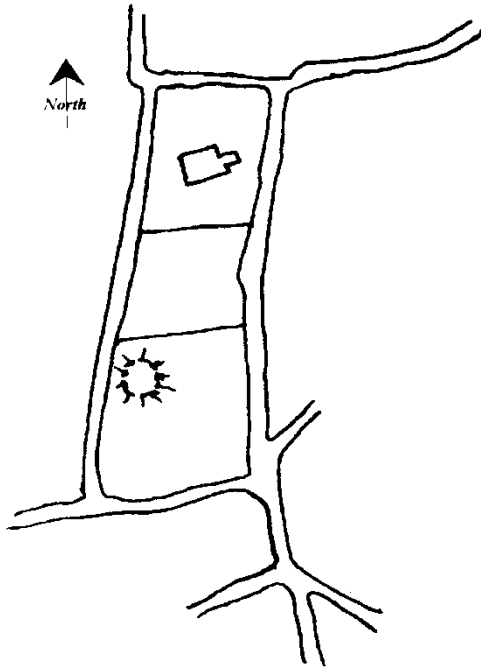


'I have a cunning plan, my lord': A conjectural approach to the layout and street pattern of medieval Trelech (newsletter 11, Summer 2003)

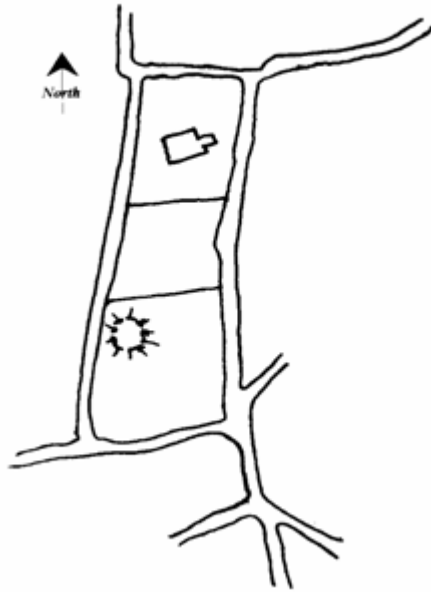
Mike Anthony.

(Mike has asked us to emphasise that this interpretation is highly conjectural - but as members who heard him speak on 17 May will testify, his conjectures are at least credible. They do not of course include the findings of this summer's excavations.)

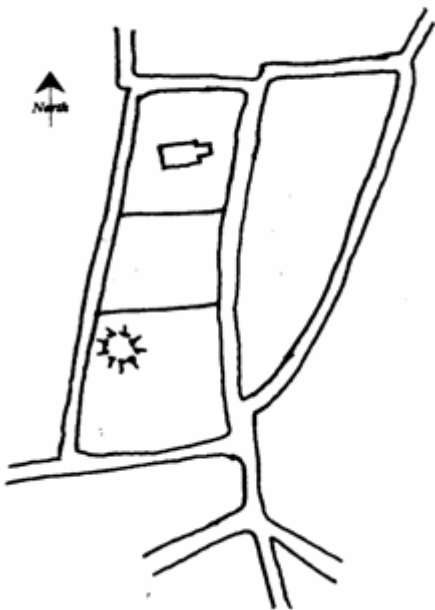


The decayed medieval town of Trelech, Gwent has been a focal point for antiquarians, historians and archaeologists alike for some considerable time. Founded by Richard de Clare, Earl of Gloucester and Glamorgan, it was one of a number of "new" towns this powerful Marcher family created, towns which include Caerphilly, Cowbridge and Llanishen. At the same time, they were augmenting some well established towns such as Usk, thirteen kilometres (eight miles) to the south west of Trelech. This remarkable surge of urban development took place in the few years immediately after 1245, when Richard de Clare inherited the Marshal possessions, following the death without heir of his uncle, Anselm, the youngest of William Marshal's sons.

