

# CHESHIRE HISTORIC TOWNS SURVEY

## Thelwall

### Archaeological Assessment



2003

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Front cover :

John Speed's Map of Lancashire 1610

Lancashire County Council <http://www.lancashire.gov.uk/environment/oldmap/index.asp>

# THELWALL

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

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### 1. SUMMARY

Strictly speaking Thelwall does not qualify, and never has qualified, as a town. However, it is included in the survey of Cheshire's Historic Towns because it was the site of a '*burh*' (a defended centre) in the early 10th century. Such sites were often created as, or grew into, trading centres and are therefore important examples of early urbanism in Cheshire.

The *burh* is the focus of this assessment, therefore only brief attention is paid to the medieval and post medieval settlement.

#### 1.1 Topography and Geology

Thelwall lies in northern Cheshire at around 15m AOD, on the fringes of Warrington whose centre lies 4km to the west. The River Mersey formerly passed immediately north of the village but was diverted when the Manchester Ship Canal was constructed. The underlying geology comprises Upper Mottled Sandstone, which is overlain by fluvio-glacial gravel.

The soils developed upon these deposits comprise typical humic-alluvial gley soils, which are suited to grass, particularly on the wetter ground. The better drained soils are graded class 3, the more waterlogged class 4 (Furness 1978, 177).

#### 1.2 Administrative Unit

The historic township of Thelwall formed a detached portion of Daresbury Chapelry, which was itself a division of Runcorn Parish. It was also part of Bucklow Hundred and the Deanery of Frodsham (Dunn 1987, 20, 27). Today Thelwall lies within the Civil Parish of Grappenhall and Thelwall within the Borough of Warrington.

#### 1.3 Place Name

Thelwall is first recorded in the Anglo Saxon Chronicle of AD 919 as *Thealwaele*, which translates as *deep pool at a plank* or perhaps as *pool with a plank bridge* (Dodgson 1970, 138). Dodgson suggests that the deep pool referred to may have been located in the River Mersey and that the *burh* was presumably established here to guard its crossing. Thelwall also occurs in the historical record as *Thelwella* (1154-60), *Thidewell* (1240), *Thelowell* (1304), and *Tolwell* (1487) (ibid).

### 2. SOURCES

#### 2.1 Historical

The only documentary source that makes reference to the Thelwall *burh* is the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. A general history of the settlement is contained in Ormerod's History of Cheshire (1882) and the *burh* is discussed by Hill (1976), Higham (1988, 1993) and Harris and Thacker (1987).

The Cheshire County Record Office (CRO) contains a large number of documents, particularly deeds, dating from the 16th century onwards, which may be useful for the study of the settlement. However, these have not been studied as it is beyond the remit of the present assessment.

## **2.2 Cartographic**

Thelwall is marked on the early county maps of Saxton (1577) and Speed (1610) as 'Thelwall Chapelry'. It is also depicted upon Burdett's map of 1777. Detailed plans of the township include an Estate Map of 1743 (CRO DWW 1/429-431), the Tithe map of 1845 and the OS First Edition 6": 1mile map surveyed in 1873-6.

## **2.3 Archaeological**

There are eight archaeological records in the settlement area of Thelwall, which are included in the County Sites and Monuments Record (CSMR), and identified on Figure 1. Throughout this document the relevant reference is provided for any sites or finds that have been identified from the CSMR. The present survey has created two new records.

Despite Hill's intensive field walking programme in the Thelwall area, there is no known archaeological evidence to indicate the location of the *burh* (1976, 38).

# **3. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SUMMARY**

## **3.1 Prehistoric**

The most significant topographical feature of the area is the River Mersey, which has possibly always been a boundary delimiting different tribes or kingdoms. The valley is wide and, until recent drainage, marshy. This area was the lowest point at which the Mersey could be forded and crossing points would have attracted settlements and, perhaps, fortifications.

There are two prehistoric findspots at Thelwall, a Neolithic stone axe found near Beech Farm, south of Lymm Road (CSMR 2264) and just to the west of this a Bronze Age metal axe (CSMR 510). In the wider area, a concentration of prehistoric sites and finds are located c 1.5km to the south-west in the Chester Road area. These include an early Bronze Age metal axe (CSMR 495), a Bronze Age vessel (CSMR 494/0/1), prehistoric flints (CSMR 494/0/2) and two Bronze Age round barrows (CSMR 496, 494/1/1). The area around Thelwall appears to have been of importance since at least Neolithic times and the discovery of stone and metal axes would suggest a nearby trade route, presumably across the Mersey.

