

CONWY

- Design and plan of the town

Perched on gently-sloping hillside above the confluence of the Conwy and Gyffin rivers, the town and castle of Conwy occupy a dramatic site. The stone-built walls encompass an area of just over 22 acres (89,500m²), taking in the abbey church of St Mary's and its large churchyard left over from the transfer of the monastic community in 1283-4, as well as the sites of the royal apartments that were put up at around this time, and of course the streets and the building plots of the town itself. The castle sits at the waterside where the Gyffin enters the Conwy river, at the lower, eastern end of the town, and from it the town's walls strike out, to the west in one direction rising steeply up hill, and in the other along the shoreline. These two sections of town wall are connected along the town's north-side by a long and relatively straight section of wall that John Flauner of Boulogne had worked on between 1284 and 1285. The circuit of walls traces out a triangular shape which was pierced by three gateways, Porth Isaf to the east, Port Uchaf to the west, and Porth y Felin to the south.¹⁵⁶

The street layout within the walls comprises two main thoroughfares. These join to make a T-shape. One street extends from the castle gates and runs parallel along the shoreline of the Conwy river, while the other is perpendicular to it, and extends steeply uphill to the town's market place. As well as this 'T', formed by Castle Street, Berry Street and High Street, a second, narrower perpendicular street, Chapel Street, also extends uphill from the river-shore, running parallel to High Street but continuing further on past the market place as far as Upper Gate. The upper and lower gates do not stand at opposite ends of the same street, therefore, but rather are offset from each other. This meant that the two main streets of the town did not terminate at a gateway, an unusual arrangement when compared with the plans of other fortified Edwardian new towns such as Caernarfon and Flint. The T-shape however is reminiscent of the arrangement of streets at Beaumaris on Anglesey, founded in 1295-6, and indeed the configuration is remarkably similar, raising the possibility that they were designed and planned by the same individual, even though the towns were not founded at the same time. Another similarity between Conwy and Beaumaris is the siting of the castle at one end of the main street that runs parallel to the shoreline, which in both towns formed the main quayside. They each also have a short street running down to the shoreline immediately opposite the perpendicular street, thus making the 'T' into more of a cross-shape (†). Both towns also contain large churchyards occupying a corner to the south of the perpendicular street, though in the case of Beaumaris the church may not have pre-dated the foundation of the town, unlike Conwy.

Similarities between the plans of Conwy and Beaumaris point to a common hand in their making, but about which little is documented. By 1295, the time of the survey of the town listing its burgages and burgesses, the streets and plots were already in place for over ten years. The rental helps to confirm some details about the various elements that made up the town at that time, including the market place, the churchyard, the street towards the mill and Upper Gate (Porth Uchaf), as well as a property situated in the middle of a street, probably the market place where 'islands' of buildings still exist.¹⁵⁷ But it provides few specific clues about the physical make-up of the town, and though it does suggest there was a standard size of burgage at Conwy it contains no reference to what this was and hence

¹⁵⁶ Ie. 'Lower gate', 'Upper gate', and 'Mill gate'. See RCAHMW, Caernarvonshire, i, pp.56-7.

¹⁵⁷ Griffiths, 'Early history of Conway', pp.7-10. Plots are also referred to 'in the market' in the later rental (p.16).

offers little help relating to the town's early formation. Field-survey of the town's street-blocks and selected property frontages along the main streets has also failed to reveal an original burgage size, though considering the evident movement (albeit slight) in property bounds revealed by entries in the 1295 rental, this should not be of surprise.¹⁵⁸ What is revealed, though, are yet further similarities between Conwy and Beaumaris in terms of the relative proportions of the overall series of plots fronting onto the main street running parallel to the shoreline, and the comparable overall lengths of the towns' T-shaped streets.

The presence of Master James of St George at the early stages of work at both Conwy and Beaumaris perhaps accounts for the similarities in layout of these two new towns.¹⁵⁹ At Conwy, his receipt of monies in the first year to cover costs of building, as well as his supervising of particular aspects of the construction work, shows him to be someone who had an overall vision of the whole enterprise. Others may also have been influential in the early planning of Conwy, including John de Bonvillars, who assigned work to contractors in the mid-1280s, and William of Louth, whose survey of the works was carried out in June 1284, before the grant of the borough charter, though after the palisade had been erected around the site and after initial groundworks had begun. Then there was the clerk of works at this time, John of Candover, who worked closely with Master James but dealt more with matters of finance and administration on site, and perhaps therefore had an eye on how many townspeople the place would need to accommodate, how many burgages to include, to earn the king a reasonable revenue. But at Beaumaris in 1295 Walter of Winchester was clerk of works, and though he like Master James had been at Conwy that same year, and may have seen the shape of the new town there, he was not involved in the early work at Conwy.¹⁶⁰ This would seem to rule out John of Candover as the directing hand in the design of Conwy, and again place suspicion on Master James. William of Louth, while active in conducting surveys elsewhere of new towns in north Wales, seems to be involved more in making a record of what was already in place rather than instrumental himself in creating towns. For example, at Rhuddlan in June 1279 he was commissioned by the king to survey the town, established in 1277, and record 'the void plots and other sites', and 'assess and rent burgages'.¹⁶¹ On that occasion Master James was instructed to assist him, as he probably was at Conwy in 1284.

