

CAERNARFON

- Design and plan of the town

Within the circuit of walls, Caernarfon's town plan comprises a grid of streets forming elongated blocks. The axis of the grid is High Street and at either end it had the town's two main gates, Exchequer Gate in the east and Golden Gate in the west.⁹⁵ Three other streets were placed across High Street, and each of these terminated at the walls.⁹⁶ These three are approximately in parallel with each other and may have been interconnected by means of a street that ran just within the town wall providing access to its five landward-facing towers.⁹⁷ The three cross streets define four central street-blocks, each large enough to accommodate a double line of building-plots facing each street. There is no discernable rear access to these plots. Along the two outer streets (Shire Hall Street, Church Street, and Palace Street, Northgate Street) there is just a single line of plots, so the street-blocks here are half the depth of the four central ones. So, six street-blocks in all were provided within the walled town. The plots within these six blocks were orientated to face the three cross streets, except those along the main axis of High Street where they are turned by ninety degrees to face onto it instead.

The overall plan of Caernarfon is thus quite a simple gridded layout, but although its plan is regular in form it is not perfectly geometrical. There are some irregularities that spoil its symmetry. The three cross-streets, for instance, do not intersect with High Street at perfect right-angles but are skewed slightly. The streets are not perfectly straight either, and the blocks of plots that they encompass are also each slightly different in size and shape, some being more elongated than others. These irregularities are usually explained in terms of the town's site having physical constraints.⁹⁸ There are other factors to consider though, relating to the process of the town's initial design and planning. This includes the timing of when the various elements of the town's plan were laid out, and who was involved. Fortunately, early documentary evidence is available at Caernarfon to examine these issues and see if the design for the town was adapted to meet local requirements.

Looking at the layout of Caernarfon's streets and street blocks overall, those to the north side of High Street appear to be differently shaped compared to south of it. The cause of this difference seems to be due to the curvature of the northern line of the town wall, which shortens the length of Northgate Street compared to Palace Street, and lengthens Church Street compared with Shire Hall Street. With their different lengths, the northern stretches of the three cross-streets produce more oddly-shaped street-blocks than those between High Street and the castle ditch to the south. It looks, then, as if the town walls were laid out on alignments that spoiled the symmetry of the street pattern, reducing the overall regularity of the six street-blocks. Could this be because the town's street-plan was designed by one individual, and its walls and defences by another? Had there been an 'ideal' design for the town which had to be adapted to suit the circuit of the town walls?

⁹⁵ These names were current in the fourteenth century. Alternative names were also used: West or Water Gate for Golden Gate, and East or Great Gate for Exchequer Gate. Two smaller postern gates were also present, one stood at the south-west corner of the circuit, close to the castle's Eagle Tower, and the other, the Green Gate, was at the southern end of Hole-in-the-Wall Street (hence the street-name). Soulsby, *Towns of Medieval Wales*, p.90; RCAHMW, *Caernarvonshire*, ii, pp.150-55.

⁹⁶ Later, in modern times, they were cut through the walls.

⁹⁷ The course of this 'intra-mural' street is suggested by unnamed lanes in the north-eastern corner of the walled town, as well as by the line of Hole-in-the-Wall Street.

⁹⁸ Soulsby, *Towns of Medieval Wales*, p.90.

One way to explore this further is to see how well the town's original burgages of sixty-by-eighty-feet fit into the actual layout of the six street-blocks.⁹⁹ The answer is not well at all in those blocks north of High Street affected by the line of the town wall. Here, for example, the block between Church Street and Market Street tapers inwards at its northern end, making it impossible to fit in the burgages of the documented size – the block is too narrow to contain two plots back-to-back – whereas at its southern end there is ample room. Along Northgate Street far fewer standard plots can be accommodated than in the street-blocks just to the west because the street is shortened by the wall. However, to the south of High Street, where the wall is not an influence, ten standard-sized plots fit comfortably in the blocks between Palace Street and Castle Street, and Castle Street and Shire Hall Street, showing that these were laid out to dimensions suitable for holding the sixty-by-eighty-feet plots.¹⁰⁰ With this in mind, it seems most likely that the original design for the town was for the four central-blocks to hold ten plots each, with the narrower outer-blocks each holding five, giving a total of 60 plots in all (ie. $4 \times 10 + 4 \times 5$). This of course is very close to the 55 recorded burgages in the 1298 rental.¹⁰¹ It points to an 'ideal' plan being drawn up with two sets of four equal-sized street blocks placed within a grid of streets.

