

CAERWYS

- Design and plan of the town

Maurice Beresford noted the ‘full rectilinear plan’ of Caerwys, with its ‘small market place’.¹²¹ The town consists of a grid of streets. Three streets run in a north-south direction, and four run east-west. Not all the streets are the same width. The widest of them form an overall cross-shape, with the market place at the centre of the cross, a small square cut into the north-east corner of the intersection of the town’s main streets, South Street/North Street and High Street/Water Street. The cross-shape and grid plan of the street pattern gives the town plan an impression of regularity in form. This is heightened by the near-equal spacing of the east-west streets, producing rectangular-shaped street-blocks of roughly the same dimensions. These streets are also arranged more precisely in parallel to each other than the two outermost north-south streets, which instead are angled so that their alignments converge together slightly. The town’s regular form seems to diminish therefore towards its perimeter edges. Within the rectangular-shape street-blocks are two lines of building plots, but the plot-patterns along the two main street axes are denser than those along the minor streets. This may be because the two main streets had the highest demand for property, and hence greater concentration of population and sub-division of burgess properties. Alternatively it may indicate that the town was developed and perhaps laid out in two stages.

The town’s initial plan development is most likely represented by the main cross of streets, with roughly equal sized plots fronting each in all four directions.¹²² Of the two streets, the dominant axis is formed by High Street/Water Street, as plots front this street continuously all along its length. This is in contrast to North Street/South Street, where plot-frontages are instead ‘interrupted’ halfway along its length by those fronting High Street/Water Street. Nevertheless, the similar size and form of the plots along both of these main cross-streets suggests that they were established at the same time, and earliest on, to the north-east of the church, which stands behind the plot frontages in a position rather aloof from the town. The orientation of High Street/Water Street also suggests there were two stages of development in the town. The two main streets do not intersect at ninety degrees, and if examined closely the alignment of High Street/Water Street does not match up exactly with the two streets to its north and south, Drover’s Lane/Holywell Road, and Chapel Street. Curiously, though, these two secondary streets both have the same alignment. This makes it look as if they were added in later, to further develop the town by facilitating property development behind the existing plot frontages on the two main cross-streets. This would also account for the way that plots on these secondary streets do not run continually along their whole length (in contrast again to those plots that front all along High Street/Water Street), for they clearly abut the rear of plots fronting onto North Street and South Street. The later insertion of these two secondary streets is suggested also by the way Chapel Street stops at South Street, unlike Drover’s Lane and Holywell Road which extend across North Street. The church and its grounds perhaps stood in the way of a street to parallel that of Drover’s Lane, thus spoiling the overall symmetry of the town’s street-pattern.

From studying the shape and plan of the street and plot patterns of Caerwys a model of its development emerges. The earliest, pre-urban feature is probably the church and an

¹²¹ Beresford, *New Towns*, p.549.

¹²² Field survey carried out in 2004 revealed that the plots were around 130-140 feet in depth (40m). No common or standard plot width could be identified. See ‘Data downloads’.

associated settlement (earthworks are visible in the field to the south of the church). This is close to Maes Mynan which, Maurice Beresford points out, 'was a house of the Welsh princes'.¹²³ The eccentric location of the church suggests it was not part of the town plan as it was originally conceived. Instead a new town was laid out to the north east of it, on a cross-plan with a small market square, with regular-sized plots fronting each of the two main streets accentuating the cross shape of the town. This may even be reflected in the name of the place ('crwys' being cross in Welsh), and probably existed before the town's charter of 1292 – the place inhabited prior to the town becoming an enfranchised borough. The symbolic significance of a cross-shape was surely not lost on its creator, or the town's inhabitants. It was probably laid out under Welsh lordship rather than Edward's, and may date from earlier in the thirteenth century when Caerwys was a meeting place for the two Welsh bishops who came there to discuss Henry III's treaty.¹²⁴ A second phase in the town's formation then followed with two new street-alignments being added in to provide land for further property development behind the main street-frontages. The most likely time when this occurred is when the 'king's town' was made a 'free borough' by the charter of 1292. These later streets may never have been as well built-up as the town's earlier two main streets. The final result however was a town with a grid-plan form. The chance of it being based upon some Gascon bastide thus seems remote to say the least.

¹²³ Beresford, *New Towns*, p.48.

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