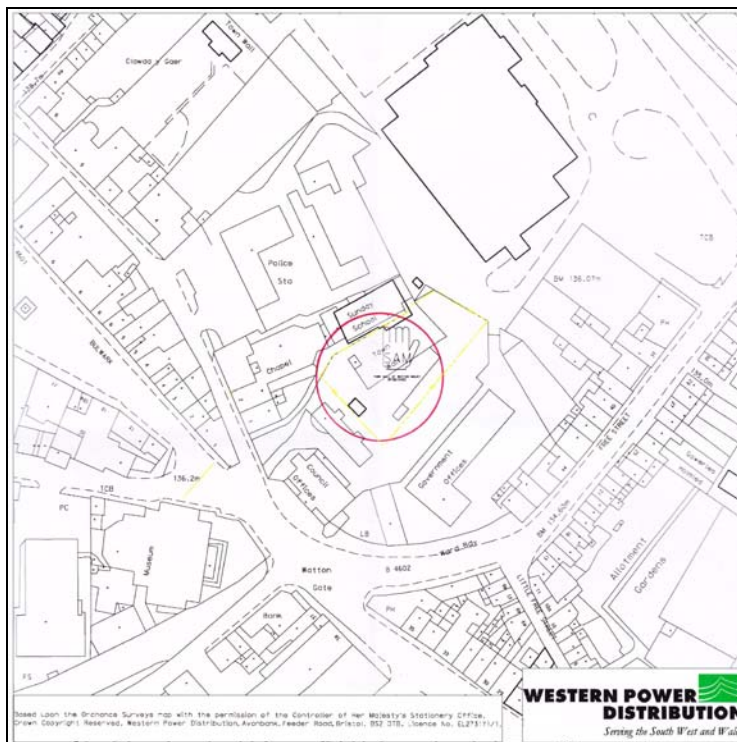


Fig. 3 Location of cabling works



Fig. 4 Location and layout of groundworks

4 WATCHING BRIEF

- 4.1 The watching brief was conducted between the 2nd and 3rd November 2009. A written, drawn and photographic record was maintained, a summary of which is provided in Appendix 1. The archive has subsequently been deposited with the regional Historic Environment Record.
- 4.2 Initial work began within the unscheduled area that comprised the compound of the existing sub-station. A trench 10m x 1.5m (orientated north-west to south-east) was machine excavated using a toothless bucket to a depth of up to 0.8m. This exposed all of the existing electrical cables in situ, and no further excavation was required within this area. The deposits removed were a mixture of dark brown silty clay, up to 0.6m thick, and an underlying reddish brown sandy clay. Both deposits were concluded to be the backfill of previous groundworks (See Plate 1).



Plate 1. Excavation within sub-station compound. Photo CPAT 2980-004

- 4.3 A few fragments of pottery of probable late medieval/early post-medieval origin were recovered together with numerous 18th and 19th-century ceramics, none of which were retained for the archive. Throughout the excavation the natural undisturbed subsoil was not observed in the base of the trench.
- 4.4 The second phase of the watching brief monitored excavations beyond, and to the west of, the sub-station compound. The initial area, approximately 5m x 4m and orientated north-west to south-east, was machine and hand-dug to a depth of up to 1m. Once again this exposed all of the existing electrical cables in situ. All of the excavated material was a mixture of re-deposited embankment gravels and modern backfill from 20th-century groundworks. Underlying the in-situ cables was a deposit of reddish-brown sandy clay overlying river-washed gravels and pebbles. These lower deposits could possibly be the in-situ remains of the material used in the construction of the 13th-century medieval embankment (See Plate 2.)
- 4.5 The third and final phase of the watching brief monitored the excavation of a narrow 1m x 0.5m service trench that extended north-west from the compound. The trench, located within the scheduled area, followed the line of a previously unrecorded service trench. Consequently all of the excavated material was of 20th-century origin. However, it was possible to see in the south-west facing section of the trench, underlying 0.6m of modern overburden, a deposit of re-deposited river gravels/pebbles. Speculatively, this could be material from the medieval town, but unfortunately no archaeological artefacts were recovered to corroborate this theory.



Plate 2. South-west facing section through scheduled area illustrating lower insitu deposits
Photo CPAT 2980-005

5 CONCLUSIONS

- 5.1 It is evident that the bank upon which the sub-station is sited has been heavily landscaped in the past fifty years. Therefore it can be assumed that any deposits of archaeological value have been removed from this part of the site.
- 5.2 All groundworks west of the sub-station (including the trench excavated within the scheduled area) were located within earlier (20th-century) groundworks. It has been assumed that the river-washed gravels mixed with sandy clay deposits, observed in section and at the base of the phase II excavation, are part of the construction material associated with the 13th-century medieval embankment. They remain in-situ and undisturbed by the recent groundworks.

6 ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

- 6.1 The writer would like to thank the following for their assistance: Cadw; Nigel Jones, CPAT; Mark Turrell, Western Power Distribution and the groundworks staff of both Bowen and Western Power Distribution.

7 REFERENCES

7.1 Documentary Sources

Silvester, R J , 1993. *Brecon Town Study*, CPAT Report No. 58.

Cruse, G, Priestly, S and Children, G, 2004. *Brecon Tower Research Project, Watergate, Brecon*, Brycheniog Volume 36 (15 –50), The Brecknock Society & Museum Friends.

7.2 Cartographic Sources

1610 John Speed: plan of Brecon

1744 Meredith Jones: plan of Brecon

1888 Ordnance Survey 1st edition 1:500 map of Brecon

APPENDIX 1

PROJECT ARCHIVE

Site records

00 context record forms

2 watching brief daily visit forms

00 A4 site drawings

00 A3 site drawing

07 digital photographs, CPAT film 2980

Photographic register