ABERYSTWYTH

- Early history of the town

One of the enduring enigmas of Aberystwyth's early history is the derivation of its place-name, for the town lay not at the mouth of the Ystwyth but the mouth of the Rheidol river. The first written accounts refer to it instead as simply the 'new town of Lampadervaur', Llanbadarn Fawr. 'Great' Llanbadarn was an existing Welsh settlement centre (*clas*) situated on the Rheidol further upstream with its locally important church dedicated to the sixth-century saint St Padarn. Initially the new town of Llanbadarn did not have its own parish church and so local townspeople had to walk to the mother church to worship. Only later, by the mid-fifteenth century, was a church built in the town and dedicated to St Mary the Virgin.[1] This was a commonplace situation in new towns of the middle ages, where older settlements continued to exert influence over their younger neighbours.

The southernmost of Edward's new towns ringing the Welsh stronghold of Snowdonia, 'New' Llanbadarn was also one of the three earliest, founded in 1277, along with Flint and Rhuddlan in the north-east of Wales. While Aberystwyth stood guard on the southern frontier of the Welsh enclave, the other two towns flanked its eastern edge. All had direct sea-access. The towns were thus strategically placed. The first activities recorded in written accounts at this time reveal the building of the castle, and the creation of the town's urban defences. The castle work began in early August 1277, following the arrival of the king's brother, Edmund, as well as masons and carpenters who had been assembled earlier in Bristol, in July, under William of March, one of the king's household administrators.[2] Edmund had himself come up from his base at Carmarthen by July 25.[3] The building work itself was looked after initially by Henry of Hereford, a master mason, but subsequently he was superceded by Ralph of Broughton as 'keeper and viewer of... works at Lampadervaur [Llanbadarn Fawr]', with a certain knight, Roger de Molis, in overall charge by September 20 when Edmund returned to England.[4] Work on making defences around the town is mentioned in Ralph's accounts of expenditure for 1278, when stones and timber had arrived by ship 'for the works of the castle and vill of Llanbadarn, for making and repairing a fosse [ditch] round the vill and a pond'.[5] The pond may be reference to a mill that lay outside the town on its south-eastern side, while the ditch was constructed to encircle the new town. By then the 'vill' – the town – was already formed and its defences seemingly begun. In fact, the town's charter, granted in December 1277, and making it a 'free borough', had given burgesses the right 'to enclose the town ... with a ditch and a wall'.[6] It seems, then, that the 'new town' of Llanbadarn had been brought into being during the autumn months, between August and December 1277.

Aberystwyth's borough privileges were modelled upon those of Montgomery, a castle-town of earlier date founded by the English closer to the border in the east. The burgesses' privileges included the right to have a gild merchant and to hold a weekly market, and as a means of attracting newcomers to take up residence in the town the charter also stated that

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[1] R.A. Griffiths, 'Aberystwyth', in R.A. Griffiths (ed.), Boroughs of Mediaeval Wales (University of Cardiff Press, Cardiff, 1978), pp.20-21.

[2] A.J. Taylor, The Welsh Castles of Edward I (Hambledon Press, London, 1986), pp.7-8.

[3] M. Prestwich, Edward I (Yale University Press, London, 1988), p.179.

[4] Taylor, Welsh Castles, p.8; CWR, p.166.

[5] Ministers' Accounts for West Wales, 1277-1306. Part I: text and translation, ed. M. Rhys (Cymmrodorion Record Series, no 13: London, 1936), p.11.

[6] CChR, 1257-1300, p.206

once a 'bondman' had resided there 'for a year and a day without being claimed... he shall remain a free man in the said borough' thereafter.[7] Following Ralph came a new keeper of Aberystwyth castle, Bogo de Knovill, who himself had previously been at Montgomery as bailiff of its castle, and who also had fortified the town there in 1277-80.[8] At Aberystwyth, the rampart defences were being likewise made during this time, under Ralph's care. It is under Bogo, though, in April 1280, that we begin to hear of expenditure 'on the works of the wall surrounding the vill of Llanbadarn', suggesting that by this date a rather more substantial circuit of defences was being built.[9] At the same time, Bogo also drew up for the king a report on the condition of the castle and town defences at Aberystwyth, and in it lamented that 'the gates of the town had neither locks nor bars and were left open day and night'.[10] Master Thomas of Bristol was employed for the work.[11] Despite all this however, in March 1282, an attack by the Welsh under Gruffudd ap Maredudd and Rhys ap Maelgwn was successful and according to one contemporary, though they spared the garrison their lives, they 'burned the town and the castle' and 'destroyed the rampart that was around the castle and the town'.[12] More rebuilding work on castle and town walls was therefore required, once the town was back in English hands.[13]

