THE NORMAN TOWN DEFENCES OF ABERGAVENNY

Monmouth Archaeology was commissioned by White Bros. & Speed Ltd. to carry out an archaeological watching brief during the groundworks for their development at 18–20 Cross Street, Abergavenny (SO 3000 1407). The site levelling for the development entailed wide-scale excavations into the hillside below the peninsula on which the town’s Norman castle was built (Fig. 14). The ground-works were carried out from May to July 2001 and a full report (MA10.61) has been lodged with the Gwent Sites and Monuments Record held by Glamorgan-Gwent Archaeological Trust in Swansea. The archive and a copy of the report is deposited with Abergavenny Museum. The watching brief follows other work at No. 19 Castle Street in 1986.66

A large V-shaped ditch running roughly in line with the ridge was exposed beneath the post-medieval and modern disturbances against the bank on the west of the site. Excavation work was stopped until a narrow section had been cut across the ditch and until its alignment and levels had been recorded. The main fill of the ditch produced a securely stratified small assemblage of medieval cooking pottery believed to be of 12th-century date. Neither the upper width of the ditch nor its depth below the original ground level could be clearly established owing to the later disturbances although it seems unlikely that either dimension was much greater than that recorded in the section and plans (Fig. 15).

The infill of the ditch consisted of re-deposited natural with odd pottery sherds and bones appearing as isolated finds, presumably not associated with any nearby domestic occupation. It seems likely that this material came from the castle and was spread down the bank prior to the back-filling of the ditch and this was followed later by a 13th-century spread of rubbish from above. It seems most unlikely that there would have been any late 11th- or 12th-century domestic occupation this close to the castle and there is no evidence of any later medieval occupation either.

Above the primary ditch fill an upper level also produced medieval pottery. The two pottery groups are easily separated in that the upper-level material includes sherds of glazed jugs and that the cooking pottery is mainly wheel-thrown. This later assemblage is centred on the 13th century with a more precise date being provided by sherds of jugs bearing ‘complex rouletting’ in the style of Monnow Valley Ware that is dated by coin evidence in Monnow Street, Monmouth, to A.D. post-1240.67

The earlier pottery group from the lower ditch fill consists of hand-made unglazed cooking pots. This group is almost certainly dated to the 12th century and probably some time before the last quarter of that century. Although such a date for the ditch abandonment might appear to be very early there is a similar defensive ditch in Monmouth which was back-filled with good dating evidence, including Malvernian tripod pitcher sherds, on the street frontage in the 12th century.68

There can be little doubt that the Abergavenny Cross Street ditch, like that at Monmouth, is Norman. Although it was thought that there was no evidence of 12th-century ceramics in Abergavenny at least four sites have produced Norman and early

67 S. Clarke, ‘Decorated Monnow Valley Ware’, 53–73 in B. Vyner and S. Wrathmell (eds.), Studies in Medieval and Later Pottery in Wales (Cardiff, 1987); idem, ‘The medieval ceramics of the Monmouth area’ (unpubl. paper, rev. 2002). This paper is included in all Monmouth Archaeology and Monmouth Archaeological Society archive reports that contain medieval pottery and has been lodged with the Gwent Sites and Monuments Record over recent years.
FIG. 14
Abergavenny: location maps and town plan.
Abergavenny town defences: site plan and section.
NOTES AND NEWS

12th-century pottery. In this and in other respects Monmouth and Abergavenny are very similar — they are both early Norman settlements on sites of Roman forts and they seem likely to have had similar patterns of early defences.

The discovery of the Cross Street ditch throws important new light on the early defences of Abergavenny and complements the work of Fabian Radcliffe and Jeremy Knight with the Abergavenny Archaeological Group in the 1960s. They suggested that their excavations at Castle Street and Flannel Street had exposed parts of an early post-Conquest enceinte which preceded the known Edwardian defences. They suggested that such Norman defences could have enclosed a rectangular area, centred on the present Castle Street, which then extended north-east to somewhere near Cross Street (Fig. 14).

The siting of the ditch discovered off Cross Street supports the suggestion by Radcliffe and Knight that there was a Norman settlement north of the castle and it is now possible to speculate on an extension of the boundary of their enceinte. If the Cross Street ditch continued to the south it could have joined a castle moat. However, if the defences of Abergavenny are similar to those of Norman Monmouth the ditch would climb steeply towards the castle from somewhere near the present site. This is suggested on the plan in what would be a similar manner to that at Monmouth where the Norman ditch rises from close to the flood plain, there being no deep moat.

A new study of the origins and the dating of the pottery recovered during the Radcliffe and Knight ditch excavations at Abergavenny pushes the date for the ditch fill into the 12th century. The pottery from Castle Street 1, Layer 11, includes Cotswold Ware of Norman date from the Vale of Gloucester while the green-glazed jug sherd bearing simple diamond rouletting, which caused Knight and Radcliffe to date the back-filling of the ditch to the early 13th century or later, is Ham Green Ware. The revised dating of Ham Green Ware shows that it could be as early as the middle of the 12th century while the Cotswold Ware that is found on the Welsh borders can be as early as the late 11th or early 12th century.

The ditch recorded in Neville Street was of a different form and is of later date: it was some 11 m wide and 2.6 m deep and was still open in the 17th century. Once again there is a similar situation in Monmouth where the later town defences bear little relationship to the Norman ones. In Monmouth the early ditch also encloses high ground below to the castle.

Why the early defensive ditches in Monmouth and Abergavenny should have been abandoned and infilled in the 12th century is unclear unless it was caused by the expansion of the town. This seems unlikely in Monmouth where the area of higher ground that was enclosed was similar to that surrounded by the town walls around A.D. 1300. The main burgages of the Norman town at Monmouth were in any case sited in Monnow Street outside the Norman defences.

If, as in Monmouth, the Abergavenny Norman burgages lay outside the Norman defences then Cross Street would be the obvious site despite the siting of St Mary's Priory. However, during this evaluation only a single small sherd of 13th-century pottery was found on the Cross Street frontage and there was no sign of medieval burgages.

STEPHEN CLARKE AND JANE BRAY