Trelech is certainly an unusual choice of location for a new town; it is not served particularly well by either road or river communications, but as recent research by Robert Penrose (1997) makes clear, its location is not inconsistent with long term de Clare strategies. The thirteenth century was one of political and administrative consolidation by the de Clares and both Trelech and Caerphilly were built in areas which were in, or close to, Welshries. In addition, Trelech is a considerable distance from hostile forces, both native Welsh and Marcher and is an ideal base for the activity which seems to have been at the core of its economic base, iron-working. The town would appear to be planned in this location to take advantage of a number of key resources. There is an abundant water supply, a more than adequate fuel supply. The raw material for iron working, the ore, was probably obtained from the ore fields at the Forest of Dean, a relatively short distance away (Howell: 2000). The difficulties of transporting the finished product out would, presumably, be a small price to pay when weighed against the greater issues of security and availability of manufacturing materials. The town was clearly successful as in 1288 it was recorded as having 378 burgage plots, (SC6/1247/21) making it the second largest town in late thirteenth century Wales.



Most observers agree that the area of the medieval town, centred on the modern village of Trelech, was laid out on a, more or less, regular grid pattern. The grid was first noted by Bradney in 1913, who observed that a right of way to the west of the current main street showed traces of paving. He concluded that the grid pattern was one of two streets running north to south connected at each end by two further east/west aligned streets placing the town within a rectilinear plan (Fig 1). This interpretation was repeated by Soulsby in 1983. In 1997, this picture was to change when excavations by staff and students of University of Wales College, Newport, led by Dr. Ray Howell, confirmed archaeological evidence of a third medieval road. This road, running north/south, to the east of the present main street, gives the medieval town a much larger grid plan and is far more consistent with a major implantation (Fig 2) (Howell: 1997). There were clearly some unresolved issues with this model as, even with the addition of the third street, the town was not large enough to accommodate the previously noted 378 burgages.

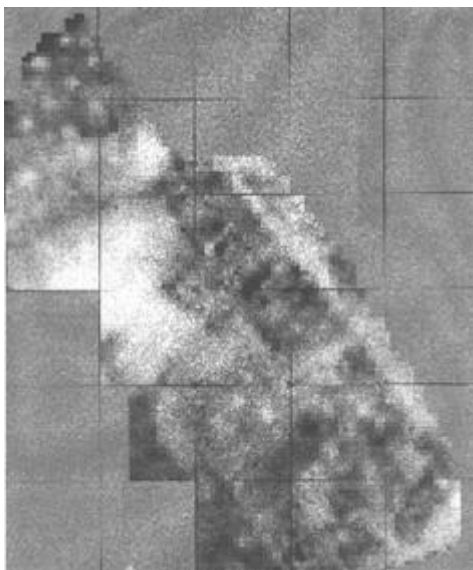


In her paper, *Trelech: a new location for the old town*. (Wilson: 1998) Julia Wilson, proposed a model which placed the medieval town, not in the northern grid system referred to above, but in a linear settlement to the south of the present village. In this model the burgage plots are laid out on either side of the road running south from Trelech itself to the neighbouring village of Trelech Cross. With evidence from field walking and earthwork surveys, she suggested that many of the fields in this area contain house platforms and, in addition, that the existing field boundaries may be used to trace the line of the original burgage plots. Using the field layout this research contends that the size of the Trelech burgage plots was some 8 metres wide by 47.8 metres long. Recent research carried out by Wilson and Monmouth Archaeology in this area, on a site at Catbrook Road (Clarke: 1999), would appear to support this hypothesis with some 130 sherds of medieval pottery being recovered from a well and pit. Fig 2: Trelech after Howell

However, the conclusions in the 1998 paper may be premature. Based on research available at the time, Wilson felt that,

"The evidence for a planned system of burgage plots within the town has not been found and the question of whether a grid system existed at all may now be posed. It is now apparent that the main burgage settlement was situated along the roads leading to Trelech Cross and Catbrook, with a linear settlement pattern dominating" (Wilson:1998: 70)

While it is difficult to disagree with the second part of this statement, that a substantial area, to the south of Trelech was given over to burgage plots, we are becoming increasingly aware of a certain uniformity of layout at the northern end of the site; a uniformity which suggests that the grid layout of a planned town should not be discounted.



