Bewdley is in the north of Worcestershire, to the west of Kidderminster. Bewdley became important in the medieval period, and continued to be a significant town in the post-medieval period as a port on the River Severn. It declined in importance after 1768 when the canal junction with the river was built at Stourport.

There was a natural ford over the river Severn at Bewdley, but there is no evidence that prehistoric, Roman or Anglo-Saxon people settled in the area of the later town. Bewdley is first mentioned in documents from the 14th century. By 1376 it can be called a town, and a market and fair were held there. The town ran a profitable ferry across the river, and in 1447 the first bridge was built.

During the medieval period Bewdley was neither formally part of Shropshire or Worcestershire. This made it a focus for criminals fleeing justice in either county. In 1544 Bewdley became part of Worcestershire.

Bewdley increased in prosperity and importance through the later medieval period. By the 16th and 17th centuries it had become an important inland port and a focus for trade between the midlands and Bristol. A range of crafts and industries were carried on in the town, including cloth and leather making.

By the mid-18th century Bewdley had become one of the most important inland ports in the country. Towards the end of the 18th century, canals were first developed, and Bewdley declined while nearby Stourport flourished.
The medieval town of Bewdley

The evidence from archaeological investigations, from maps and from documentary sources has allowed archaeologists to interpret the components which made up the medieval town of Bewdley. The map shows the outlines of these areas. Medieval Bewdley consisted of 24 components: two chapels, two market places, the street system, a bridge, a ford, two quays, 12 areas of medieval housing, a palace and two open spaces.

Chapels (WSM19326, WSM08160). In the mid 15th century Bewdley became part of Ribbesford parish. Until then, it had neither its own parish church, nor was it part of another parish. A chapel of ease was built in about 1450. A second chapel was built in the late 15th century close to the end of the stone bridge built in 1483.

Market places (WSM19332, WSM19337). The first market place in Bewdley was the wide street on the top of Wyre Hill, then known as High Street. By about 1539 the main market place was in Load Street.

Street system (WSM19331). The street system probably developed around the middle of the 15th century. It included four town gates, probably for traffic control and tolls, rather than part of town defences.

Bridges and ford (WSM12782, WSM19336). The ford at the end of Lax Lane may have operated from prehistoric times. The first bridge across the Severn was stone and built in 1447 in the same place as the present bridge. During the Wars of the Roses this was destroyed by the Lancastrians. It was rebuilt in timber, but in 1483 a new stone bridge was constructed a little further downstream.

Quays (WSM17747, WSM19354). Boats and trows were loaded and unloaded on both sides of the river.

Medieval houses (WSM17537, WSM17583, WSM17584, WSM17585, WSM19333, WSM19334, WSM19342, WSM19343, WSM19344, WSM19350, WSM19351, WSM21477). Most of the tenement plots were in Bewdley. Wribbenhall was legally separate from Bewdley, but functioned as a suburb of the town in the medieval and later periods.

Palace (WSM19335). Tickenhill Manor was originally owned by the Mortimer family, but in the 15th century became crown property. Henry VII enlarged the house into a palace for his son Arthur, Prince of Wales. Later, it was a residence for the Princesses Mary and Elizabeth Tudor. The palace was built of timber and had a great court and gardens with a gatehouse, chapel and several outbuildings.

Open spaces (WSM17536, WSM19340).

WSM numbers refer to records held by the Historic Environment Record (HER) of Worcestershire County Council. These used to have the prefix HWCM, but the numbers have stayed the same. Contact the HER for further information.
The post-medieval town of Bewdley

The evidence from archaeological investigations, from maps and from documentary sources has allowed archaeologists to interpret the components which made up the post-medieval town of Bewdley. The map shows the outlines of these areas. This account of post-medieval Bewdley covers the period from 1540 to 1800.

Post-medieval Bewdley consisted of 39 components: eight chapels, a market place, the street system, a bridge and a ford, two quays, 16 areas of housing, a palace, two open spaces, a tannery and a foundry.

Chapels (WSM00770, WSM08160, WSM17764, WSM19326, WSM19338, WSM21478, WSM21479, WSM21480). The medieval chapel of ease continued in use, was rebuilt in 1745-48, and became the parish church in 1853. The medieval bridge chapel went out of use as a chapel some time before being demolished in 1798. In 1719 a new chapel was built in Wribbenhall. It was demolished in 1880 and a new church was built further away from the river on the Kidderminster Road.

