

Grosmont Borough and the Village Street (newsletter 13, autumn 2004)

Members who came to the day school in Grosmont earlier in the summer will remember the splendidly lively and detailed account of the development of Grosmont by local historian Philip Morgan. Mr Morgan has kindly allowed us to publish these notes on the history of the borough and its housing.

In the first centuries of Norman rule many new towns were created by the King, the Church or the monasteries or by the barons. In this context they are generally called "the lord". Setting aside a relatively small amount of land, dividing it into plots and then inviting, perhaps even coercing, craftsmen, merchants and traders to rent the sites – the burgages - the lord created for himself a regular income from the rents alone. In return the burgesses were granted certain privileges which included the right to hold markets, hold their own courts for civil cases and collect tolls. One privilege, often overlooked, was that burgesses were relieved of the obligations of boon work on the lord's land.(1)

The shape of Grosmont's village street resulted from the position of the castle and of the church but above all it came from the placing of these burgage plots and the market area. Its charter and its date have not been found but it was certainly in being by 1250 when the lordship was in royal hands though later, and for centuries, it was held by the Duke of Lancaster.

We don't know where these plots lay but the configuration of the gardens on the north side of the street under the protection of the castle could possibly be burgages. Even so only one is known for certain and that is now Howell's House, once called Top Shop, built in 1611 on a double burgage plot.. Other houses on the north side which were possibly burgages are:

Whitney Villa, once an early addition to Howell's House;
The Steps, possibly a merge of two very early cottages;
Rock Villa, originally a thatched house, it's said, that was burnt down and rebuilt in the late 19th century with a cell for a new police station;
Myrtle Cottage, of unknown date but possibly the site of Philip y gof's plot of 3½ burgages in 1610 and much later a smithy of repute.

Castle House was probably built in the late 18th century on an encroachment of the approach to the castle; part "of that castle yard which was formerly laid open to the Highway and encroached containing ¾ acre". It was not a burgage.

The only other known site of a plot is at the top of the village where a holding was described as part of a burgage during Chancery proceedings in late 19th century; that tells us that the burgages extended far up the street.

The market place can be revealed on the map by removing the buildings against the churchyard wall on the south side of the street as well as The Angel and Town Farm. All these were built from 1600 onward. The triangular area created is typical of many a borough market place. In this area would have stood the Market Hall where the burgesses would meet and where they held the town court. The annual rent for a burgage was almost invariably one shilling so if we know the total burgh rent at any time we will know the number of burgage plots. In 1250 there were 168 (2) and in 1256/7 there were, perhaps, 204 sites.(3) Because a burgess could hold more than one plot it does not follow that there were 168 burgesses in 1250 nor 204 in 1256/7.

From its beginning the borough needed a spokesman to deal with the lord's agents; first he would have been chosen by the lord but in due time he would have been elected by his fellow burgesses and given the title of mayor. He and other senior burgesses were in charge of the market, ran the borough court and collected the tolls. It is not at all clear what these tolls were in Grosmont though it is usually assumed that they were road tolls paid by those entering the town but there were several other tolls which were probably raised: perhaps pontage for crossing the bridge at Kentchurch; pickage for breaking the ground to erect a market stall and stallage for putting up the stall.(4)

The lord changed from collecting the tolls to farming them out to the burgesses. In 1256/7 the reeve's accounts included "46s 8d received from the market at the term of Easter, farmed by the year for £4 13s4d." This account suggests only the market tolls were due to the lord. Another elected officer was the aletaster whose function seems to have been that of a weights and measures inspector, checking the ales and other products such as breads.

The decay of the borough and its market

The success of the market determined the prosperity of the village and its size and of course the reverse is also true - as the population fell so did its prosperity. So the deterioration set in when The Great Famine (1311-1321) and a succession of outbreaks of The Plague (1349-1361) severely reduced the population. And then the castle became redundant in military terms and was no longer garrisoned. But perhaps the biggest factor in the decline of Grosmont was the intense competition from the more important markets of Abergavenny and Monmouth. By 1574 the burgesses complained to the Duchy "that they paid 60 shillings a year for the tolls of the market when there was, in fact, neither market nor toll".

In 1588 during a case before the Duchy Court several witnesses said there were only 20 or 25 households in the village and a map prepared for the same case showed only three houses on the north side of the street. Then, in 1591, the Duchy noted that although the town had been paying 13s 4d {sic} annually the market there had been discontinued "by reason of the poverty of the town of Grosmont and the scarcity of the people there Grosmont is now in better case being replenished with more people and of great wealth." (5)

And so there were efforts to rejuvenate the market with, it seems, indifferent success, although it included a rebuild of the Market Hall. Alongside these efforts came moves towards permanent shops in the early 1600s. A further indication of the dwindling "borough" comes in a Duchy survey (A Survey of the Duchy of Lancaster Lordships in Wales 1609-1613 transcribed and edited by William Rees) which listed only 20 burgages.

The saga of the tolls rumbled on and in 1788 the Duchy receiver reported (6) that the mayor paid a yearly rent of fifteen shillings for the tolls but "that the Tolls within the borough and manor of Grosmont have not of late years exceeded..... two pounds, two shillings.... of which it hath been usual for the mayor to pay forty shillings towards the repair of the Town Hall". The Town Hall, i.e. the Market Hall, was constantly in need of repair so when in 1828 the Duke of Beaufort now lord of the manor offered to build a new Hall on condition the burgesses renounced their claim to the tolls his offer was accepted. And so the collection of tolls which had been a meaningless ritual for so long came to an end; and the other functions of the borough officers had long ceased with Justices enforcing the law and the Vestry - "the ratepayers in vestry assembled"- taking over local affairs.

While the market at Grosmont was nothing like its predecessors of centuries before, the village by the early 1800s was a busy place with shops and the craftsmen needed in a rural community. The 1841 census reveals blacksmiths, shoemakers, maltsters, masons, carpenters and wheelwrights, tailors, a clockmaker and even a bookbinder. And there were grocers, bakers and butchers as well as three pubs and James Lane the first of a long series - now regrettably ended - of village doctors.

Notes

1. For a general account of boroughs see M. Beresford *New towns of the Middle Ages* 2nd edition 1988 and more specifically for Wales see I. Soulsby, *The Towns of Medieval Wales* and R.A.Griffiths *The Boroughs of Medieval Wales*
2. *Cal.Inq.Misc.*, I, p.8 quoted by Beresford op cit p.559
3. A.J.Roderick and William Rees *The ministers' accounts for the lordships of Abergavenny, Grosmont and Whitecastle, 1256-1257 Part ii South Wales and Monmouth Record Society*, publication No 3 p.23

4. For a detailed discussion on markets see Mrs O.S. Watkins "The Medieval Market and Fair in England and Wales" Y Cymmrodor vol xxv pp. 20-74
5. PRO DL/42/99/ f.74v
6. PRO DL/41/94PtII