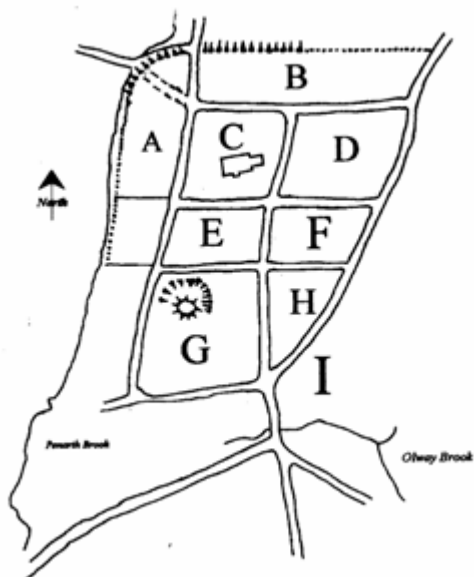
Geophysical surveys carried out in the late summer of 1999 on a site to the west of St. Nicholas's Church indicated a range of interesting features. As the site was "scheduled", CADW were approached with a view to augment the previous permission to carry out a resistivity survey by the addition of an excavation. Permission to open six trenches over a two year period was granted and excavation began in June 2000 (Howell, forthcoming). While the excavation concentrated, quite correctly, on the more obvious targets, such as a series of linear features which were probably walls, a number of more discrete features were visible on the geophysics printout. A series of faint rectilinear features running at right angles from the former medieval road were noted. It quickly became apparent that these were probably the "ghost" remains of burgage plots. (Fig 3.) The plots were measured and found to be 8.5 metres wide by 42 metres long. The size of burgage plots in Wales varies considerably, but these figures are certainly consistent with estimates from other Welsh urban developments.

.These measurements differ slightly from those given by Wilson for burgages in the southern part of the town being approximately the same width and some 6 metres shorter, it is felt, however, that Wilson's estimated size for the southern burgages (47.8 metres) is too long. This latter estimate relies on existing field boundaries and may fail to take into an account the presence of a "back-lane". Hindle (1990) observes that most burgages would be provided with a rear access and it is suggested that the main Trelech to Trelech Cross road was flanked on either side by a lane, running parallel with it. All the roads observed at Trelech to date, both archaeological and those "in use" are approximately 5.5 metres wide. It is possible that when the area occupied by the burgage plots to the south was enclosed, the lane at the rear of the properties was incorporated into the enclosure, artificially adding around 6 metres to the length of the burgages. If the burgage plots to the south are, in fact, also 42 meters long, this raises the possibility that they are a planned suburb of the town, laid down at the same time as the northern grid.

At this point it may be worth noting that the modern definition of a suburb was very different from the medieval usage. Today, a suburb conjures up images of genteel respectability and is typically used as a sleeper zone for a greater metropolis. The medieval suburbium in contrast was an integral part of the town, technically outside its boundaries but participating fully in its economic and social life. Usually linear, ribbon developments they tend to cluster along one or more of a town's approach roads, often extending for some considerable distance, two miles in the case of London. (Keene: 1990)

Assuming that the burgage plots at Trelech are 8.5 metres wide and 42 metres long, we may be able to apply this data to other areas within the site. Slater makes the point that planned towns, whether linear or grid, would tend to be organised into blocks, each block having the length of a burgage plot as one of its dimensions. (Slater: 1981) With this in mind, can any other blocks be found in Trelech which display a boundary length of 42 metres?