Bewdley was a centre for non-conformist sects from the mid-17th century. The Baptist congregation met from 1649, and built a chapel in 1764. A Presbyterian meeting house was built in about 1696. The Friends first meeting house was acquired in 1691, and a new building constructed in 1706. The Wesleyan chapel was opened in 1794.

Market place (WSM19337). By about 1540 Load Street market was the main market place in the town. The medieval market buildings continued in use, but were demolished in 1783.

Street system (WSM17642). The medieval street system continued in use. The medieval gates were used as toll gates, and were strengthened during the Civil War. All four had been demolished by the mid-19th century.

Areas of housing (WSM17537, WSM17583, WSM17584, WSM17585, WSM19333, WSM19334, WSM19342, WSM19343, WSM19344, WSM19348, WSM19350, WSM19351, WSM19358, WSM19359, WSM19360, WSM21477). Bewdley and Wribbenhall each expanded to the north during the post-medieval period. The number of small industries and crafts increased, including tanning, weaving and metalworking.

Public buildings. Sayer’s Almshouses, Cooke’s Almshouses and Bourlton’s Almshouses (WSM10807, WSM10760, WSM10821) were all built in the 17th century.

The Free Grammar School (WSM10818) was founded by the Borough Charter of 1606. There was also an earlier grammar school, mentioned in documents in 1577.
The Bewdley Workhouse was built in 1737 at 64 High Street (WSM10709). This closed in 1834 when a much larger workhouse was built in Kidderminster.

**Bridges and ford** (WSM12782, WSM19336). The ford at the end of Lax Lane went out of use in the 18th century. Improvements to the river for boat traffic made it too deep to ford. The medieval stone bridge, continued in use until the late 18th century. A new bridge was designed by Thomas Telford and finished in 1798, when the medieval bridge was demolished.

**Open spaces** (WSM17536, WSM19340).

**Quays** (WSM17747, WSM19353). Bewdley was at its most prosperous in the 17th and 18th centuries and large numbers of boats loaded and unloaded goods at the quays on both sides of the river.

**Palace** (WSM19335). Tickenhill Palace was damaged during the Civil War, and gradually became more dilapidated. Most of the buildings were demolished by 1738, although some of the medieval timber structure survives in Tickenhill Manor, built later in the 18th century.

**Tannery** (WSM17761). Tanning was an important industry in the town from the 16th century into the modern period.

**Foundry** (WSM10729). A brass foundry was established in 1697 behind Load Street.
Archaeological fieldwork in Bewdley & Wribbenhall

Limited archaeological fieldwork has been undertaken in Bewdley despite its importance. The following is a list of all the published archaeological work within the historic core of the town up to July 2009. The letters and codes in brackets are the Historic Environment Record reference numbers.


Cook, M. 2008. Building recording at the Bake House, rear of 15 High Street, Bewdley. Martin Cook Archaeology. (WSM38574)

Miller, D, and Darch, E, 2002 Archaeological watching brief at Severn Side North, Bewdley, Worcestershire, Worcestershire County Council Archaeological Service Internal Report, 1110 (WSM31563)

Miller, D, Darch, E, and Pearson, E, 2003 Programme of Archaeological Work at 27 Dog Lane, Bewdley, Worcestershire, Worcestershire County Council Archaeological Service Internal Report, 1123 (WSM31923)

Napthan, M, and Ratkai, S, 1996 Evaluation at Pewterers Alley, Bewdley, Worcestershire County Council Archaeological Service Internal Report, 511 (WSM29658)

Patrick, C, 2002 An archaeological evaluation and building recording at the Manor House, High Street, Bewdley, Worcestershire, Worcestershire County Council Archaeological Service Internal Report, 968 (WSM31612)


Williams, P, and Cook, M, 2004 An Archaeological Evaluation of Land Adjacent to Dundas House, Rosenhurst Drive, Bewdley Mercian Archaeology Internal Report, 104 (WSM32540)

Williams, P, 2004 An Archaeological Watching Brief at 11 Severnside North, Bewdley, Worcestershire Mercian Archaeology Internal Report, 123 (WSM33825)

Historic Buildings in Bewdley

Many of the historic buildings in Bewdley are Georgian, but quite a number of earlier buildings survive as well. Most of the earliest buildings were timber-framed, and many timber framed buildings survive behind brick street frontages.

Ten known medieval buildings survive in Bewdley. The earliest is a 14th century timber-framed building on Stourport Road. Three medieval buildings survive in Wyre Hill and all were probably built in the 15th century. Other timber-framed buildings that probably date from later in the 15th century survive on Sandy Bank, Welch Gate, High Street and on Lax Lane.