All in all, then, though little is known of how the plan of Conwy was laid out on the ground, it seems that the most likely person who decided what the town should look like was Master James of St George, the king's master architect in north Wales. This would explain the similarities evident in the layouts of Conwy and Beaumaris, and also account for the presence of the same plan-features even though the two towns were founded over a decade apart. That the town and castle were seen to be one construction at Conwy is revealed in the earliest references to it.¹⁶² The unity of the town and castle design – the linking of the two, for example in the alignment of Castle Street with the castle gates – suggests likewise, and since Master James is certainly responsible for overseeing work on the castle and town defences it is highly likely too that he was engaged with coming up with a plan for the town's streets and plots, a plan that had to be accommodated within the confines of the

¹⁵⁸ RCAHMW, Caernarvonshire, i, p.39: suggests it 'seems probable that the Conwy burgage had an area of about 4800 square feet [ie. comparable with Caernarfon] but that its linear dimensions varied according to the depth available at different parts of the town'. Field survey conducted in 2004, see 'Data downloads'.

¹⁵⁹ On Master James' presence at Beaumaris and Conwy see Taylor, 'Master James of St George'.

¹⁶⁰ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, pp.104-5.

¹⁶¹ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.30; CWR, p.178.

¹⁶² Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.46.

circuit of walls, and which took in the abbey church and churchyard. The way the two main streets intersect at right-angles, and the straightness of the streets even on the steep hillside that makes up the town, also hint at someone with practical knowledge of geometry, a mason-architect for example.¹⁶³ However, if both town plan and walled circuit were the unified product of one man's thinking, as appears to be the case, it seems odd that they should have chosen not to make the Lower and Upper Gates, two of the town's main gateways, align with one another along a single street axis of either High Street or Chapel Street. This may be due to the town's undulating topography, for unlike at Caernarfon it is not possible to see from one side of the town to the other, so even if the gates were at opposite ends of the same street they would not have been inter-visible anyway.

As with the other Edwardian towns in north Wales, the physical formation of Conwy preceded the legal foundation of it as a borough. The chartering of the town marked the end of the town's beginning. It seems likely that William of Louth's survey in the summer of 1284 was timed to see what progress had been made on the town prior to its receiving new inhabitants, which the 'free borough' status and privileges were to entice, in the autumn. Work was still continuing at this time on the town's defences, as noted above, and in the town, too, building projects went on through the 1280s and 1290s, including work on the King's Hall, which was enclosed by a wall, the construction of a new mill on the Gyffin, the 'two small walls built in the ditch between the castle and the apartment of Master James', and later still, repairs to the town quay.¹⁶⁴ The 1295 and 1305-6 rentals also provide some information on how the new town was developing after its foundation, although the burgesses' houses are not mentioned specifically since the survey was of land and not buildings. It is clear that by the turn of the century properties existed outside the walls along the quayside, for eight plots are mentioned there, each paying six-pence in rent, while seven built-upon properties are mentioned 'extra muros', beyond the walls, at Twthill.¹⁶⁵ The area of the King's Hall and Llywelyn's Hall have been excavated and foundations of these and other early structures found there, while elsewhere in the town more limited archaeological excavations have produced evidence of the town's early occupation, including on the north side of Berry Street a stone-built property boundary, more or less coincident with a plot boundary marked on the first edition Ordnance Survey plan.¹⁶⁶ The quayside has also had archaeological work, but on the houses and workshops that must have occupied the burgages of the early town nothing comparable has been carried out.¹⁶⁷

Overall, the layout of Conwy is interesting for what it reveals of the early history of the new town and its planning. Through linking the scant documentary sources with careful study of the town's plan, and through making comparative observations between it and other

¹⁶³ For example, Chapel Street and Upper Gate Street. On the geometrical knowledge of medieval master masons see L.R. Shelby, 'The geometrical knowledge of mediaeval master masons', *Speculum* 47 (1972), pp.395-421.

¹⁶⁴ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, pp.53-8.

¹⁶⁵ Griffiths, 'Early history of Conway', pp.16, 19.

¹⁶⁶ Excavation: L.A.S. Butler, 'Excavations at Conway 1961-4', *Transactions of the Caernarvonshire Historical Society* 26 (1965), pp.20-30; M.A. Mason, 'Llywelyn's Hall, Conwy', *Transactions of the Caernarvonshire Historical Society* 56 (1995), pp.11-35; Gifford Consulting Engineers, Former TA Centre Premises, Berry Street, Conwy, report on archaeological works (Report B4658B-RO3, 2002, copy with GAT); R.S. Kelly, *Conwy's Past in Future. A survey of archaeological deposits in Conwy*, Gwynedd (Gwynedd Archaeological Trust, Bangor, 1977).

¹⁶⁷ Excavation: Anon., *Conwy West Sewage Disposal and Quay Pipelines – 1994 Development, archaeological monitoring and recording (phase II) (G1182)* ((Gwynedd Archaeological Trust report 111, c.1994).

Edwardian new towns, it is possible to begin to see how Conwy took shape during its early formation in 1283 and 1284. Considering the plan-similarities between Conwy and Beaumaris, and the apparent involvement of Master James in the planning of both, it may be that the original burgages at Conwy were of the same dimensions as those laid out at Beaumaris, forty by eighty feet. At Conwy though, the 1295 rental makes it clear that the standard burgage there was subject to minor alterations, making it difficult to now use modern measurements of the town's streets and plots to work out whether this was the case. Even so, the unified planning of castle and town, and the shared characteristics of the layouts of Conwy and Beaumaris, help to suggest that at least in this particular case the design and planning of the new town was the work of the king's master architect, James of St George. In this sense, not only do some of his castles reflect common design traits, as is well known,¹⁶⁸ so too do the towns where he had worked from the start. Perhaps, as with the castles, it will be possible to identify town planning traits that connect Conwy and Beaumaris with the new towns of Savoy, the region from where Master James had come, and where he had previously worked before coming to Wales.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ Taylor, 'Master James of St George'.

¹⁶⁹ A.J. Taylor, 'Some notes on the Savoyards in North Wales, 1277-1300, with special reference to the Savoyard element in the construction of Harlech castle', *Genava* 11 (New Series) (1963), pp.289-315.