

ABERYSTYWTH

- Design and plan of the town

The plan of Aberystwyth comprises two main streets that form a cross-shape, one leading up from the south and another from the east. These were the two main entry points into the new town by land, the latter running up to the gates of the castle. The site chosen lies on a headland bounded on the south side by the mouth of the Rheidol river and on the west and north by the sea. The castle occupies a prominent site overlooking the sea, with the town to its eastern side. This arrangement gave the castle occupants easy access to the sea should an escape be needed, while the town helped to shield it from an attack on the landward side. This model was widely used in the middle ages in the planning of castle-towns, and shows some strategic thinking on the part of the individual who came up with the plan for Aberystwyth. Who was this was we do not know.

The initial planning of the town must have taken place in late summer or early autumn of 1277, for this was when the castle was begun.²² As castle and town appear to be one integral design, it makes sense to see them as contemporary with each other, with provision to defend the town made at the outset (though it was a few years more before the walls were built). In which case, it is plausible that the plan was created by the master mason Henry of Hereford, who was engaged in initial building work on the castle; or if not, his successor, Ralph of Broughton, 'keeper and viewer' of the king's works there. If we see these men not as the originators of the new works but more as local overseers, other likely candidates are William of March, since he had been assembling men in Bristol to work on the new castle as early as July 1277, or conceivably Edmund himself, for he was at Aberystwyth during this formative time.²³ Whoever the designer was, they showed consideration for combining the town's commercial and military function, unifying town and castle in one overall plan.

The town's street-pattern fossilises the circular outline of Aberystwyth's defensive circuit. Within its defences, the new town enclosed an area of about 25½ acres (115,500m²).²⁴ The town's two main streets were set out to approximately equal length (1250 feet/380m), with gates positioned at their eastern and southern landward approaches. Along these two streets, building plots – that is, the town's former burgages – stretch back to rear access lanes, which run more or less parallel to the alignments of the main streets. Of these back lanes, two in particular, Little Darkgate Street behind Great Darkgate Street, and High Street behind Bridge Street, are fairly wide themselves. However, such back lanes are curiously absent from the plots that front the eastern sides of both Pier Street and Bridge Street. This means the town is not completely symmetrical in its arrangement. The particular layout of streets and street-blocks, together with the circular-shape circuit of defences, makes the plan-layout of Aberystwyth appear somewhat similar to the plan of the walled core of medieval Bristol.²⁵ It likewise has a cross of streets and back lanes placed long some but not all of the length of the two main streets. Considering the initial connections existing between these two places, it is conceivable that the idea for the layout

²² Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.8.

²³ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, pp.7-8

²⁴ The town's defences have received little archaeological attention; see D.B. Hague, 'The Aberystwyth town walls', *Ceredigion* 2 (1955), p.276.

²⁵ For a plan of this part of Bristol see K.D. Lilley, 'Mapping cosmopolis: moral topographies of the medieval city', *Environment & Planning d: Society and Space* 22 (2004), p.692; E. Ralph, 'Bristol, circa 1480', in *Local Maps and Plans from Medieval England*, R.A. Skelton and P.D.A. Harvey (eds.) (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1989), pp.309-316.

of the 'new town of Lampadar' was originally derived from Bristol's town-plan, especially seeing as many of those men coming to work on the castle and defences at Aberystwyth in July and August 1277 had come from there, under instruction from William of March and Edmund of Lancaster. On July 10 Edmund, for example, had issued a request for supplies and men to the constable of Bristol castle, while a few day's earlier the king gave William 'the task of recruiting men', which took place at Bristol and included 120 masons drawn from the south west of England.²⁶