Most of the 16th and 17th century timber-framed buildings which survive are on Load Street. It seems that land in this part of the town was valuable at this time, because several of these buildings are tall and narrow, to allow the owners to make the most of small plots of land.

Six brick buildings dating from the later 17th century survive. Brick was an expensive luxury at this time, so it shows that some of the people of Bewdley were very wealthy. These include four large buildings on Severnside South and two buildings on Kidderminster Road.

Many of the 18th century buildings are quite grand buildings which were owned by wealthy merchants or the gentry. The less well-off areas at this time seem to have been Wribbenhall, the Lax Lane area, Dowles Road, Sandy Bank and Wyre Hill.
Further Reading – Bewdley and Wribbenhall

The following books and sources are about Bewdley only. There are other relevant books about aspects of historic towns, or about towns in Worcestershire including Bewdley.

Babb, L, 1974 Bewdley river traffic, Worcestershire Archaeol and Local Hist Newsletter 14, 11-12

Babb, L, and Davies, S, 1975 The tanning industry in Bewdley, Worcestershire Archaeol and Local Hist Newsletter 16, 6

Barrett, M B, 1972 Bewdley Bridge, in Snell, L S (ed) Essays towards a history of Bewdley, 82-88


Bewdley Historical Research Group 1991 Bewdley in its golden age: life in Bewdley 1660-1760

Brown, S, 1972 Markets and fairs of Bewdley and some relevant information on trading, in Snell, L S (ed) Essays towards a history of Bewdley, 89-102

Burton, J R, 1883 A history of Bewdley with concise accounts of some neighbouring parishes

Buteux, V, 1995 Archaeological assessment of Bewdley (and Wribbenhall), Hereford and Worcester, WCAS internal report 298

Fisher, R N, and Pagett, C M, 1972 A brief history of transportation and communication in Bewdley, in Snell, L S (ed) Essays towards a history of Bewdley, 60-81

Hobson, J, 1972 A short history of the Free Grammar School of King James in Bewdley, in Snell, L S (ed) Essays towards a history of Bewdley, 103-114

Neal, G, 1985 Bewdley's Severn bridges, Worcestershire Archaeol and Local Hist Newsletter 35, 16-18

Parker, J F, 1932 Old Bewdley and its industries, Trans Worcestershire Archaeol Soc 2 ser 9, 1-20

Parker, J F, 1944 Some old Bewdley recollections, Trans Worcestershire Archaeol Soc 2 ser 21, 16-21

Price, S, 1973 Bewdley: medieval topography, Worcestershire Archaeol and Local Hist Newsletter 12, 2

Price, S, 1973 Bewdley: medieval bridge site, Worcestershire Archaeol and Local Hist Newsletter 13, 3
Price, S, 1974 Bewdley: medieval town gates, Worcestershire Archaeol and Local Hist Newsletter 15, 5

Snell, L S (ed), 1972 Essays towards a history of Bewdley

Styles, P, 1947 The corporation of Bewdley under the later Stuarts

If you live in Worcestershire, you can look up books that are in the library on the online catalogue http://opac.worcestershire.gov.uk/TalisPrism/index.html

**Original Documentary Sources for Bewdley**

This is a list of the main documents for Bewdley. These are held in the Worcestershire Record Office (WRO). For more information contact the Record Office providing the reference number e.g WRO BA 2636.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Documentary Sources</th>
<th>Detail</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WRO BA 8681</td>
<td>Survey of manor 1650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WRO BA 8782</td>
<td>Boundaries, and customs of manor 1612</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WRO BA 5446</td>
<td>Large numbers of papers regarding the bridge and including chapelwardens' accounts, 1569-1664</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WRO BA 8681</td>
<td>Bewdley borough: court papers 17th to 19th centuries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WRO BA 5495</td>
<td>Rentals, deeds, memoranda, accounts etc 1524-1872. Stewards' accounts 1708-84 and 1798-1808</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WRO BA 5446</td>
<td>Orders, minutes, memoranda regarding the burgesses, 1649-1708</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WRO BA 4827</td>
<td>Deeds, Bewdley Corporation, 1712-1903</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WRO BA 5537</td>
<td>Baptist records, 1649 onwards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WRO BA 4600</td>
<td>Plan of manor 1785</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WRO BA 965</td>
<td>Plan, c 1830</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WRO BA 5662</td>
<td>Plan of borough, 1837</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WRO BA 5351 and BA 5604</td>
<td>Tithe map (1845) and award (1843)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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