## 3.2 Roman

The major Roman site in the surrounding area was the industrial settlement of Wilderspool, located to the south of Warrington, which flourished between the late 1st to late 2nd centuries AD. Roads converge on the settlement from Middlewich to the south and Chester to the west and continue northwards to Wigan, which indicates that there must have been a crossing of the Mersey in the nearby area. A possible fording place has been identified in the southern area of Victoria Park in Warrington, 3km west of Thelwall (CSMR 448/1/2) and it has been suggested that a ford was replaced by a bridge around the site of the medieval and later bridge in Warrington (CSMR 447) (Strickland 1995).

## 3.3 Early Medieval

Within the surrounding area three early medieval log boats have been discovered, which attest to the use of the Mersey as a waterway. These were found 2.5km west of Thelwall (CSMR 503), 2km north-west (CSMR 505) and 3.5km west (CSMR 507).

The purpose of the Thelwall *burh* was presumably to strengthen Cheshire against the forces of Ragnald and his newly-established Viking kingdom in York (Higham 1988, 207). It may have been intended to control a crossing point over the Mersey or to control river traffic. There is no sign that it was intended to function as a trading settlement as well as a garrison; certainly it had no success as the former and even its use as a garrison may have been short-lived. In 920 AD Ragnald was among the Northern kings who submitted to Edward the Elder at Bakewell. The imminent danger to Cheshire's northern border passed, and the fort at Thelwall may have been abandoned.

Thelwall's location as a detached portion of the parish of Runcorn, where there was also a *burh* founded in 915, suggests that there may have been a connection between the two. It is likely that Thelwall and Runcorn were intended to control the Mersey together. This phase of fortification by Edward the Elder included the foundation of *burhs* at Manchester in 919 and at Rhuddlan in 921 (Harris and Thacker, 1987, 250).

The site of the *burh* has not been located and three possible sites are suggested, including two in the vicinity of Thelwall village and one to the west in Latchford. Carter has suggested that the *burh* was not located within the area of the village of Thelwall but in what was a detached part of Thelwall, situated in the 'loops' or 'eyes' of the river Mersey. One such loop, which would have provided an effective defensive site and was also the site of a ford across the Mersey, was Latchford (Carter 1989, 14).

## 3.4 Medieval

### 3.4.1 The Manor

Roger de Poictu (son of Roger de Montgomery, the first earl of Shrewsbury), was lord of all the land between the Rivers Ribble and Mersey, and he gave half of the fishing at Thelwall, on the north side of the Mersey, to the Abbot of Shrewsbury

under Henry I. The prior of Norton had the fishing on the south side, granted by the Baron of Halton in the reign of King Stephen (Ormerod, 1882, 747). The estate was held by the Claytons in the reign of Edward III and continued in their possession until 1561 when it was sold to the Brookes, then subsequently possessed by the Moores and Pickerings (Bagshaw 1850, 587).

### 3.4.2 Settlement

During the medieval period the major settlement in the surrounding area was the town of Warrington, which has origins from at least the 13th century. Data for Cheshire towns is rare because in the medieval period the shire was exempt from national taxation, having its own taxation system, the Mize. Thelwall was not mentioned at Domesday but the name does reappear in the 12th and 13th centuries and in 1405 the Cheshire Mize recorded that Thelwall was assessed at 32s 0d and Latchford at 20s 0d, compared with Lymm's assessment of 72s 0d (Booth 1985).

### 3.5 Post Medieval

Thelwall appears on the county maps of Saxton (1577) and Speed (1610) as 'Thelwall Chapelry'. Peter de Leycester writing in 1666 (Ormerod 1882, 748), notes that the chapel was founded by Thomas Brookes who bought the estate in 1561. The chapel had been built by 1577, when it appears on Saxton's map, and it is shown on the 1743 Estate Map located by Thelwall Hall. Also there is an engraving of it in Ormerod (1882, 746). It was replaced in 1843 by the present chapel of All Saints, which was built on the same site.

Ormerod records that Thelwall Hall, which dates from the reign of George II (1727-60), occupies the site of an ancient manor house dating from when the manor was in the possession of the Claytons (Ormerod, 1882, 749).

The population of the township in 1664 has been estimated as 250 (MacGregor 1992). Subsequently its population shows a steady, unspectacular growth, which can be observed from the census returns printed in the Victoria County History (Harris 1979, 235). For 1981 and 1991 census data has been reproduced under Class Licence Number C01W0000125 with the permission of the Controller of the HMSO.

|             |     |             |      |
|-------------|-----|-------------|------|
| <b>1801</b> | 309 | <b>1901</b> | 481  |
| <b>1811</b> | 326 | <b>1911</b> | 517  |
| <b>1821</b> | 327 | <b>1921</b> | 462  |
| <b>1831</b> | 332 | <b>1931</b> | 509  |
| <b>1841</b> | 334 | <b>1951</b> | 5655 |
| <b>1851</b> | 347 | <b>1961</b> | 7746 |
| <b>1861</b> | 468 | <b>1971</b> | 8505 |
| <b>1871</b> | 353 | <b>1981</b> | 8456 |
| <b>1881</b> | 496 | <b>1991</b> | 8778 |
| <b>1891</b> | 770 |             |      |

The significant increase in 1951 is due to Thelwall's inclusion in Grappenhall CP.