The area covered by the 'ideal' pattern of regular street-blocks is at odds, however, with the actual plan on the ground. It seems that the town plan was adapted to make the street-blocks fit into the area encompassed by the circuit of walls (an area of just over ten acres). This involved turning plots to face High Street, and making the blocks north of High Street less regular in form than those to the south, resulting in plots either larger or smaller in size than the standard burgage. A mismatch between the town's plan and the walls implies that two individuals were responsible for them, one laying out the streets and the plots, and the other working on the walls and defences. From what we know of the individuals engaged at Caernarfon in the preliminary work during summer 1283, it is possible to see perhaps Mannasser de Vaucoleurs or Richard the Engineer setting out the circuit for the town's defences, looking to fulfill the need for a tight and defensible circuit, while someone such as Eustace de Hache or his clerk John of Dunster, both men with more of an administrative mind, was concerned with the town layout and matters such as how best to accommodate the maximum number of burgages within a given area. At a size of sixty-by-eighty-feet, sixty-burgages could have been accommodated by the simple gridded arrangement of streets chosen for the town, but the defences evidently took precedence over having a perfectly ordered pattern of streets and plots. Perhaps, then, what we are seeing in the plan of Caernarfon's is a sign that there was a compromise between those dealing with the town's future commercial and economic needs and those dealing with its military and defensive needs. The decision-making for this work would have to have been done at the preliminary stage, when the site was being cleared, ditches dug, and palisades put up. Indeed, the positioning of the two town-gates in the wall could not have been done without due consideration for the placing of the streets, especially the line of High Street, and in the setting out of the oblong-shaped street blocks, even if in the end these had to be made to fit with where the defences ran. Though this still leaves the question of why Castle Street was not made to line up with the gate of the castle, unless the castle had a different designer?

⁹⁹ Field measurements of the street-blocks and plot-frontages were taken in 2004. See 'Data downloads'.

¹⁰⁰ Indeed, some plot-frontages in the town still measure sixty-feet wide and eighty deep.

¹⁰¹ 59 were in existence by 1305.

While the town's plan within the walls was in place by the time the borough received its charter in 1284, some new developments continued to occur outside. One of these was the quay created in 1285, along the wall on the north-side of the town. It is shown as a tidal creek on Speed's plan of the town of 1610, but subsequently became infilled. The former outlines of it are preserved by the streets of Bank Quay and Turk Quay. The creek was fed by a small stream (or streams) flowing down from the mill pond, the King's Pool. The dam across this pool was built in 1305, together with a sluice for a new mill outside the East Gate, and the works of the new mill appear in the account roll of Thomas de Esthallye, the king's chamberlain in north Wales at that time.¹⁰² Also here was a multi-arched bridge across the river, leading into the town from the east up to the main East, or Exchequer Gate which housed the exchequer for north Wales.¹⁰³ The market place for the town lay outside the walls to the east where more space was available, with closer proximity to the quay.¹⁰⁴ Reference to it appears on the reverse side of the 1298 rental roll, and certainly there were houses located in the suburbs outside the walls by the later fourteenth century.¹⁰⁵ There were also some minor changes within the walls after 1284 though none disrupted the town plan. For example, a chantry chapel dedicated to St Mary was founded in 1307 just inside the north-west corner of the walls and placed on a burgage held by Henry de Ellerton, a mason working under Walter of Hereford.¹⁰⁶ For the town's burgesses Llanbeblig remained the parish church, however.

The adaptation of the town plan and the working out of a layout to combine defensive and commercial functions shows the skill of those involved in setting out Caernarfon during 1283 and 1284. The impact on the town plan of the 1295 Welsh attack seems minimal, and besides by then the plots and streets were demarcated, and property holdings defined in legal terms. The close attention to detail shown by burgesses to the boundaries of their property in the town is demonstrated in surviving transfer deeds of the fourteenth century.¹⁰⁷ These contain measured out distances as well as the names of those whose property they abutted. One such deed, of 1334, granted half a burgage which lay between the plot of Reginald of Trentham on the one side and the king's highway on the other, a corner plot.¹⁰⁸ The townscape of the walled town of Caernarfon was thus relatively unchanging through its earliest years, and indeed once set in place the lines of streets and plots that made up its town's plan appear to have remained largely intact right up to modern times, so that even today the dimensions and traces of the town's original burgages can still be picked out.

¹⁰² RCAHMS, Caernarvonshire, ii, p.158; Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.91; E.A. Lewis, 'The account roll of the Chamberlain of the Principality of North Wales from Michaelmas 1304 to Michaelmas 1305', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 1 (1923), pp.256, 269.

¹⁰³ For the bridge see, RCAHMS, Caernarvonshire, ii, p.153; Excavations: Anon., *Eastgate Street, Caernarfon*, archaeological watching brief (Gwynedd Archaeological Trust report 361, 2000); A. Davidson and D.Rh. Gwyn, *Eastgate Street, Caernarfon*, archaeological assessment (G1368) (Gwynedd Archaeological Trust report 202, 1996); on the Exchequer gate see Williams Jones, 'Caernarvon', p.78.

¹⁰⁴ Soulsby, *Towns of Medieval Wales*, p.90.

¹⁰⁵ Jones Pierce and Griffiths, 'Early history of the borough of Caernarvon', p.241; Williams Jones, 'Caernarvon', p.84.

¹⁰⁶ Williams Jones, 'Caernarvon', p.82; RCAHMS, Caernarvonshire, ii, pp.123-4.

¹⁰⁷ Jones Pierce and Griffiths, 'Early history of the borough of Caernarvon', pp.241-46.

¹⁰⁸ Jones Pierce and Griffiths, 'Early history of the borough of Caernarvon', p.242.