In the summer of 2000, a limited but intensive survey, using a combination of large scale Ordnance Survey maps (1:1250) and field measurements was carried out. Measurement in metres alone was felt to be artificial, as the original planners would have used a medieval measure, the perch. Unfortunately, there does not appear to be a standard length for the perch. By the reign of Edward I, and the foundation of Trelech, the statutory perch was standardised at 16 ½ feet or 5.03 metres, however in rural areas customary perches were frequently in use. These customary measures could vary by a considerable margin from the statute perch; 6 ½ feet shorter in Pembrokeshire and 7 ½ feet longer in Cheshire. (Slater: 1981) The statutory perch does not fit well into the given burgage plot sizes at Trelech, but a slightly shorter perch of a little over 13 feet 9 inches or nearly 4.2 metres does fit the sizes for both the central grid and the southern suburb reasonably well. With the absence of any evidence to the contrary, and until such evidence emerges, it was decided to measure the Trelech blocks in multiples of 4.2 metres, or the 'Trelech' perch.



For the purposes of the survey, nine blocks, which would appear to make up the core of the Trelech grid were identified, with a tenth added following a further geophysical survey. (Fig. 4) While this work is far from complete, preliminary results suggest a number of blocks conform to the sizes estimated for burgage plots of 10 perches long.

The site of the initial geophysical survey, and of the summer 2000 excavation by UWCN (Block A) is, in fact, slightly wider than the burgage plots, standing at an average of 55 metres wide. However, the western edge of this block is defined by the Penarth Brook and the first few metres of ground here is extremely soft and marshy and not particularly suitable for the placing of a burgage plot. In addition, the Penarth is seen as forming the western defences of the town. It is possible that this area was left intentionally free of buildings, as a defensive precaution

Fig: 4 Suggested grid layout of Trelech's roads and blocks

The most obvious starting point for the ground measurement survey was the churchyard surrounding Saint Nicholas's Church, (Block C) as it was felt that its boundaries were less likely to have moved through subsequent encroachment. Early results were disappointing in that no clear correlation between known burgage sizes and the churchyard could be made. When the western north/south road was restored to its original position however, a position indicated by the geophysics survey from Block A, a clearer pattern emerged. The current right of way is, in fact, some 11 metres east of the original road and a corresponding encroachment would seem to have taken place onto the church boundary. With the church boundary restored to its, assumed, original size the distance between the west and east walls was shown to be 84 metres. This size equates to 20 perches or two burgage plot lengths, tying in well with the 10 perch length of the burgages in the neighbouring Block A.

The north to south length of Block C is a little long at 91 metres. This discrepancy may be resolved by factoring in an additional boundary shift. In order for the grid to be viable, a number of crossing roads running east to west would have to be planned, at the moment only one, at the extreme north of the site is confirmed. At least two more are envisaged; one of those was probably between blocks C/E, and D/F, with the third a little further south at the boundaries of blocks E/G and F/H. If the church yard had taken up the space vacated by the central crossing road when it fell into disuse a number of metres could realistically be removed from the block's current size giving its possible original size of 20 perches. The churchyard in Block C then measures approximately 20 by 20 perches, as its angles are not set at 90 degrees it is not technically a square, but is certainly regular in shape.

A similar pattern can be found in its neighbour to the east, Block D. Once again, the missing crossing road between this block and the southern Block F needs to be factored in, and further boundary shifts must be considered at the northern end. The northernmost crossing road has a pronounced 'dog leg'

at its T-junction with the central north/south road. In this instance, it is felt that the northern crossing road above Block D, which leads to The Narth, has shifted north. Moving this road south will line it up well with the western half of this road, which defines the northern edge of the churchyard. This, western, section of road is securely placed as it is aligned with a trackway indicated on the geophysics in Block A as well as on a topographical survey carried out by Neil Phillips of SCARAB. Once these changes have been incorporated, this block, like the churchyard, is 20 perches long. It is however 16 metres, or almost 4 perches wider. This may be explained by the presence of a natural spring and well, a spring which runs southwards and almost exactly bisects the block. Working from the roads at the western and eastern edges of the block, two rows of 'back-to-back', 10 perch burgages could easily be accommodated with the stream and marshy ground running between them.