The town was made larger in physical size than was necessary for the number of inhabitants living there c.1300. Without having any reference to the size of the original burgages, the specific area of the walled-town covered by the first-occupied urban properties is difficult to deduce. But if the 150 or so burgages present in c.1310 were placed along the whole length of the two main streets – that is with 75 facing each street (30 or so on each side) – then an individual burgage of even quite large dimensions would easily fit. The main streets could therefore comfortably accommodate the burgages recorded in the first decade of the 1300s. By way of comparison, in Edward's later new towns of Cricieth and Caernarfon the original burgages set out were 60 by 80 feet, while at Beaumaris they were 40 by 80 feet.²⁷ Those laid out at Aberystwyth's may have been considerably larger than this, unless only relatively small sections of both main streets were occupied c.1300. Certainly significant plot boundaries front these streets, creating large building plots stretching back more than 200 feet (61m) in depth from street frontage to back lane.²⁸ The town was spacious enough to provide room for potential growth within the walled area, though this may indicate some optimism on the part of its planners. The areas of the town which seem to have been left for later development are those situated furthest from the two main streets, especially the south eastern corner, between Bridge Street and Queen Street. The area in the north west, between the castle and Pier Street and Great Darkgate Street, is also seemingly devoid of plots and streets, but here it is likely that they were originally laid out, probably in the form of a westward extension of Little Darkgate Street (north of Great Darkgate Street). Remnants of former streets and plot patterns can be traced here on later town plans. They were probably lost due to the town's later medieval population decline, perhaps after the Black Death, or later.²⁹ However, the town's new church of St Mary's was placed outside the walls sometime before the mid-fifteenth century suggesting that even then there was little open space left inside the walled town.³⁰

Aberystwyth was thus a fairly large and thoughtfully laid-out medieval new town. But with its curving streets and street-blocks, the degree of regularity is not especially strong and the plan lacks an overall symmetry. Also, there are some strange anomalies in the plan requiring explanation. One is the apparent lack of a market place, unless this was situated where a later market hall stood, at the west end of Great Darkgate Street, or unless the market – sanctioned by the borough charter to take place on Mondays – filled the street itself (as was commonplace in medieval towns). A second oddity concerns the intersection of the two main streets. They do not meet neatly but instead Bridge Street and Pier Street are each offset slightly from the other, creating a dog-leg turn. Great Darkgate Street

²⁶ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.7.

²⁷ E.A. Lewis, *The Mediaeval Boroughs of Snowdonia* (Henry Sotheman, London, 1912), p.63.

²⁸ Measurements based on field-survey undertaken in 2004. See 'Data downloads'.

²⁹ Griffiths, 'Aberystwyth', pp.43-44.

³⁰ Griffiths, 'Aberystwyth', p.21, suggests that St Mary's lay north of the castle and notes that 'in 1762, it was stated that "many years ago" the original church was destroyed as a result of gradual undermining by the pounding waves'. However, a destroyed church is shown east of the town walls and north of Pier Street on Lewis Morris's map of c.1740.

however is spared this and runs uninterrupted for its whole length with a straighter alignment. The level of planning required to create the new town is not diminished by its apparent asymmetry, however. Castle and town formed a unified entity, the defences of each being combined as one, as noted above. In encompassing neatly the cross of the two main streets, the oval-shape circuit of the defences was integral to the original design of the town. Having two main streets both made co-equal in length also adds to the overall unity and uniformity of the town plan. So too do the similarly-proportioned, elongated rectangular-shaped blocks formed by these streets, with the burgesses' house plots contained within them. The provision of these rear access lanes gave burgesses an easy means of sub-dividing their properties, which they could then rent out to others for a sum.

The new town of Llanbadarn was thus no doubt carefully thought out in terms of its design and layout, as is clear from the maps shown here. As one of Edward's first three new towns in north Wales it might have been expected to set the trend to be followed by others. But this was not the case, for in terms of its street and plot layout the design of Aberystwyth is without parallel in Edward's other towns. The plan of Aberystwyth might best be interpreted as a one-off design, perhaps modelled upon Bristol. If so, the originator of the town plan may have moved onto other things before the later new towns of 1283-4 were established. Who this suggests the town's designer was remains open to conjecture.