

MONMOUTH PRIORY PRECINCT AND THE MYSTERY OF THE ROADS TO THE NORTH GATE

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In 1982 Monmouth Archaeological Society carried out excavations in the two front gardens of the Royal George Hotel, on the eastern side of Monk Street, Monmouth (now No's 1-6). The excavation revealed a metalled road running in line with modern Monk Street but which was sinking over the edge of a deep ditch under the modern road and pavement. The ditch, which was on the same alignment as the road, was presumed to be the Priory Precinct ditch which is shown, complete with bridges and a gatehouse, on John Speed's map of the town in 1610. The road should have been the medieval street heading the North Gate which was built around AD1300 and succeeded the earlier town defences. However, the road was pre-dated by iron working hearths containing 13th and 14th century pottery and the fabric of the road itself contained material which showed that the road could not have been laid much before the early 16th century. The road was abandoned during the 18th century when the Royal George was built and when natural clay, presumably from the new foundation trenches, was used to raise the ground levels and create the frontage gardens. It appeared that the street to the North Gate was missing, for if the ditch outside the Royal George was the Priory Precinct ditch it would presumably mean that any road the other side of the ditch would have been inside the Priory grounds. Such a road would also have to cross the ditch twice – in and out of the Priory grounds for the

ditch, as Speed shows, has been found to turn to the west long before reaching the North Gate. Speed also shows the ditch turning west along Whitecross Street to the south.

However, during the continuation of the 2011 watching brief for Amec Utilities on the groundworks for the renewal of gas mains an earlier road was found on the western edge of the ditch. This was also outside the Royal George. The road has medieval pottery in its fabric and bits of Roman pottery in the surface of the natural beneath. Clay pipe stems and 18th century potsherds on the surface of the road shows that this and the road under the Royal George front gardens were both open in the early 18th century. Therefore the roads must also have existed in Speed's time although there is no hint of a second road on his map and the mystery remains.

Nearer to the North Gate, the Royal George frontage road was also found on the north-western corner of the traffic lights. Here a drainage gulley, containing an assemblage of 17th and 18th century pottery in a thick organic-rich deposit, separated the two roads; the eastern one being pre-dated by an abraded piece of a 15th century floor tile from the nearby Cadogan House tile kiln. This area was the site of a house shown on the 1881 Ordnance Survey and partly destroyed when the late 19th century Priory Street to New Dixton Road was built.