Excavations have taken place within Block D, including the 1997 excavations by UWCN, referred to above and a 'Watching Brief' carried out by Monmouth Archaeology on developments at the 'Lion Inn' in the block's north west corner. No conclusive evidence for the burgage plots assumed to be located in this block emerged from these works. It may be argued, however, that the block is one of the few in Trelech to be subjected to considerable post-medieval development; development which may have destroyed earlier archaeology which, from the Summer 2000 excavations in Block A, is known to be close to the surface and vulnerable.

Despite the lack of physical evidence, it must be noted that a geophysical survey carried out in this area in the spring of 2002 by Drs. Hamilton and Howell clearly shows linear burgage patterns and would tend to confirm the hypothesis that two rows of 'back-to-back' domestic buildings are present in this block. (Howell: pers. comm.).

The interpretation and reconstruction of Block B, to the north of Blocks C and D is a little more straightforward. A line measured from the northern crossing road to a few metres inside the town's northern defensive ditch is almost exactly 42 metres, or 10 perches, accommodating one burgage plot length. Indeed, it may be that the current village Post-Office, lying on the western edge of this block, is built within the boundaries of a burgage plot. A measurement of standing walls and boundaries within the vicinity of this building gives a plot size of 43 metres long and 10 metres wide. Allowing for encroachments, this is remarkably close to the presumed standard of 42 metres long and 8.5 metres wide (2 by 10 perches). The only real question mark surrounding Block B is whether or not the central north/south road of the town terminated at a 'T-junction' or continued into this block and on to the defensive ditch, cutting the block in two. As yet, no evidence has been gathered to arrive at a suitable conclusion.

Block E is known locally as the, 'Village Green'. Although this is currently something of a misnomer; the plot is occupied by a tarmac car-park, a public house and a stable and courtyard; there is no reason to doubt that this was formerly the site of the green. Once more taking missing roads into consideration, this block measures 42 metres north to south and 82 metres east to west. The original size of this block was probably 42 by 84 metres, or 10 by 20 perches. As a village green, we may not expect to find evidence of occupation in this block, however there is a water well, presumed to be medieval, within the public house. This well may be part of a private dwelling, but could equally be a public well, located in a public area as one would expect of a village green.

Recent research by Neil Phillips has suggested that this area may itself have formerly been part of the castle bailey. Phillips contends that by the time of the de Clare occupation of Trelech the castle was already in a state of decline and that the bailey may have been in use as a village green. In this case the well noted above may previously have been connected with the castle (Phillips: pers. comm.)

The next three blocks to be discussed, F, G and H are all somewhat more problematic. The easiest to understand is undoubtedly Block G, that which contains the castle motte and its attendant bailey. The castle is first noted in the historical record in 1231, but is more likely to date from the late eleventh or early twelfth centuries and as such, considerably predates the de Clare town. As we can safely assume that the later town developed around this structure, we should not expect its

dimensions to conform to the later grid plan. The boundaries of this block were probably modified slightly, in order that integration with the overall plan could take place but essentially, this represents a pre-urban block. As one of the key seigneurial areas of Trelech one would not expect any signs of burghal occupation within this block. A 'Watching Brief' carried out by Monmouth Archaeology (Clarke: 1998) at Court Farm, within the precincts of the bailey did, however, produce evidence of fourteenth century occupation and iron-working. This would be consistent with a model of the town, discussed more fully below, which sees it in decline in the fourteenth century and areas which were formerly, 'out of bounds' for the burghers being occupied, following the collapse of the earlier central authority.