### 3.6 Modern

It was during the 19th and 20th centuries that Warrington began to expand south across the Mersey, leading to the eventual absorption of Latchford, Grappenhall and Thelwall into its suburbs.

## 4. EARLY MEDIEVAL PLAN COMPONENTS (Figure 2)

The site of the *burh* of Thelwall cannot be definitively identified. Hill (1976, 38-9) has suggested three possible locations and these are discussed as separate components prefixed by **COM**. However, without archaeological intervention it is unlikely that the location of the *burh* will ever be established.

### EARLY MEDIEVAL c 450 –1066 (Figure 2)

**COM 1** – Burh?, Thelwall Village

**COM 2** – Burh?, South of Thelwall Village

**COM 3** – Burh?, Latchford

#### 4.1 COM 1: Thelwall Village

**COM 1** perhaps identifies the most obvious location for the *burh*, under the present village. Before the building of the Manchester Ship Canal, the River Mersey passed immediately north of the village, which would have meant that river traffic could have been controlled from this location. Also, a ferry across the river is depicted at this site on the OS First Edition and it is possible that this identifies a much earlier crossing point.

Within the approximate area of the *burh*, earthworks have been noted in the grounds of a school, to the north of Lymm Road (OS Record Card SJ68NE6). The school, an early 19th century mansion, was formerly called Greenfield House, which was described in the 1845 tithe award as having ‘gardens’ and ‘pleasure grounds’. Earthworks, in the form of banks, are recorded running along the northern side of the present Lymm Road and it has been suggested that these may have formed the southern defences of the *burh*. The OS First Edition, however, depicts the course of Lymm road running further north than its present course. This indicates that the course of Lymm Road has been re-aligned since 1876 and that the earth banks are probably associated with this re-alignment, rather than with the putative *burh*.

#### 4.2 COM 2: South of Thelwall Village

A second location to the south of Thelwall village on a ‘small promontory between two valleys lying to the east of the village’ has been suggested by Hill. This site would have the same advantages and disadvantages as the village site (**COM 1**).

#### 4.3 COM 3: Latchford

A third possible location is at Latchford. The name Latchford, means a ford at a boggy place, which may refer to the ford site in the vicinity of Victoria Park. Hill (1976) has suggested that the *burh* may have been located here, a hypothesis

supported by the fact that this area formed a detached part of Thelwall, and Runcorn Parish in the 19th century. Higham (1988) has suggested that until the creation of the Manchester Ship Canal this area was low-lying and boggy, and therefore an unsuitable location for the *burh*. However, Old Warps Farm formerly lay in this area and the place name 'warp' indicates an area of land built up by the deposition of silt, which suggests that this area was not as uninhabitable as Higham suggests.

## **5. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL**

### **5.1 Above-Ground Remains**

The village of Thelwall is a designated Conservation Area and there are twelve listed buildings within Thelwall village, all of which are listed Grade II, including the church of All Saints and Thelwall Old Hall.

### **5.2 Below-Ground Remains**

Until a secure location for the *burh* can be established it is impossible to comment on its archaeological potential. For the moment all that can be said is that any remains located within Victoria Park or around the present Thelwall village may survive well as there has been little development in these areas.

## **6. PRIORITIES FOR ARCHAEOLOGICAL WORK**

### **6.1 General**

The study of Thelwall forms part of a national research priority to examine the origins and development of medieval towns and rural markets (Priority H5; English Heritage 1997, 49).

### **6.2 Early Medieval**

- Establish the nature, location, extent and function of the *burh*.
- Examine whether there is any evidence of internal features
- Establish the nature of its defences
- Establish how long the *burh* was in use
- Establish whether it was purely a garrison or whether there is any evidence of it having other functions (industrial etc)
- Examine whether it was used in association with the *burh* at Runcor

## **7 SOURCES**

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## **7.2 Maps**

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## **8. ILLUSTRATIONS**

Figure 1: Thelwall and the Surrounding Area











Figure 2: Early Medieval Thelwall





**Figure 1**  
**Thelwall and the**  
**Surrounding Area**

**Sites and Monuments**

-  Burh?
-  Log Boats
-  Bridge
-  Ford
-  Prehistoric
-  Romano-British
-  Early Medieval
-  Post Medieval
-  Medieval
-  Modern

1:20000

0 0.5 1 Kilometres



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**Figure 2**  
**Early Medieval**  
**Thelwall**

Key

-  River Mersey (former course)
-  COMs 1-3: Burh?

1:15000

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