

More about Bruton



The town of Bruton lies at a crossing of the Brue river, on both sides of the narrow valley. Little is known of the prehistory of the valley, although many of the surrounding hill tops produced flint scatters and other stone tools, showing a clear prehistoric presence in this landscape. There are two landscape features (a barrow and enclosures) which are likely to date to the prehistoric period.

Roman settlement of this area is clearly attested by a series of fortuitous finds recorded as well as two probable occupation sites and a temple in the locality. There is as yet no evidence for Roman settlement in the centre of the town itself.

Documentary evidence suggested that there were two 7th century churches established at Bruton. William of Malmesbury, in his hagiography of St Aldhelm, mentions the church the saint built in Bruton dedicated to St. Peter which lay alongside a church dedicated to St Mary which had been founded by King Ine of Wessex. The location of the second church and which of the churches was more closely linked with the abbey have remained points of contention. Couzens argues that the churches stood side by side and that, at the foundation of the priory, both were used to create a single large building on the side of the present church for use both by the parish and the canons. Eeles by contrast suggested (1933: 2) that two churches stood somewhere in the south-east of the parish. Leland's account of Bruton, written in 1540, suggests that a Benedictine monastery was founded in the early 11th century. However, no mention of a monastery was made in Domesday which casts doubt on this.

The churches probably formed the core of a Saxon borough. Domesday lists five burgesses of the town and a further eleven for Pitcombe who were also likely to have been resident in Bruton. Coins have been found which were minted in the town in the 10th century. To the south of the town a series of field names and place names (Godminster, Holywell etc) suggest that there was a Saxon religious centre in this area.

A priory was founded at Bruton in 1142 by William de Mohun who had been granted the estate following the conquest. The priory was raised to abbey status in 1510 (Hayward 1904: 33). At the dissolution the abbey was first leased and then sold to the Berkeley family who converted the abbey buildings into a manor house. The manor was damaged by fire in 1763 and eventually demolished in 1786.

Kings school at Bruton, which was re-founded in 1550 has been built partially on the site of the abbey.

In 1280 the rights of the priory to hold the market and the hundred court were questioned at the county town of Somerton. These rights were described as being "by ancient possession from a time of which memory

runneth not” (Couzens 1968:42) suggesting that the town had long been a market centre. Aston and Leech (1977:21) suggest that the area along the High Street and the probable market place between Patwell Street and Quaperlake Street were planned by the abbey as an attempt to move focus habitation to the north side of the river, distancing it from the priory.

As with many small towns in this area the main industry was woollen cloth production. Around the town were several fulling mills serving the industry. Two documents cast some light on the post-medieval period of Bruton. The Parliamentary Survey of 1650 describes the ecclesiastical situation in each area and was devised by juries in the hundred court. Two hundred families are recorded in Bruton (although this may only be those attending the church) and the church still held chapelries at Wyke and Redlynch.

With the decline of the wool trade in the late 18th century Bruton changed over to silk production. However, by the 1830’s this industry was also in decline, for example Ward (a silk manufacturer) employed up to 900 people in 1823 but by 1831 that had fallen to 230.

St. Mary’s sits within a closed churchyard at the southern edge of the town of Bruton in Somerset. It serves a population of around 3,000 and also the three Bruton schools.

Its vibrancy and interest make Bruton an attractive place to live, now sometimes described as ‘the Notting Hill of the South-West’ with a strong community feel.