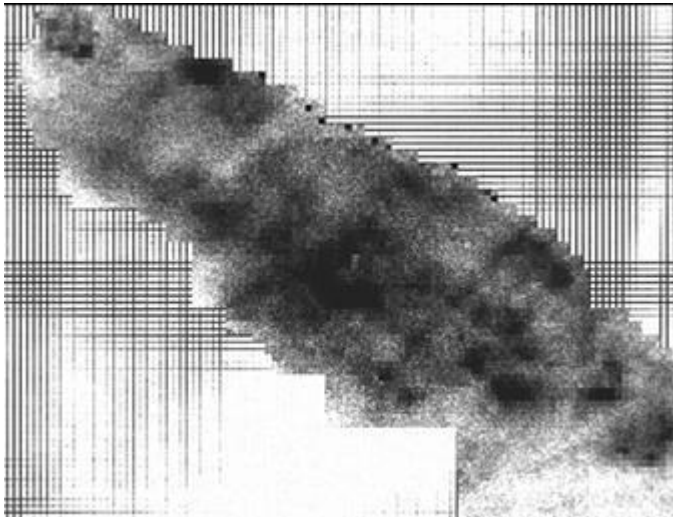
Block F, is more than a little unusual within the Trelech grid as it is one of the smallest blocks. The counterpart to Block E, the village green, this block also measures 10 perches on its north/south axis. While the village green would probably not have been intended for burghal occupation, this block would not have faced similar restrictions and would be open for domestic development. The block is, however, irregular in shape and at just under 80 metres at its longest edge, east to west, and 60 metres at its shortest it would not support 'back-to-back' burgages in a layout similar to that projected for its northern neighbour. A possible solution would be to change the orientation of the plots within this block. All the burgages so far discussed have, as would be normal practice, been modelled with their shorter, 2 perch side, fronting the street. It is suggested that in this block, the burgages have their longer side running parallel with the central street, taking up the entire 10 perch length of this block, and fronting onto the crossing street between them and Block H. What then, could be the nature of the relationship between these burgages and the block to the south, which may cause this re-orientation?

The area opposite the castle and referred to here as Block H is quite different from the normal rectilinear plan, regular or otherwise, for the blocks of Trelech. While the western road runs parallel with the central road, the eastern road does not. It travels inwards and meets the central road at a point near the south eastern corner of the castle, probably to take advantage of the crossing point for the Olway Brook. This gives Block H a triangular shape, totally unsuited for a regular pattern of burgage holdings. There is a possible explanation for the unusual form of this area. In his 1997 study, Robert Penrose noted that one of the items 'missing' from the inventory of Trelech was an area defined as the market and it is suggested that Block H could be this area. Even given that the primary economic activity at Trelech was iron-working, the town could not have survived without a market. A weekly market is known to have taken place at Trelech from at least 1288, in addition there was, from 1296, an annual fair (SC6/1247/18, 1247/21 and 925/30).

Medieval market squares take many forms but they all have one common requirement, access to the market needs to be controlled in order that those with goods to sell may be taxed the due rate. In many towns, Ludlow and Monmouth are two good examples, the High Street is exceptionally wide, this street is then sealed at either end and the market takes place there. This does not appear to be the case at Trelech, where the streets are, on average, around 5 or 6 metres wide. The second alternative is a large open area, defined by roads entering the town, quadrilateral in shape if four roads join, triangular if three. (Hindle: 1990: 39) Often built near castle gates, this latter would appear to be the case at Trelech, where the main Chepstow to Monmouth road running through the town is met by the eastern north/south road and a crossing road. The simple provision of three toll-booths would ensure an adequate control of traffic into the market and, as all routes would be sealed by manning each corner of the triangle, this would further ensure that no tax evasion was possible. An additional benefit of using the main Monmouth road through the town as one of the 'sides' of the market would be that 'through traffic' would be captured and enticed to purchase goods.

This last noted benefit might explain a possible, deliberate diversion of the Chepstow to Monmouth road. When looked at on a map, it can be readily seen that the road takes a pronounced detour through the town via a series of 90-degree turns. In point of fact, a straight line linking the Chepstow road to the western north/south road would provide a far more direct, and logical, route for Monmouth bound traffic. The ground in this area, to the south west of the castle, is certainly soft and the road now utilises the Olway Brook crossing noted above, but traversing it would not be beyond the skill of

medieval civil engineers. One could be forgiven for thinking that traffic was being deliberately moved through the town, in marked contrast to the practices of modern town planners.