The early town seems to have been reasonably successful as a commercial enterprise. The borough charter of 1277 provided an incentive for merchants to come to trade in the town. It proclaimed that 'all merchants of the king's dominions and of other lands at peace with the king, and their merchandise, shall be free to come to the said borough, stay there and depart by land or water.'[14] In May 1282, five years after the founding of the new town, and soon after the Welsh incursion that had burned it, the king had granted Gilbert of Clare 'power to receive burgesses and others willing to come to the king's town of Lampader to dwell therein', giving them the right to abode there 'for the king's benefit'.[15] Gilbert was earl of Gloucester and Hertford and had been put in overall charge of the king's affairs in west Wales.[16] The earliest indication of how well the new town was doing comes in the early fourteenth century. Surveys carried out by the royal administration during the first decade of the century show that there were around 120 burgesses in Aberystwyth renting a total of some 145 burgages.[17] Some burgesses clearly held more than one burgage. One particularly detailed rental of *nove ville de Lampadarn* made at this time lists a total of 112 people living there, renting between them 144 burgages, and because they are actually named it is possible to show that 51 of these burgesses – almost half – had Welsh names.[18] The list of individuals also records who held what, so we read that a certain Thomas of

[7] CChR, 1257-1300, p.206

[8] Taylor, Welsh Castles, p.10; Griffiths, 'Aberystwyth', p.30.

[9] Ministers' Accounts for West Wales, 1277-1306, p.33.

[10] Taylor, Welsh Castles, p.11, citing PRO: C49, Chancery Parliamentary Proceedings, 1/19.

[11] Taylor, Welsh Castles, p.11, citing PRO: C49, Chancery Parliamentary Proceedings, 1/19.

[12] Brut y Tywysogyon, or The Chronicle of the Princes, Red Book of Hergest Version, ed. T. Jones (Board of Celtic Studies History and Law Series, no.16: University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1955), p.271.

[13] Taylor, Welsh Castles, p.13.

[14] CChR, 1257-1300, p.206.

[15] CWR, p.222.

[16] CWR, p.222.

[17] 1300-1301, 141½ burgages and 120 burgesses; 1305-1305, 147 burgages; 1311, 155½ burgages: I.J. Sanders, 'The boroughs of Aberystwyth and Cardigan in the early fourteenth century', Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies 15 (1954), p.283, citing Minister's Accounts for West Wales, 1277-1306, pp.75, 93, 199, 217, 295, 363.

[18] Sanders, 'Boroughs of Aberystwyth and Cardigan', p.283.

Lichfield rented one burgage while Richard of Ewyas had two.[19] Welshmen had apparently been forbidden by Edward to live in the boroughs, so their strong presence as burgesses residing in the new town is curious, while immigrants from parts of England and the Welsh borders, men such as Thomas and Richard, were to be expected since they were actively encouraged.[20] The list of burgess names in the survey may have been recorded in the same order as their burgages appeared on the ground, but unlike a contemporary survey of Cardigan, no topographical features are mentioned in the Aberystwyth rental.[21]

The early history of the new town of Llanbadarn is thus fairly well documented. Despite some initial setbacks it was a well-settled and prosperous place. With a royal castle, gates and town walls to protect it, what became Aberystwyth seems to have been an attractive proposition to would-be townspeople, both English and Welsh, who came to live there. What these documents do not reveal however is how the new town was formed. For this it is necessary to take a closer look at the plan of the town itself.

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[19] Sanders, 'Boroughs of Aberystwyth and Cardigan', pp287-89, citing PRO: SC 12/17/72.
[20] Sanders, 'Boroughs of Aberystwyth and Cardigan', p.283, citing CPR 1385-9, p.114. In the mid-fourteenth century a plea was made to the Edward III by 'the English burgesses of the English borough towns in north Wales', which 'the king's grandfather, by his wise counsel established soon after the conquest of Wales', Calendar of Ancient Petitions Relating to Wales, ed. W. Rees (University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1975), p.439.
[21] See Sanders, 'Boroughs of Aberystwyth and Cardigan', pp.289-93.