The final block to be discussed, I, was the subject of excavations in June 2002. A geophysical survey carried out in Spring 2000 noted a series of features which resemble the burgage plots of Block A (Fig 5) (Hamilton and Howell, forthcoming). While the readings in this area are less obvious than those from A, their width be estimated at 8.5 metres (2 perches). Their length is difficult to determine, as they are cut by a modern, concrete farm track but at least 35 metres can be traced from the printout. The excavations themselves failed to produce any definitive evidence for the length of the plots but did produce archaeological material consistent with a late thirteenth century occupation, centred around iron blooming, as noted elsewhere in Trelech.

Tentative phases for the construction of the town may now be explored. The late eleventh or early twelfth century castle may have been free standing, or may have been associated with a small hamlet. Excavations by Howell have revealed a dwelling with a central hearth and dated to 1200 - 1230 lending support to this latter view. The first phase of the town 'proper' would appear to have taken place shortly after 1245 and the acquisition of the town by Richard de Clare. It is suggested that Earl Richard laid down the initial grid plan, followed fairly shortly by a linear development acting as a 'tail' to the grid's head. This 'head' would have contained the higher functions associated with a medieval town and would include the castle as an administrative centre, the church and the market. Higher status burgesses may also have located to this area of the town and this may explain the possible amalgamation of two burgage plots in Block A. Here, a well-built stone building straddles two burgages, the owner could clearly afford two plot rents and was able to build in stone, a rare occurrence in medieval domestic architecture.

This model of high status occupation at one end of a town is consistent with research carried out by Dr. Jon Kissonock on medieval villages in Pembrokeshire. He noted groups of high status buildings standing apart from the planned elements of a number of villages and proposed the term 'magnate core' to describe the phenomenon. In the case of Angle, the magnate core shifted when the original planned village expanded to meet it, "so as to preserve the spatial distance between the two social groups". (Kissonock: 1997: 126). There is a possibility that we are seeing something similar happening in Trelech and the amalgamation of plots and the construction of better buildings may be assigned to phase two.

The town was attacked on a number of occasions, by Roger Bigod in 1291 and by Morgan ap Maredudd in 1294-5 but still seems to have been viable. In 1310-11 wood from the forest, presumably for charcoal, raised £162, 18/6 d, Cardiff in contrast raised only £103, 11/9 d in total revenue for the same period. (Penrose: 1997) (SC6/928/24) It would appear though that the town was only viable through the strength of will of the de Clares and when Gilbert, the last of the line, was killed at Bannockburn in 1314 the town entered a phase of terminal decline. Charcoal burners are still

noted in the record in 1316 (SC6/925/29 and SC6/925/31) but little further is heard of the town. It is to this third, post-de Clare phase that it is suggested that some of the iron-workings in the grid system should be assigned, in particular the work in the castle bailey noted above.

The final phase, possibly post 1348 and the Black Death would have seen the town move away from iron manufacture as its primary economic base and return to pastoral farming, probably sheep. It is this phase which saw the probable abandonment of the burgage patterns established 100 years before. The geophysics and summer 2000 excavations in Block A certainly indicate some late medieval or early post-medieval buildings which are rotated through 90-degrees and run parallel with the western street. This feature would seem to be confirmed by an earlier UWCN excavation in Block A1 which revealed a fourteenth century longhouse also built to run parallel with the street.

There is a great deal of work still to be carried out at Trelech before a complete understanding of the town is achieved. Much of this work is becoming urgent as the village continues to be developed at an alarming rate. It is hoped to undertake a standing building survey in the near future and to complete the field measurements of the projected medieval blocks; these surveys will, hopefully, enhance this current model. It is acknowledged that the model presented here is far from complete but it is believed that the amalgamation of the linear plan argued by Wilson and the traditional grid model observed by Bradney, Soulsby and Howell provides a sound basis for future research.

Acknowledgements

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